

*FROM SAC*

**HOME**

**MYTHS**

& other

**UNTRUTHS**

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*Home? I'll tell you about it when I find it.*

*-Johnny Sittisin*



# The Top of the World

Eli Turner

From down in the city, all of the places were dark. The cold, still swimming pools. The silent trees that bore witness to his first kiss. Schoolyards and fields and streets and sidewalks that had played stage to Justin's entire life. Fifteen years that seemed like little more than an accretion of moments. The football stadium lights still cooling as their fading gray filaments stood vigil over an empty black field. The vacant front of the middle school he left for the last time more than two years before. Bedrooms and living rooms he knew well. Even the bedroom where his parents slept, unaware. All lay dark and waiting.

Up on the hill above it all where Justin sat, everything looked like one great bed of lights scattered across the black earth below and away out to the hills across the valley. Every street lamp and porch light and neon sign glowed electric blue or tan or red somewhere in the distance. In the hills beyond town, a row of radio antenna lights pulsed red and patient against the truer black hanging behind. All of the lights brimmed with remembrance. But he wanted the lights to be stars. To be somewhere else. Somewhere billions of miles away. And when he would go home, back down into those lights, he would be somewhere else. He could return to a home far away and far different. Somewhere far and new and teeming with novelty and possibility.

But instead, the lights and the town were very near. Close enough to cast a sepia pallor over him and the entire party, the moon already set. The cheery screech of some girl's laugh rang echoless above the steady murmur of voices. Catherine's laugh. Justin closed his eyes and tried to remember what she looked like the first time he saw her. He could not recall. The voices talked of the game and classes and boys and girls and crushes and enemies, and the words all fogged against the cold air before dissipating into nothing in the faint light and cold air.

Justin saw the spotty lines of white headlights on the freeway coursing through the middle of town then away down the valley to the south or up into the mountains to the north. He watched

a plane's lights lift off from the airport and followed the lights, blue, then white, then blue, on through the black sea of sky as it pulsed away towards the horizon, blazing away from here. He envied the anonymous passengers and that they might stay away from Redding forever. It seemed that everyone could get out one way or another. He crossed his arms against the cold and the town, and listened to the hushed din of the party. He looked back and saw Catherine. Her mouth appeared voiceless, lost in the sounds of the crowd. He looked down where she had once touched him, there on his left arm, when her fingertips were his just for a single moment. That touch was gone, now only his arm, freckled and plain, and she still just some girl. A girl with the same hands as any other.

Alicia broke from her circle and walked over to Justin.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Sitting," he said.

"It's beautiful from up here, isn't it?" she said, looking out.

"Nope."

He killed his third beer, threw the bottle at the lights' glow, and watched it fall into the trees' black silhouettes a couple dozen yards down the hill.

"Come on. It's not bad," Alicia said.

He turned to face her as she sat down next to him.

"Are you kidding me?"

Alicia took a breath and held it, seemingly composing her next words in it. She just let it out as a sigh. A lone pair of headlights wound through the oak trees along the narrow road at the foot of the hill. She and Justin let the noise of the party and the light of the city carry the moment. After awhile, the moment drifted back to them.

“You can’t honestly say that it’s all terrible,” she said.

“This town seems a whole lot smaller than it used to. It was all out of reach when we were little. We were small and the town was this great big mystery to us. But it doesn’t even feel like a city anymore.”

“I’m just saying, this will never not be the place where we grew up. It will always have some sort of gravity. It will—”

Alicia was interrupted by a sudden blaring bass behind them. She and Justin looked toward the clamor.

“Goddamn it,” Justin said, sighing.

The Escalade’s initial bass rumble blended with the noise from the party, but when the door opened, the speakers launched the noise of some unintelligible rap song into the relative still air above the party. Bryan cut the music and jumped out of the driver’s seat as two guys stepped out with him and slammed the doors shut. They unloaded some beer into a cooler Bryan set down in front of his truck, then the two guys walked off into the crowd. Justin stood up.

“I’ll be back in a sec.”

Justin headed toward the Escalade. He approached Bryan and grabbed a beer from the cooler. He twisted it open with the crook of his arm.

“Sup?” Bryan said.

“Hey.”

Justin chugged the entire beer, looking sideways at Bryan. Bryan didn't notice as he was looking around at the various circles. Justin tossed the empty bottle aside and grabbed two more from the cooler. Bryan continued surveying the crowd. Justin watched Bryan's eyes scan from girl to girl. Bryan adjusted his shirt collar and smoothed his goatee with one hand. Justin walked back to the curb and sat back next to Alicia.

Eric stepped out of his pickup's shadow and took a seat on the curb next to Justin. Eric jabbed him with his elbow.

“You need another beer?” Eric said. Alicia crossed her arms and looked back toward the party. She saw Bryan. His eye had already fixed on someone in the crowd.

“Nah,” Justin said, holding up the spare beer he brought.

“What are you doing?” Eric said.

“Just talking,” Alicia answered.

“About what?” Eric said, popping open his beer.

“Nothing,” Justin said.

“Redding,” Alicia corrected.

“Man, fuck Redding,” Eric yelled, raising his beer.

A few faces from the party looked over. Alicia rolled her eyes.

“Well, I’m going back,” Alicia said. “See you around.”

She stood up and dusted off her pants.

“Yeah,” Justin said.

She lingered for just a moment but decided better of whatever she was about to say. Instead, she walked back to her circle and merged again with the group. She looked back and flashed a wry smile before Justin looked away toward Catherine. Bryan had joined her circle and now held the teens’ attentions captive with some overused stories of exaggerated triumph over exaggerated—if not wholly invented—challenges. Turning his back to the party, Justin again faced the light from below.

The singular sound of all the conversations hung for a moment over the hill. Justin surveyed the town below in this peculiar humming silence, sensing a faint gnawing in his chest from the concision of the entire town and all of those places and all of their moments all in one view in one second scrawled across the blackness of the night in the valley below. He felt sick in his chest, and for a moment, felt like some epiphany had been arrested at the very tip of his tongue. Some inexplicable moment of abject clarity had welled up inside him, impossible to elaborate, as though his mind were carefully searching for a word he had never even known in the first place. He held the feeling for a moment like a breath, but before he could press the

boundary of the notion that he couldn't quite grasp, he just as suddenly felt the feeling sink away and crumble into ash. At once wistful and relieved at the dissipation of the feeling, Justin took a long drink from his beer then eased back into the sound of so many voices and the feeling of the cold air. He dug at the corner of the label with his thumbnail and thought about nothing at all.

"Tough game tonight, bro," Eric said, interrupting the last dregs of Justin's wondering.

"Well, you can't win them all," Justin replied.

They sat looking out for a few minutes. The murmur of the party ambled along behind them. Justin broke the pause.

"You got any plans to get out of town? Like, for good?" he asked Eric.

"Shit," Eric answered, "I don't know. I just graduated last year. Thinking about maybe taking some classes out at the college or, something. I don't know."

"Man, just don't end up like Bryan," Justin said.

"Hell no," Eric said. "Fucking grandpa over there? Twenty-five, living off his dad's money, hitting on fucking high school girls? Fuck that."

"He does bring a lot of beer," Justin said, clicking Bryan's bottles of Coors Light with Eric, followed by a quick drink to mark the toast. Catherine let out another squealing laugh, and Justin flinched and froze for a moment. After a few seconds, he

realized he was stuck staring into the blackness down the neck of his beer, and he eased back again.

“Why don’t you just talk to her?” Eric asked.

Justin glanced over his shoulder at Catherine. She was laughing at something Bryan said. Justin watched her quiet down to a giggle.

“She’s just...” Justin trailed off as he turned back away.

“Yeah,” Eric said, letting the subject die.

He picked up a stick and drew a circle in the dirt with it then took another swig and traced the same circle a few times before the tip of the stick broke and he tossed it away.

“So,” Justin said. “Why not take off after high school? I mean, you hate this town, too, right?”

“Shit. You can’t just take off.”

“But you have no obligations,” Justin replied, “You can just leave. Whenever.”

“And go where? And how? I ain’t got a dad buying me every fucking thing I want,” he said, waving his beer towards Bryan’s truck.

“Just, I don’t know,” Justin said. “Shit, anywhere. Just get in your truck and fucking leave.”

“I’m working on it,” Eric said, trying to kill the point. He smoothed over his circle in the dirt with his shoe and stared for a moment at the flat swath left behind.

Justin considered pressing the point, but decided instead not to revive it. He stood up, finished his beer, and threw it over the edge of the hill. It shattered somewhere off in the dark. After a few steps, he had to steady himself. He was drunker than he noticed while sitting down. He stopped off at Eric's truck to grab some Sierra Nevada out of the back before heading into the crowd.

A couple of circles passed around pipes, sending plumes of weed smoke into the sepia haze above them. The dark air absorbed every puff, unchanged. Justin saw a few guys still wearing their game jerseys. He pictured them bald and wrinkled someday, looking at framed jerseys hanging over trophies in their gray home offices, telling their kids about the River Bowl victory as if it were just last Friday, and as though they had in fact been victorious. Another beer twisted open and washed away his conjured image with a long, bitter drink. The Sierra Nevada had warmed sitting in the bed of Eric's truck, despite the cool night. The beers buzzed under his skin as he walked over to Catherine's circle. She and Bryan had moved a few feet away; Justin could not hear what they said.

He watched her, knowing she could not see his face, his back to the town lights, those same lights reflected in her eyes, all shining back at him. A clot of shining yellowed silver in her eyes except for the three tiny red radio antenna lights he could just make out still further away hovering above the clumped

mass of the town's luminance. Somehow they felt more distant and minute gleaming in the dark of her eyes. Justin took another long drink. But the lights in her eyes were not stars, not that immeasurably distant scatter of lonely suns he wished they were. Had they been, maybe they would not seem so imminent. Maybe they would not seem like so many flickering memories. No. They were right there, not ten feet away. Dull and familiar. Justin touched his left arm.

Bryan brushed something off Catherine's cheek. She smiled and giggled and set her hand on his left arm. Justin's hand tightened against the beer bottle. He tried breathing deep, but the air vanished from his chest, nearly making him cough. Blood rushed all over; his skin burned and throbbed. Justin finished his beer in one more short chug then left the circle.

He noticed Alicia leaning against Eric's truck, gazing out at the town. Justin grabbed two more of Eric's beers and passed one to Alicia; she declined it. He opened both, held one in each hand, and leaned back next to her.

"What are you looking at now?" He closed his eyes for a moment and saw Catherine's hand moving down Bryan's arm.

"Nothing," she said. "Everything. Just taking it all in."

"Taking what in?" he scoffed, and drank the beer in his right hand.

“Look out there,” she said, turning to him, ”just look. Don’t think, look. Don’t try so hard to hate it. Imagine it’s just lights out there and stars up there and nothing, *nothing* else. Just try.”

Justin looked but could not unrecognize anything: the strip of neon signs from the Market Street motels, the silvery blue lights on all the bridges, Hilltop drive winding its way from his parents’ first apartment down to the mall, the grid of the parking lot lights next to the concrete monolithic Convention Center. The lightless thread of the river and the scattered line of cars on the freeway that both coursed across and through everything. The entire town and every single place in it all in a solitary view. Constellations of street lights mapping out every spot and every house from every memory. A new cold breeze slipped up the hill. He shivered.

“Every fucking place I’ve ever been.”

Alicia’s head dropped. Justin finished one beer and started on the next. She picked her head back up.

“Maybe someday you’ll see this town,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Maybe.” Gravity started pulling a little harder at him. He took another long drink, watching the lights of another plane taking off. Alicia said something, but he ignored her as he followed the triangle of the strobes and reds and blues as they rose up with ease over the valley and away toward the mountains until they vanished into the low clouds over the opposite foothills. When he finally turned back to

Alicia, she had already returned to her group. He finished his second beer and threw both empty bottles into the trees, watching them disappear in the shadows. He tried to find Alicia in the crowd, but all the shapes merged with their circles, the circles into the crowd, and it all blurred in the haze of beer and the dense pale glow of the town.

Justin pushed off from Eric's truck and started toward Bryan's Escalade. He needed another beer, and he needed to take something from Bryan. As Justin staggered toward the cooler, blind to the party, he tripped and stumbled into something dark and heavy. Glass shattered on the pavement and he turned and saw a flash of knuckles as they struck his eye socket with a stinging crack and he fell hard onto his shoulder and both his eyes burned wet. He blinked hard and looked up. He recognized Bryan standing over him with clenched fists. A scattered cloud of eyes watched him, and a silence seemed to drop from the sky. A deliberate quiet. A few laughed. Catherine stepped next to Bryan and took hold of his left arm.

"Come on," she said, "He's drunk."

Justin strained to get to his feet, steadied himself, and clenched his fists. He eyed Bryan then looked to Catherine, her hand still on Bryan's arm, but only just, and her fingers barely pressed into his skin. She shook her head, her eyes pleading. He thought of the rope swing at the lake two summers ago. Up on the bluff, he handed her the rope to jump. She took hold of his

left arm, looking him in the eye. He could not remember exactly, but it must have been that same look. It had to be. That same imploring stare. Catherine's hand on Bryan's arm. The touch of her fingers on his skin, the memory so vivid and bright; he needed it to be his.

The sickness rose in his chest. Again on the precipice of some coagulated understanding about moments and memories. He strained to breathe, his eye throbbing, and the cool air seething with an ill wonder that settled in the space between him and Catherine and the rest of the crowd, and her, still touching Bryan's arm.

And that was everything.

The gnawing in his chest finally consumed his body, starting in his bones and boring out to erupt over his skin, washing through his blood and his breath, overwhelming the alcohol's hum, and every want he ever knew demanded satisfaction. And there, in that yawning black gulf between the punch's sting and his aching eye, between her touch and the thought of her touch, between living all those moments over 15 years out there in all those places, out there in the glistening darkness, seeing it all as one memory, an opus of his whole life splayed before him, there lay the teeth of the gnawing inside his chest, a mute stream of a shattered grammar, of feelings speaking to moments and memories in a language without, words so that no moment could understand the next. Each moment from his past existed only for

one instant, now passed, never existing in the first place. That sound, that thought, that touch could never be his again. And there lay the shattered past, shards and splinters piled together under a fog of imagination and memory. Gone forever. Yet somehow Justin looked at the imminent and rotten remains: Catherine's hand, Catherine's eyes, and the reflected lights of the town.

His fists went limp. He stepped past Bryan, weakly bumping their shoulders together. Catherine's fingers tightened on Bryan's arm, and he said nothing. As Justin walked away, he looked out over the town. Through the tears, he could still discern the band of lights from the freeway passing like a spotty stream of moments, meandering away from the permanent lights of the town. The party's murmur eased back to life.

Eric emerged from the blur. Justin wiped his eyes clear with his sleeve.

"I'm out. You want a ride?" he asked Justin.

Justin looked towards Catherine and imagined her touching Bryan's arm for hours into the night. He cringed and put his hand to his stomach and headed straight toward Eric's truck.

"Fuck these people," he said. "Let's go."

Justin slipped on some gravel and grabbed Eric's shoulder to stop from falling.

"You drunk asshole," Eric said. "You're gonna make me spill my beer."

Justin steadied his feet and let go of Eric. As Justin headed to the passenger door, Eric ran into the corner of his truck. He yelled “Fuck” and tried to rub the sting out of his hip.

“Who’s drunk now, bitch?”

“Get in the truck,” Eric said.

Justin climbed into the cab, looking back and seeing Alicia watch from her circle. He paused, trying to decipher her look in the dark, his eyes struggling through the beer. He noticed her watching Eric taking a long drink from his beer and then climb into the truck. Justin’s stomach twinged again. She stepped away from her group and started toward him. He turned back and climbed into the cab. Eric was still chugging, and Justin raised his eyebrow.

“Don’t worry, pussy,” Eric said.

The wavering seatbelt buckle and clasp fought with Justin in the dark of the cab, hitting the ends four or five times until they slid together and he thought he felt them click. He loosened the strap and slumped down in the seat, eyes closed, struggling to clear his thoughts through the alcohol, but he saw only Bryan’s fist and Catherine’s hand touching his arm, heard her laugh, and all of it in the sickly amber light rising from the valley. Now it all seemed distant and unclear, the moments already slipping away into memory. Even the town’s lights in Catherine’s eyes, how he had thought they were not stars, and how they never

would be. Now, he just wanted to go home, even if it was the same old home.

The engine turned over a few times before starting in earnest; Eric put the truck into drive and jammed the gas. Tires yelped then caught the road and lurched down the hill. Justin did not look back for Alicia. Eric fumbled with switches in the dark for a moment before succeeding with hitting the headlights. He swerved to pull the truck back to the center of the road.

“Shit,” Eric said, handing Justin his almost empty bottle. “Pitch that for me.”

Justin wondered what Alicia said to him while he watched that plane’s lights drift away in the dark. For a moment, he tried to remember, watching the last of the beer sloshing in the bottle with the bumps in the road. He threw the bottle out the window and heard it start to shatter before the wind picked up with the accelerating truck. He caught one last glimpse of the bed of lights from town before the black trees rose and swallowed them whole.

A small Toyota rounded the sharp curve and its headlights swept to the left to find the overturned pickup truck sideways in the road. They set out to investigate the sound that had echoed its way up to the party minutes before, replaying itself against the hills before fading into a final silence. The driver eased the car to a stop several yards from the wreckage, the tires crackling

over the pebbles on the roadway until the car stopped completely and the crackling died. The three kids in the car sat in silence for a moment, listening to themselves breathing in the dark. The driver killed the engine and got out of the car. Every tiny sound shocked the abject silence in the air.

One tire on the truck was still spinning. Eric sat cross-legged in the road staring down at the pavement a couple yards from the open driver's side door. The last wisps of a shadowy plume of steam rose from the radiator and dissipated away into the cold sky. The truck's remaining headlight shone down into the asphalt, scattering a gray light over Eric and into the trees.

The driver cut the taut silence.

“Call 9-1-1.”

Soon the trees lit up with a swirl of various colored lights brushing in mute rhythm against the trees' shadows and the night. The Highway Patrol officers measured and reported and flashed the lights of their cameras, and their badges flashed with the swirl of colored lights in the vacant darkness. A sheriff's deputy rode with Eric to the hospital, the bandage on his forehead soaked dark red and one arm splinted and in a sling. The deputy cuffed Eric's other arm to the glossy yellow rail of the gurney. The paramedics laid a white sheet over Justin at first. Later they lifted away the spotted sheet and gathered him into a black bag, sealing him into its lonely dark. When they drove off, their departure went unlit and silent. A tow truck came and

righted the pickup and dragged it away. Finally, some firefighters swept up piles of square glass pebbles and sprayed the road clean, the wash running off into the loamy dirt shoulder littered with browned oak and Manzanita leaves. One by one, each cop and kid and firefighter trickled away until at last nothing was left but the dark.

All the places in town were still dark, too, and it would be several more hours before the sun would rise.

# The Weasel

Jenni Wiltz

"I like it," Luke said. "Just look at that face."

The creature stood frozen, eyes alert and shoulders permanently hunched, tiny hands curled close to its chest. To Rachel, its blonde fur looked like the ponytail of her mother's Barbie, the one whose metal earring rotted and turned the doll's ear gangrene green. "Why?" she asked.

"It has character. It *wants* something."

"It's a rodent. What does it want?"

"To survive."

From the kitchen, a child wailed. Rachel couldn't tell which one. Her cousins' kids all sounded the same to her when they cried.

Allen and Bart, Rachel's uncles, rocked back on their boot heels and tipped the widemouth beer cans in their hands. Tall and square, Bart always wore dark Wranglers, striped cowboy shirts, and an enormous silver belt buckle with Grandpa Will's cattle brand on it. She had said no more than seven words to him in her whole life.

Rachel looked back at the bookshelf. "Why did Grandpa Will stuff it?"

"Weasels are rare round here," Allen said. Laid back and lanky, his pale mullet fringe lapped over the neck of his shirt.

"Where did it come from?"

"The barn. It was scaring the cows."

Rachel thought of a photo tucked away in Grandma Mae's oldest album. It was a snapshot of young Grandpa Will, smiling and standing on a pile of skulls in the Philippines during World War II. He held a rifle in one hand and an American flag in the other, planted proudly in a hole in the top of one of the skulls. Will had always wanted Allen to take over the ranch. Allen wanted to race motorcycles.

"You want it?" Allen asked. "No one's claimed it yet."

Bart crumpled his can against his chest and stalked toward the refrigerator.

Rachel shivered.

The air in the house was still poisoned with Lysol and bile. She looked down at her hand, so dry she could see the folded fault lines of her wrist. To look for lotion in Mae's medicine cabinet, she would have had to push past her grandmother's Reagan-era bottle of Sea Breeze and a tube of Revlon Moondrops lipstick.

She couldn't do it.

The house was too full of people and Mae's things: cow figurines, framed embroidery (*No matter where I serve my guests, it seems they like my kitchen best*), and colored glass vases never used for their intended purpose. "The only thing I can't kill is dirt," Mae said. Despite having a black thumb, all her soap was scented with lilac. When Rachel asked why, Mae replied, "I love lilac, but the damn thing only blooms for once a month. I don't know about you, but I bloom for another eleven."

Grandpa Will's things were still there, too—fishing rods in a case in the office, two deer mounts, a marlin, a bass, three trout, a duck, and the weasel. A red windbreaker, size XL, hung in the porch closet. It had a sticky note on it. One week, just one week, and yellow notes littered the edges of framed family photos, trout mounts, paintings of Yosemite, Will's Farm Bureau jacket, and the antique cocoa set that had been in the family for five generations.

“You want it?” Allen asked again, pointing to the weasel.

“I’m getting more food,” she said.

Luke looked at his watch. “Didn’t you eat after the service?”

She ignored the question and headed for the hors d’oeuvres spread out on the kitchen counter. She used one fingernail to separate a paper plate from the stack and piled it high with one of everything: salami, cheese, turkey rolls, olives, and crackers. Bart claimed a fourth Bud Light and went to drink it next to his daughter, Ashley, and her two blonde progeny.

Ashley sat on the floor, watching her girls stack plastic blocks. Sandra, the four-year-old, stacked neatly. Sophie, the two-year-old, demolished like Godzilla. Ashley clapped when Sophie demolished a stack of blocks and jeered at teary-eyed Sandra as she reached for the fallen blocks. “She’s just going to kick them down again, stupid,” Ashley said.

In third grade, Ashley showed Rachel a booklet her class made for her: “Ashley Marie, Queen of the Week.” Each classmate drew a picture saluting Ashley, and the teacher bound them together with a hole punch and string. Ashley thought it was an anointing equivalent to that of Louis VII by Abbot Suger. Even then, Rachel knew the title implied Ashley’s queenship was less than permanent—it would be rescinded in seven days and bestowed upon someone else. Ashley did not comprehend this. She’d carried her coronation-day righteousness with her ever since.

Another cousin, Heather, sat on the floor near Ashley, shepherding her own kids. Thin and soft-spoken, Heather married shortly after quitting beauty school. Grandpa Will always referred to her husband, a Korean, as a “Chinaman.” Rachel counted back the years and realized he’d passed away before Heather had Milo, now in pre-school. Their new baby, Mackenzie, arrived via emergency C-section four months early. On the operating table, the doctors saw Heather’s intestines tangled in a gangrenous mess. She lost half her colon and they said that another week without treatment would have killed her. Every day during the long recovery, Mae read Lee Child novels out loud to her and spiked her yogurt with protein-rich granola. Rachel hadn’t known the part about Mae until the memorial service.

“Hi,” Heather said, grabbing a bean bag from Milo as he attempted to bash Mackenzie’s head in with it. “We don’t do that, Milo. It’s not nice.”

“iPhone,” the boy said.

“Not now, Milo.”

“Game. Want.”

Rachel blinked. Milo was almost five and she’d never heard him utter a complete sentence. “Hi,” she replied.

“What?” Heather swung her head back to Rachel. “Milo, I told you no.”

“Nothing,” Rachel said. She took a bite of the turkey roll.

“Hey.” Ashley’s white teeth glowed against her spray-tan skin. “Remember when we used to play with Grandma’s scarves?”

A piece of wilted spinach stuck to the outside of Rachel’s front teeth. She swiped it away with her tongue. “I do,” she said. Mae had given them a drawer of old scarves to dress up with, a tube of coral lipstick, and a straw hat with a feather in the hatband. They took turns promenading down the house’s long hallway with a wooden duck whose rubber feet flapped on a wheel.

Heather tried to keep Mackenzie from lifting her dress. “We never have fun like that anymore. Milo, don’t . . . I said no.”

Sophie demolished another of Sandra’s towers and Ashley laughed. “We have fun like that all the time, don’t we girls? Hey, do you guys remember when we tied each other up?”

The memory bloomed like lilac, multiple blossoms arranged symmetrically on a single stem of thought. “No,” Rachel whispered. “I’d forgotten.” She bent her head and tried to envision everything as it had been. Afternoon light fell on the willing victim, seated in Mae’s rocker as if it were an electric chair, spine stiff and limbs tense. Each cousin grabbed a scarf and twisted it into a polyester rope. Nothing was off limits: a gag, a blindfold, double-knots, ropes that bound wrists to feet. Goosebumps flared up and down her legs each time they’d tied

her ankles to the chair, nimble fingers cinching the fabric until it burned through the outer layer of her skin.

“We should have Grandma’s scarves,” Ashley said.

Weeks ago, when Mae went into the hospital, Rachel’s mother told her that she was Mae’s executor. *If there’s anything you want*, her mother said, *write it down and give it to me.*

“No,” Rachel said softly.

“Why? We’re all here.”

“We don’t even know where they are.”

“I do.” Ashley hopped up and jogged toward the back of the house, reappearing with a handful of gauzy fabrics. “I’ll lay them out. Then we can see who wants what.”

Rachel looked up, wishing someone would tell them to stop. Allen was still with Luke. Bart watched with a stone face, but it didn’t mean anything—he always looked that way. She couldn’t see her mother. Across the room, a flicker of yellow caught her eye. Ashley’s husband, Rob, placed a sticky note on a framed photo of Grandpa Will holding up an enormous bass.

Ashley folded each scarf into a square. “Everyone make a first choice, and if no one else wants that one, you get it. Rachel, you’re oldest, you go first.”

Rachel’s eyes devoured the patterns on the gauze tiles. She knew exactly where she’d seen each one. *Red with purple daisies and blue roses*: over Mae’s curlers in the morning when she took the grandkids to go feed calves at dawn. *Pink and orange daisies*

*on a field of yellow*: when Mae brought them out to the hay barn and the irrigation ditch to play. *Yellow tulips on a field of navy*: when Mae piled them into her blue Suburban and took them to a skating rink.

“Make your pick,” Ashley said.

“I don’t want to.”

“You have to.”

“We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“She would want us to have them.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what?”

Mackenzie shrieked and reached for the pink and orange daisies, plump fingers shaking the scarf out of its neatly folded square. “Mackenzie, no,” Heather said. “That’s not yours.” Her daughter blew bubbles and pressed the scarf to her lips. Heather grabbed the girl’s wrist and tried to pry open her fingers. “Don’t put your gross mouth on things.”

“Rachel, you haven’t picked yet.”

“I can’t.” She looked up at Bart for help, but her uncle only flicked his head toward the gauzy tiles.

“Just pick,” said Ashley. “Want me to pick for you?”

Rachel extended her index finger without bothering to look where it was pointing.

“Does anybody else want that one?” Ashley asked.

No one spoke.

“Take it,” Ashley said, handing her a navy scarf with white and yellow daisies.

Rachel set it on her lap.

“Why’d you pick that one?”

Rachel blinked. *Because you made me.*

“Heather,” Ashley said. “Your turn.”

Bart crumpled his empty can and stepped over the pile of scarves, making his way into the kitchen. The tip of his boot came down on the purple daisies. No one said a word.

On the Monday before Mae died, her doctor raised the issue of sedation. Mae hadn’t eaten in four weeks but could not stop vomiting. At night, the nurses taped a plastic bag to her mouth. Most nights, the tape held until morning.

The cancer, they said, was destroying Mae’s insides. She vomited up the remnants of her own intestines, liquefied by the cancerous cells. When she heard this, Mae stopped sucking on ice chips and pulled out her IV. It accomplished nothing. After vomiting for another two weeks straight, Mae begged Rachel’s mother to make it stop.

Rachel saw her for the last time in a brief one-hundred-and-twenty second window between vomiting attacks. Rachel’s mother was the gatekeeper, shuffling people in and out in between Mae’s better moments. Rachel waited two hours that morning for her moment. When it came, she felt numb. No love, no fear, no sadness, no anything to mark her as human.

A thin white curtain surrounded Mae's bed, as if it could keep the sounds and smells of death from offending the person the next bed over. "Go," her mother said, pushing between her shoulder blades.

Rachel went.

Beneath the satin-bound blanket, Mae was both bloated and emaciated. Her mother warned her Mae would look different, but no one told her how capable the human body was of swelling. The shape outlined beneath the blanket was too round to be a real human being. A cloud formation of bruises swept up Mae's forearm, past her elbow. Without her glasses, her eyes looked lighter and wetter. Someone had taken her diamond earrings, wedding band, and a right-hand ring made with diamonds her great-grandfather found lying beside a body on a Civil War battlefield. "Hi, sweetie," Mae said. "I look a little different, don't I?"

*Don't cry, her mother had ordered. Not under any circumstances.*

Rachel reached for her grandmother's hand. "I love you," she said, hating the words. They were what you said when nothing else was left. But in her heart, everything was left.

"I'm so glad you're here," Mae said. "How is your husband?"

"Driving nights. This is the first time I've seen him all week." Rachel paused. "You brought us together."

The light in Mae's eyes returned for a moment—just one, as the smile touched her from the inside out. “It’s all right then,” she said. “I don’t like to think of you in that house on the big hill all alone.”

“I’m fine.” Rachel tried to smile and knew that she failed. “When he’s gone, I make the recipes he won’t eat.”

Mae’s lips made an “o” shape, her face suddenly as gray as her eyes. Rachel’s mother squeezed her arm. “It’s time,” her mother said. Rachel panicked. She turned and fled, with no goodbye. In the hallway outside, she crumpled against the doorframe and listened to Mae throw up forty-two times.

*I didn’t even say goodbye,* Rachel thought.

*I fucking ran away.*

She looked at the scarf in her lap and blinked back tears. “I have to go,” she said.

She walked over to the cork photo board the church sent home with them after the memorial service. In one photo, Mae wore a red dress, pink apron, blue scarf over her hair, and rubber boots while she hosed off the barn floor. In another, she wore a thin straw hat and sat on a park bench with her kids. The plump cheeks and big eyes were Rachel’s own, transferred two generations down like a carbon copy. It was a genetic accident, Rachel knew. There was no intent in such a thing—she didn’t deserve it.

As she stared at Mae's smile, something crashed into her from behind. She fell forward, her sweaty palms greasing the glossy photo surfaces.

Rachel picked up her foot and nearly stepped on Sophie, tumbling in unending somersaults. "Silly girl," Ashley said, hurrying to scoop her up. Then, to Rachel, "These things make you crazy."

"Me not crazy," Sophie said, stabbing her index finger into Ashley's freckled chest. "You crazy."

"That's what I said, silly goose."

Rachel looked above the cork board to the weasel's display shelf. *You must be so tired of all of us.*

"What are you looking at?" Ashley asked.

"The weasel."

"That ugly thing? It has vampire teeth."

"Luke likes it."

Ashley touched her nose to Sophie's. "It's ugly, right? Say 'ugly.'"

Sophie squealed and nodded. "Ugly!"

"Nobody wants that icky thing, right?"

"Icky," Sophie repeated.

"Allen said that Grandpa Will—"

"So," Ashley said, shifting Sophie on her hip. "What's new with you?" Her cousin smiled, cracking the mask of orange makeup at the corners of her eyes. Rachel knew no one who was

equal parts Danish, Irish, and Dutch was meant to be the color of a Spanish tiled roof.

“I work now. I’m done with school.”

“What’d you go back for?”

The correct answer, Rachel knew, was English. But if she said that, Ashley would want to know why. It seemed simpler to give her the answer she wanted. “I was hiding.”

Ashley looked at the photo board and then back to Rachel. “You look like her,” she said. “More than the rest of us.”

“Why is Rob putting sticky notes on all of Grandpa Will’s fishing pictures?”

“My dad said to do it. The important stuff should stay in the family.”

*But we’re all family*, Rachel thought. She turned her head to see Bart in the kitchen, downing a fifth beer.

On the Wednesday before Mae died, her doctors brought up sedation again. All the children—Rachel’s mother, Allen, Bart, plus their spouses—gathered in a conference room with Dr. Lockwood and listened quietly. Bart was the only one who refused to sign the waiver. “It’s euthanasia,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It’s not,” Dr. Lockwood argued. “The medication will dull her senses, and she’ll be awake for a little while longer. Then she’ll go to sleep, and the rest is up to her body and the cancer.”

“But when the medicine puts her to sleep, that’s it.”

“She’ll be alive. But she won’t wake up, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“What if she gets better?”

“That’s not going to happen,” the doctor said softly.

“She’s ready,” said Rachel’s mother. “It’s been weeks, and she’s ready.”

“No,” Bart said.

“Then you sit by her bed and listen to her throw up a hundred times an hour.”

“The Bible says . . .”

“Fuck the Bible. The people who wrote it thought the earth was flat.” Rachel’s mother stood up and left the room. Rachel had no further knowledge of what happened among the other children and spouses. All she knew was that when the nurse made her rounds that night, she wrote on Mae’s chart that the patient refused medication. One hash mark on the chart indicated a visitor from the immediate family.

Nine days and two hospice transfers later, Mae died.

At the grave site, Ashley stroked her faux-fur scarf and looked into the sun with dry eyes. Heather hadn’t cried, either. She spent the entire funeral playing phone games with Milo and shoving cereal in Mackenzie’s mouth to keep her quiet.

*Whatever’s inside me, it’s not these people’s blood.*

She walked over to the far wall and tore off all the sticky notes. They twirled and spun on their way to the floor, a miniature yellow snowstorm.

\*

Low clouds shielded the farm from the traditional summer sun. Half of Grandpa Will's ashes lay in the cornfield out back, its green stalks whistling in the wind. Rachel remembered what her mother told her about the corn in summer: "If you sit there all day, it'll be taller by dinner than it was at breakfast."

"Did you ever do that, Mom?" Rachel asked.

"Lots of times."

"You must have been bored."

"Maybe," her mom said, "we just liked to hear it grow."

"You can't hear things grow."

"How would you know?"

Now, standing on Mae's front lawn, Rachel had no idea why she thought what she did. Teenage Rachel believed the world began and ended in cities like London, Prague, and Paris. But cities were gray and dank and full of people who hated each other. She could not imagine living in one of them now.

In the front yard, one big rock occupied the center of the lawn. A narrow hole ran straight through the middle, which filled with spiders every spring. Every year, she and her cousins

dared each other to stick their hands inside to retrieve a plastic Easter egg. By the time Rachel found a stick to use as a pry bar, Ashley had fished it out with a scream and a squeal. They concluded the hunt by climbing the rock and jumping off. At the time, the rock seemed enormous, like the one in the insurance commercials they showed during the golf tournaments her father watched on Sunday.

Now, it wasn't even waist high.

Rachel placed her black dress shoe on a foothold halfway up the rock. Behind her, the house's front door slammed. "What are you doing?" Luke asked.

"Climbing the rock. We all used to do it."

"You're making it look hard."

"I'm in a dress and heels." She lifted her other foot and placed it on the rock. With her right hand, she grabbed the peak and hoisted herself up. The world looked no different: same vineyard across the street, same train tracks a mile past the vineyard, same shanty at the end of the street, same peacocks that shrieked in the dusk like lost children. "This was my favorite place in the world when I was eight," she said. "I used to cry at night here."

"What the hell for?"

"The peacocks. I thought everyone was ignoring lost children."

Luke's thick-lashed eyes drifted toward the fleet of cars parked in the driveway. "Whose Lexus?"

"Who do you think?"

Heather's husband, Chris, owned several food trucks, a fashion boutique, a car stereo store, a cabin in Tahoe, and a McMansion on the edge of town. "I saw him texting," Luke said. "At the grave."

Rachel shook her head. "He wouldn't."

"During the prayer. He pulled his phone out of his pocket."

She thought *she* was dead inside when she walked up to Mae's bed and felt nothing. But hers was a nothing born of numbness, of protection from a love and a grief that would liquefy her bones if she let it. Chris's nothing was the nothing of nothing.

"Fucking asshole," Luke said. He looked through the vineyard to the train tracks. "This place is weird now. Do you feel it?"

"I'm going to jump." Rachel landed hard on the balls of her feet and stumbled forward. Something jolted like lightning in her knee.

"I don't like it," Luke said. "Whatever made it good to be here is gone."

*It's still her home*, Rachel wanted to say. Throughout college and her twenties, her mother reminded her that Mae's house was their meeting point. Should there be a zombie apocalypse,

nuclear attack, or devastating earthquake, she was to come immediately to the ranch. It was self-sustaining, with food and generators and a well. *You'll be safe there*, her mom said. *We'll all be safe.*

“How much longer do we have to stay?” Luke asked.

“They’re meeting with a lawyer in an hour.”

“That’ll make Bart happy.”

“Don’t say that.” Rachel looked over her shoulder to make sure the front dining room windows were still closed.

“The guy’s a dick.”

“I’m serious,” Rachel said.

“It’s the truth.”

Rachel turned to go back to the house.

“Wait,” Luke said, grabbing her arm. “Don’t be grumpy.”

Rachel hated that word. She wanted to be *mad* or *angry* or even *upset*. He always called her “grumpy” instead. Sometimes he made a face to accompany the accusation—squished up his features and stuck out his bottom lip. It made her want to hit him. “I’m allowed to disagree,” she said.

“You’re grumpy.”

*Fuck.* It was a waste of words. She turned to go back inside. For all she knew, after the next hour, she’d never set foot in that house again. She thought of all the things she loved about it: Mae’s empty vases (orange for autumn, red for Christmas, green for spring), the wind chimes on the porch, the Flaky Flix in the

freezer, the same thin green towels in the bathroom since she'd been born. "We're never coming back here," Luke said.

"Fuck you," Rachel said.

"You're the one who hates everyone here."

"They're my family."

"But you hate them."

"It doesn't matter." A breeze blew the chimes arranged along the porch overhang. She closed her eyes and matched the sound to each chime.

The front door slammed behind her and she jumped. Allen came out onto the porch with a beer in his hand. "Hey," he said. "Am I interrupting?"

"No," Rachel said.

Allen held the beer out for Luke. "This is the one I was telling you about."

Luke tested the twist-off capabilities of the cap, then placed it between his teeth to wrench it free. He sniffed the aroma and took a cautious sip, holding it in his mouth for five seconds. "It's not Belgian," he said.

Allen shrugged. "Label says it is."

"Too hoppy for a Belgian."

"Are you guys staying here tonight?"

"God, no," Luke said.

"Just as well. Lawyer's meeting will be at least two hours long. Then we're all going out to dinner."

“Bart too?”

Allen nodded. “He’ll be good after the meeting.”

“How can anyone tell?”

“Great-Grandma Jennings started investing in the ‘50s. Mom and Dad never spent what they got from her.”

In her mother’s photos, Great-Grandma Jennings was a fat, white-haired woman with black-rimmed glasses and knitting needles in her hands. She grew up on a ranch in Wyoming and inherited a Packard when her older sister died. Rachel had two Christmas ornaments Great-Grandma Jennings engraved. She died before a third could be presented. Rachel never knew her.

“So you’re all rich now?” Luke asked.

“We’ll get a check.”

“Must be nice.”

Allen popped his shoulders in a shrug. “You take what you can get.”

Rachel smiled at her uncle. She could think of nothing to say.

“You want that weasel?” Allen asked.

“I like it,” Luke said.

Allen nodded. “Enjoy the beer.” Then he turned and went back inside.

Luke shook his head. “Why did he tell us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can we go now?”

“No.”

“We’ve been here since Friday night. Is another twenty minutes going to make it better?”

She looked at her husband. His pale green eyes held nothing that she recognized. He didn’t know if his own father was alive or dead. “I need to see someone,” she said.

\*

The cornfield was in the back of the house. She heard the noise in the living room as her cousins packed up their children and their share of the leftovers. She turned her back to it and stared out at the corn. At the end of June, it was almost as tall as she was. Lush from a late rain, the leaves and stalks were deep and dark as emeralds. Their yellow strands of silk had yet to sprout.

Grandpa Will had been born in North Hollywood. He came to the Central Valley after getting out of the Navy. She wondered if the pile of skulls was why he’d refused to go back to a bustling city. There were always a dozen guns inside his house. Once, playing hide and seek, she’d found a rifle lying beneath Mae’s hanging shirts.

The only people who lived on this road were related to him.

She’d told Luke that hating her family didn’t matter, but it did. The tingling feeling inside her was thin enough to trickle

into the body's cracks and crevices, to take up residence in the fissure of a bone split many years ago. Thin enough to avoid detection in x-rays, in sonograms, in MRIs, in CAT scans. Thin enough to dilute blood. The only thing it couldn't dilute was soil. Soil ate it up and only grew stronger.

She looked out at the cornfield, at the earth that had swallowed her grandfather. "What if I never see you again?" she asked.

The cornfield didn't answer. But only half of Will was out there. The other half had gone into a casket with Mae's ashes that morning. *He doesn't know what to tell me because he never has to leave.*

She turned back toward the house. Through the window, she watched Ashley and Rob bundle up their two blonde daughters. They were each wearing several of Mae's scarves—around waists, around shoulders, around wrists and necks. Rob took each one by the hand and led them toward the garage. Ashley slung a big brown purse over her shoulder and went to give Bart a hug. Rachel watched. Bart's eyes floated vacantly over his daughter's shoulder. Ashley stood on her tiptoes to whisper something in her father's ear. Bart's lips thinned in response.

Something inside Rachel tightened, in the marrow and crevices of her bones.

Ashley followed her husband and children into the garage. Bart bent down and picked up a shopping bag that someone had

used to transport food from the church back to the house. He shook it open and walked toward the built-in corner shelves. He lifted the weasel from its perch and slipped it into the bag. Then he went around the corner into the dining room, where the lawyer and accountant were waiting.

Rachel turned back to the corn.

Allen was wrong. She knew exactly why her grandfather kept the weasel all these years.

# Feathers

Rebecca Woolston

My father has a collection of rocks in the front yard, one from every place he's been. One I helped him pick when he took us to the river as kids. That day, the first time I walked into the river, I told him I was scared. The current, the algae wrapping around my toes. He pulled me out of the river, gave me his shirt to wear. I hid behind a small tree and changed out of my wet clothes. Embarrassed, I stood on the river bank, eating a candy bar I found in my father's shirt. I thought about how I created a memory in the water of who we were that day. How I buried it

beneath a stone in the river. After that day, I began to collect rocks for my dad every time I traveled somewhere.

On a morning when I am twenty-two, I crawl into bed with my mother. Remembering when I did this as a kid, always afraid of sleep. I watch the sky. It's early, still a gray lavender. The color of her just waking up. I pull the covers tight under my chin, turning to her:

“Remember when I use to make you pancakes so you could have breakfast in bed?” She smiles. “You never stayed in bed. You always ruined the surprise.”

Her hand moves to pet the cat sleeping next to her. She coos good morning.

She crawls out of bed, careful not to disturb her cat; I think of when I asked her to leave my father. “Because I love him,” was all she ever said. When she stretches, one of her wing feathers flicks my cheek. I keep mumbling news about my life, what I've been doing, where I've been the last few nights. My childsong voice chirps on and on. I become the child soul again, wings breaking through. Swelling, aching, tingling, they push out against the surface of my summer skin. My mother tells me when a feather's ache turns to pain, when its tingling turns to burning, I will be okay. Tells me to remember the recipe for the poultice to put on the skin.

The older I get, the more torn feathers I see on her aging body. She hides the damage well, tells me someday I will have them, too. Says she hopes they will be less in number, not as heavy. I catch glimpses of scars where the plume was plucked, but am too scared to ask when, and who.

On the door, my memories swirl in the pattern of the wood. My mother tells me some people just aren't meant to be parents.

Cobwebs hang over our heads, black from all the dust. Black from my father's smoke. Black from my mother's thoughts that suck away sleep. Black like my coffee. The webs drape the vaulted ceiling of my parent's room, built like a church. Where the possibility of my family worshiping each other, together, always existed. Never the four of us in a room all at once. Always, just three, while the fourth stumbles upon a sermon, lingers in the doorway, stammering out a question between embarrassed apologies. All of us have done it. Except Mom. The one we look to for passages, hymns, parables. In these moments, I see her feathers glow brighter than I remember. Between passage readings and song, she whispers to me she hates this room. I notice most of her feathers have faded to a sun bleached fawn. She tells me I can live between the spaces of anger, that this is where peace exists. She tells me I can worship myself, that it's okay to be selfish sometimes. She tells me as long as I have my body, it'll be okay. That when I let feathers become torn, that's when the cobwebs form, when all the dust gathers.

I think about my lover, how he tells me when I touch him, his skin tingles. How I tell him when he touches me I become breath and whispers. I float away, waiting for the capture from the tangle of his fingers, the twist of his tongue. I think about the rocks I still gather, the spaces my body moves, where the feathers may land.

# The Remembering

Elison Alcovendaz

Shards of Sandy's broken glasses lay scattered beside her face, which, despite common wisdom, did not look at peace. Rather, it looked somewhere between confused and surprised, like walking in to your bedroom to find Clarissa, your ex-wife, on top of a man, writhing in ways you'd never seen before. A group of neighbors from the apartment complex circled the body, teary-eyed and shivering, and Sandy hovered above the throng, confused. I'm not dead, she thought, I'm not a floating glob of spirit, I will go right back into my body and stand up and dust myself off and surprise the shit out of these people. She shot

into her human shell and spread her spiritness throughout her body. She stretched and stretched until her body was filled but she couldn't get a finger to twitch or a toe to move. It felt uncanny in there, like a home that had changed from your childhood. She could've cried if she had eyes, or tear ducts, but she didn't, so she shot back out of her flesh and studied herself.

Her hair was still spiked, though the gel had begun to dry and her tips had begun to limp and her stout legs seemed shorter in death than she'd remembered. She couldn't remember having such a flat nose or such red and bulging eyes. Dirty puddle water saturated the old Iron Maiden shirt—the one Clarissa used to wear to bed—and her suddenly ashen body looked stiff with finality. All she'd done was go for a walk when, 257 steps later, her heart stopped. How she knew that number, exactly, she wasn't sure, but after her initial panic, a wave of knowledge washed over her. She now understood that her ex-wife liked fucking men and she knew she didn't have deathly superpowers (besides flying through stuff), though she also knew she could “think” even though she didn't have a brain and could “sense” things even though she couldn't physically see or touch anything. She also knew that there was one hell and one heaven, and it really didn't matter what you did in your life. Once you died, you got to choose how you'd spend eternity. In heaven, you stayed in your spirit-state, and in hell you assumed bodily form and could choose any body you wanted. In heaven, you

knew nothing but peace. In hell, you felt the full gamut of emotions and got sick and got better and fell in love and broke up and got sick again. And she knew she had 24 hours to decide.

An ambulance pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex and two EMTs hopped out and ran some checks and shook their heads. Sighs passed from onlooker to onlooker. Sandy hovered behind the scene and watched her neighbors huddle into each other as everyone waited in silence for the County Coroner's office to arrive. By the time the coroner's van came and her human shell was zipped into a yellow body bag, Sandy had already begun to forget what her body looked like.

Soon the tenants had walked back to their apartments, the lights in all the windows were off, and Sandy floated above the complex, alone. Twenty-three hours to the decision. She wondered where she should go. If only this purgatorial state came with teleportation, or at least super speed, then she could see all the places she'd always wanted to see. But no, a spirit wasn't much faster than Usain Bolt at full tilt. She calculated how long it would take to get to the Great Wall (9.313 days) or the Eiffel Tower (8.168 days) and the breaths that comprised her spirit swelled with sadness. During their marriage, Clarissa had spoken often of trips to Costa Rica, Bali, India to see the Taj Mahal, but Sandy's arthritic, fibromyalgic body had prevented her from even venturing outside of California. Sometimes, on the

bad days, a trip to the grocery store would be out of the question. In the last months of their marriage, Sandy often found Clarissa out of her arms and out of bed, sometimes running for miles and miles around the city, sometimes taking solo trips to Yosemite. Now that Sandy had finally lost her gimpy knees and aching hip, Clarissa couldn't even see her, couldn't touch her. How nice. Sandy decided she would go see Clarissa instead.

Clarissa lived at the other end of town, down near Stockton and Mack, and Sandy took the time to get used to her spirit-state. At first, she stayed along the streets, flying over stopped cars, speeding through red lights, but she got bored so she started darting through walls. She watched a woman fake an orgasm and listened to the banal conversations people had in bed. She lingered at quiet family dinners, watched people's thumbs as they moved across their phones, flew circles around the shoppers at Arden Fair Mall. When that got old, she figured she'd determine once and for all if the old adage were true: Did fleshy folk get chills when a ghost passed through them? She flew into and through other people in various stages of activity: people cooking dinner and watching TV and washing dishes and walking on the sidewalk with their dogs. Not one goosebump. If anyone flinched, it was Sandy. The proximity of those engorged hearts and churning guts would've made her hurl if she still had the capacity to do so.

When she arrived at Clarissa's house, Sandy had 20 hours left. She flew through the locked front door and saw that no one was home. Darkness did not impact her now—she could “see” through it with no problem—though the sudden emptiness of the place worried her. Steam rose from a rice cooker on the kitchen counter, imprints of Clarissa's feet still showed on the foam mat beside the stove, and deep in the bowels of the house, a washing machine shook. Sandy darted around and saw the couch had been replaced, as had the bathroom tiles, the carpet, even that almost-like-mucus-colored wallpaper they spent a week putting up. Though Sandy had lived here for ten years, all evidence of their marriage had been wiped away.

Not that it bothered her. A home would always, at some point or another, become a house again. One of the realities of life, or something like that. Her greater concern lay with Clarissa. Where had she gone? Sandy searched every room and found no clue to Clarissa's whereabouts. Spreading herself across her old side of the master bed (the only thing not replaced), Sandy settled onto the sheets, careful not to allow herself to fall through the mattress, and stared at the fallen strands of Clarissa's black hair on the pillows. Maybe if she could get close to Clarissa, to a part of her, she could find her.

Something tugged at the core of Sandy's spirit, but she couldn't name it. It wasn't God's voice or anything corny like that, just a heavy, pounding knowledge that she *had* to find

Clarissa. After the divorce, they rarely spoke, usually only when meeting to exchange custody of the dog. Even then, words were few and touch non-existent; not so much as a peck on the cheek or a handshake. That's what had hurt Sandy the most. Closure had always been for weak people, Sandy believed; if someone didn't want you anymore, why in hell would you allow them to have dominion over your heart? Closure was for sissies. No, it couldn't be that. It was something else entirely, something Sandy could not yet name.

Where was she? Work? It was almost midnight and Clarissa should've been off hours ago. Perhaps there had been an emergency at the hospital. Like a baby being born or an ex-wife being shot in the chest. Sandy laughed at the thought. She took one last glance at her old home and flew.

UC Davis Med Center shone on the north side of Highway 50 like a place where you got saved—like an evangelical church, but bigger and quieter. Oak Park, the immediate surrounding neighborhood, had a reputation throughout Sacramento as an epicenter of crime, yet Sandy knew it differently. She'd grown up there and yeah, there were crack heads and prostitutes and a ghetto bird almost every night, but there were real people there too, people with nicknames who stopped you in the street to say hello and shake your hand. Maybe they needed cash, but if you said no there were no hard feelings, just a God Bless and a

goodbye. Everyone in the neighborhood knew someone born at the Med Center, and everyone knew at least three that died there, too.

Sandy hadn't given it much thought, but as she floated outside of the emergency room where Clarissa worked, she wondered if she'd see other spirits about, roaming the world for one earthly day before choosing their final destination. She waited just outside of the sliding doors near the ashtray, waiting for some other spirit to pop out of the brick walls and spook the shit out of her. Ghosts scaring ghosts, now that would be something. But after an hour, the only scary thing was the thought of all those sick people inside with those germs on their hands (2.8 million bacteria on average), the greenish mucus in their noses, the wailing kids with cracks in their bones. Clarissa loved working here—some nonsense about mixing excitement with helping fellow humans—but Sandy had avoided it like SARS. She had enough of her own issues without having to worry about picking up other peoples' crap.

She couldn't get sick right now, though, so she said eff it and shot through the sliding glass doors and saw an ER lobby so packed with slowly dying sacks of flesh that not even one of the old, mothbally seats was available. The place reeked of dying skin cells and covered up urine, and the dull, yellow lights basked the dirty tile floors and dirty faces with a corpse's shade of jaundice. Clarissa sometimes did triage, so Sandy quickly

poked her head through the door of the triage room just in time to see an old man pull down his pants in front of the nurse for no apparent reason. Sandy lingered only long enough to identify the nurse as someone other than Clarissa.

Sandy moved on to the observation area of the ER department, one of the saddest places on earth. She checked all the nurses' desks and peeked in from room to room and from curtain to curtain, but only found the not-quite-acute moans of patients with yellow nametag bracelets around their wrists. Bodies tied to tubes and masks and wires and machines that beeped all night just to tell people in the next room that blood was still circulating . . . this was life, here. She'd met Clarissa in the room at the far corner—Room 18. Sandy had woken up with her right arm numb and immovable and the ambulance came and dropped her at the ER into Clarissa's loving arms. Sandy knew now that love at first sight only existed as a bodily function—a combination of chemicals released by the brain based on associations you or society has implanted there like, say, a nice rack—but that's what Sandy felt when Clarissa fed her the IV and tucked the bed sheet just so perfectly around her swollen body. A day later, Sandy made the move, Clarissa accepted, and they got hitched months after in a nondescript ceremony in a Reno chapel. How it had gone from that to Clarissa riding some asshole like she actually liked it, well, Sandy still hadn't figured that out, not even in her spirit-state. In fact,

the whole love thing had only become more confusing, almost like she couldn't *really* remember what it felt like.

Was Clarissa on her break? Sandy flew through the floor to Clarissa's usual spot, a rickety corner table in the old basement cafeteria, a now defunct expanse of sterile-colored walls where Clarissa would nap. The chair Clarissa normally sat in had been wedged away from the table, like someone had stood abruptly, knocking the chair askew. Sandy spread herself across the area above the table and chair, smelling for Clarissa's Chanel perfume. Yup, there it was, the kind of perfume stereotypically beautiful women like Clarissa wore, a kind of trick to keep people in the realm of the physical. Sandy hated that perfume. She preferred Clarissa in the hospital, in baby blue scrubs with her make-up stripped down, fragrance-free. You could actually see Clarissa then.

Sandy roamed the hospital for hours. She watched the final moments of a brain surgery. She watched a teenage boy limp down the hallway on a new prosthetic leg. She watched a woman give birth and watched another woman die. She watched people passing time in waiting rooms, burying themselves into crossword puzzles and the TV news and the just-on-this-side-of-edible cafeteria food. She watched the doctors roaming the innocuous corridors like the silent demigods of earth, blessed with the power to postpone death, cursed by their inability to cure it. Sandy couldn't get to heaven soon enough. Don't worry!

she wanted to yell at everyone. Death is great! Earthly emotions had begun to seep from her spirit, and she began to feel lighter.

Twelve hours left. Where could she be? The gym? Clarissa, the health-freak, loved going to the 24 on Florin at all hours of the day and night, sweating off the ER's sick by running the treadmill on a ridiculous incline. Sandy had accompanied her a few times, though the equipment didn't fit her short, stout body quite right, and she never could get past the innate distaste for the bigger women like herself who worked out with baggy sweatpants and baggier shirts. The trainers always came up to her—let me show you how to use that machine, have you thought about hiring a trainer?, that girl you're with, is she single?—and she saw her fellow gym-goers, male and female alike, take extra care to wipe up any spot of perspiration that Sandy had left behind before plopping their toned asses on the machine Sandy had just abandoned. And the smell was worse than any hospital, that was for sure.

But Sandy couldn't think of anywhere else Clarissa could be. It took her only a few minutes to arrive at the gym. It was 9am on a Sunday morning and the gym was sparsely populated. The normal bodybuilding dudes in their tank tops too small to hide their little nipples curled dumbbells in front of mirrors; lithe women in their perfectly taut spandex ran mini-marathons on the treadmill; the yoga moms stretched in a circle; others in various shapes pushed various pounds off their chest or over

their shoulders or other various movements people do to increase their muscle mass. It's all for nothing, Sandy thought. She checked the Zumba class, the women's locker room, the sauna, the pool, the parking lot. No sign of Clarissa.

For the next eight hours, Sandy scoped out all the places in town she knew Clarissa often visited. At Capitol Park, she flew around the meandering paths, looking for Clarissa's face among the joggers; in Old Sac, she shot up and down the riverbanks and through all the rooms of the Delta King, where they spent many a Valentine's Day eating chocolate strawberries and rolling around in bed. All the malls in the area Sandy scanned, all the aisles of all the department stores. Yosemite, too—Mirror Lake and Half Dome and all the falls Clarissa had always shown her pictures of. As the hours ticked by, Sandy could no longer vividly feel the wind as she flew and the sun no longer settled hot on her skin. Several times she stopped under one of the millions of the city's trees and waited for leaf to fall on her imagined, outstretched hand. She hovered close to the grass and had to inhale with each one of her breaths to whiff the spores and pollen that had plagued so many Sacramentans with allergies. When night began to fall, the deeper memories had begun to fade, remembrances of Clarissa and her cutting down a Christmas tree and nearly slicing Sandy's pinky finger off, sitting ringside for the amateur boxing matches at the old Radisson (where Clarissa would act disgusted when spit flew on her face,

but the next moment later was on top of chair, flinging fucks and shits while pumping her fist in the air), Clarissa yelling and then making up, Clarissa just yelling, Clarissa bucking that greasy asshole, Clarissa changing the locks, Clarissa serving Sandy with the divorce papers, Clarissa. . . .

Those memories transformed into fractured wisps of breath, and as they slowly dripped away into nothingness, relief spread throughout Sandy. Fading away were the last 10 years of being alone with her achy bones, the last 20 years of fatness and sweat in the wrong places at the wrong time, the whole life of being short and thick and stuck to a body that never seemed to want to grow smaller; Sandy let herself float without care.

Premonitions of heaven, the nearly complete absence of heartache and pain, filled her with something approaching bliss. She exhaled softly to push herself onward and onward until the moment she would be led to the light.

With an hour left, Sandy allowed herself to take in the world and say goodbye to everything that had once been her life and had already almost become forgotten. The apartment and all of its photos brought little sadness; Country Club Lanes, where she almost bowled a 200 the night after the divorce became official, brought even less. Reveling in the peace that had begun to radiate throughout her spirit, Sandy let each memory go, one by one, like pulling photos from a stack and tossing them one by one into the trash. In her joy, she went back to the hospital

and flitted through each person's sick body, hoping to fill them with the effervescence she was feeling. She paid last visits to her neighbors at the complex, offered them invisible smiles and whispered to them that death was nothing to be afraid of. By the time she was done spirit-hugging all the friends and neighbors and extended family that had played a role in her life, there was only one more place to visit.

Western Lawn sat at the southern end of Stockton Boulevard, close enough to Highway 99 that people joked the dead never had a quiet night's sleep. Tucked behind an Applebee's, the memorial park, with its seeming infinite expanse of green grass and the large pond with the waterfall in the front, could've been mistaken for a regular park, a place for the living. Sandy had avoided the cemetery for most of her adult life, but after the divorce, it became her sanctuary, where she'd sit on the grass and talk to her mother's headstone. She spent so much time there all of her jeans carried grass stains and the florist where she bought her flowers knew all about the divorce. Now, in her tranquil, bodiless state, Sandy could think of no better place to spend her last few minutes on earth.

Her mother's bones lay at the far end of the cemetery, furthest away from the freeway and the shopping center, but nearest to the cremation chamber Sandy had always imagined would be her last stop. When alive, the idea of her body rotting in the dirt like some kind of forgotten road kill had sickened

her, but since her death she hadn't thought once about the location of her human shell. She certainly hadn't made arrangements. What would it matter? She would've discarded that worthless bag of swollen blood vessels years ago had she known death would be like this. But as she approached her mother's grave and heard Clarissa's voice, that worthless bag was all she could think about.

Clarissa stood in a small patch of unused grass a couple of plots beside the grave, speaking with a man dressed in a wrinkled, linty, black suit that had undoubtedly seen too many corpses. He nodded solemnly to each of Clarissa's words, as though they were both engaged in a prayer. Clarissa was dressed in baby blue scrubs and off-white sneakers; clumps of hair strayed from her messy bun and her face shone, make-up free, though the light vestiges of Clarissa's Chanel perfume filled each of Sandy's breaths with a rush of happiness and sadness and anger and lust and regret and surprise and eagerness and anxiety and nostalgia and hate and love and a million other sensations that Sandy could not stop herself. She darted in and out of Clarissa's body without thought and without care, and the remembering started happening.

But Clarissa continued on in that voice Sandy couldn't believe she'd already forgotten, a voice that left nothing to the imagination, each syllable punctuated with whatever emotion

Clarissa happened to be feeling at that moment. “This is the spot,” Clarissa said.

“Okay,” the man said, and he placed his hand on Clarissa’s arm as though to nudge her towards the office, where they would do paperwork and Clarissa would make a payment and dot that one last “i” and make Sandy just another human has-been.

“Claire!” Sandy tried to scream. She hurried after them, wrapping Clarissa in furious circles. She flew full speed at the man to knock him over. She flew at their feet to trip them. She inhabited Clarissa’s body and spread out until every millimeter of Clarissa’s skin was touched by Sandy’s spirit, but then Clarissa was sitting at a table and the man with only one expression pulled some forms out of a desk drawer and explained the payment plan and Clarissa had a pen in her hand and was signing her maiden name and then they stood and shook hands and Clarissa asked:

“Can I see the body?”

The man didn’t flinch. “I’m sorry, ma’am. The Coroner’s office just brought the body over an hour ago. We have a lot of work to do. You wouldn’t want to see the body like this.”

Clarissa nodded and wiped a tear and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Sandy failed to say and before Clarissa could reach the other end of the office, she blockaded the door, spreading her spirit to the corners like a spider web, but Clarissa reached

through Sandy and pushed the handle and stepped through without even a shiver, without even an increase in her heartbeat, and then she was halfway across the parking lot.

Sandy rushed through the walls, zipping back and forth across the office and chapel, until she finally found her body on a white-linened table in the embalming room. A sheet covered most of her body, though that was the last thing she noticed, for in the next moment Sandy was in her body again, spread out so fully against her skin that every pore was filled with the breaths of her spirit. Get up! Sandy thought as a car started outside. Rise, dammit! Now!

But the doors to her left and right were already opening, doors cut perfectly into the air, one filled with light and stillness, the other filled with cries and laughs and drums and the smell of cheap coffee. Sandy heard Clarissa's car skid off into the distance. Clarissa was gone, for now, but in Sandy's last seconds, the arteries and nerves and bones filtered through her spirit; her fingertips tingled; she remembered the shape of Clarissa's mouth on her lips. As she slid off the table, placed her feet on the ground, and in her familiar body walked toward the only door with a shadow, Sandy knew that she had always known. There were no love stories without bodies, and that when the time came, Clarissa would choose correctly. Clarissa would come home.

# Interiors

Jon Alston

Geoffrey took from the walls all the photographs of he and Mel, months ago. Her eyes stared, whispering. Now boxes hid in their old bedroom with the door closed and locked, while Geoffrey slept on the couch. On the couch for years. Even the scent of her cut through him. The day after she died, walking into their room proved suffocating. Paralyzing shakes racked his body and buckled his knees; he crawled out on all fours, tears almost pouring.

But cleaning, removing Mel from that space, their room, the idea nauseated him. Not for love, for compassion, for

immortalizing. A simple, unexplainable trepidation. Seeing her body in their bed, stiff, cold, contorted.

He had stopped looking in mirrors after the second time Mel appeared behind him during his first week alone.

Four years and Mel still possessed the house, imbedded in the walls, thick sticky miasma permeating the hallways and rooms. Their room. The heart of darkness in that house. The photographs were some talisman conjuring her, keeping her in the house. In Geoffrey's senses. Buried in brown boxes, those images still kept her alive.

\* \* \*

Out on the front lawn, he started to dig. A wide shallow hole, large enough for him to lie down without touching the sides. Rough, quick work, no time to waste. Mel's invisible voice gloated between the walls, criticizing, laughing. Dozens of pseudo graves littered the lawn around the make shift fire ring; Geoffrey wiped sweat from his forehead on the back of his band, smearing dirt on his face.

One by one he carried the boxes stacked with picture frames of Mel, of himself, of the two together; with family, at their wedding, on vacation; an album crammed with out of focus

portraits, unrecognizable landscapes, the house when the two first moved in. Each box Geoffrey set next to the ring, until all five boxes gathered in worship around the squat hole. Once the boxes were out, he took a metal tank of gas from the garage and set it next to the cardboard sepulchers. He unscrewed the cap slowly, waiting for the gasoline hiss, and once hearing it, wafting in the pungent and tangy odor.

The first box went in: their wedding. No remorse, he dropped it in the ring's center and poured on too much gas. He stepped out of the ring, searching for the matches in his pocket. He flipped them out, struck up a single flame, and tossed it on the aromatic pile. Orange and yellow jumped out of the brown wet box, heating Geoffrey's face, pushing back Mel's cold breath on his back. The flames grew, tearing the box apart, and frames and albums spilled out, filling the hole. Photographs crackled and bubbled, the edges turning orange to brown to black, curling up and erasing the images. Geoffrey sat between the other boxes, pulling out frames and tossing them on top of the pile. Mel's face stared out at him, dozens of her faces; her high school portrait; Mel shoving cake in Geoffrey's face, even after she told him not to; their first picture in front of the house; Mel in a bikini. He had forgotten that version of her. The comforting hands. Her embarrassed smirks and giggles. Her before they married. Now, only phantoms caged in celluloid that he wanted released.

Mel still filled the house. The cracked walls and moldy carpet, the mortar chipping from bricks and peeling paint; the broken pipes, drips, pungent odors, and squeaky stairs. He couldn't afford a new home, or to leave the one he had for an apartment. Something had to be done. The house was all he had left. But she couldn't stay.

Manuals on remodeling he acquired from the County Library, beginner to advanced. Nine various volumes on home remodeling and demolition. *Renovating Old Houses* rested open on his lap, eyes never leaving the page. He nodded, flipping pages. Twenty years they lived in the house before she died, without a word from Geoffrey or Mel about anything regarding the derelict state. That house, built by some long distant and dead relative, not even a name surviving the decades between Geoffrey and the deceased. It had afforded comfort to them both, kept out the elements, the cold, the burning summers, the dust and animals. A generational significance pulsed through his muscles.

Preparations took a week: checking and double checking supplies, tools, techniques; all in order. When they inherited the place, Mel intended to help, but both knew her interest in Geoffrey's projects manifested only when his ideas interfered

with her movement throughout the space. Movements she still made.

He began with the carpet. Easy enough, he thought, large squares of synthetic fabric laid over cement—just pull it up and lay new stuffs right back down. Near their entry remained tile that even Geoffrey would not attempt to remove, even with its cracks and dusting mortar. Where the tile and carpet met, he began its deconstruction. A putty knife jammed between the carpet and tile, Geoffrey starting the initial separation with blade and pliers, a hammer and cat's paw ready if necessary at his right knee. The carpet lifted just enough for him to get three fingers under and grip. A sharp pain jolted in his fingers. He pulled them out, and blood peaked at the edge of a new laceration.

"Damn," he yelled, and heard Mel whisper "already?" He shook the pain out of his fingertips, ignoring the beads of blood emerging. Under the carpet he stuffed his fingers again, keeping close watch for those embedded nails. Callused skin ensnared the carpet's edge and Geoffrey pulled; up peeled a small section, subtle snaps as the carpet tore from the tack boards circumscribing the floors. A few tiny droplets of blood splashed on the gray underbelly; Geoffrey did not notice. He pulled; dozens more miniscule snaps echoed down the hallways and throughout the house. And slowly, the carpet rolled back, exposing what last saw daylight 60 plus years before. The heavy,

bulky carpet weighed Geoffrey down. He dropped the fibers and sat next to the exposed concrete slab. The few drops of blood had soaked into the floor's imperceptible pores, drinking up his life. A few deep breaths. Geoffrey felt good, felt the advancement under his fingernails, felt his muscles rip and stretch, alive, felt the house in his skin.

Once rested, he examined the gray minerals now laid open to the ceiling. Small etchings on the cement, on all the cement. At first he assumed they were cracks, the years of weight, of wear, the thoughts of simply existing, but he brushed the ground with his open palms, wanting to feel what would need repair and the inner textures of the foundation. But they didn't go down. No undefined dark fissures splitting the ground, no dust left behind, or even perhaps venturous spiders and their webs. Only shallow grooves.

He thought of Mel. How he would tell her, get her to touch the peculiarity under his hands. He wanted to be able to ask her what she thought the floor looked like, and he'd point at a group of markings. He envisioned her turning toward the wall, her index finger working paint from the wall, a spot Mel liked to pick at the paint when she tried to ignore their arguments. The hole was still there, the little curls of paint peeling away. And the small indentation her nail cut into the wood. Of course she would roll her eyes, and he'd try to convince her, slap the cement and point to the strange markings to get her attention.

The rest of the day Geoffrey tugged on the carpet, ripping the fibers from the tacks, exposing more and more of the strange markings in the foundation, markings he tried to ignore, to look at the way Mel would have, just fractures in the concrete, disruptions needing repair. But each new section exposed more varied symbols, scratches that Geoffrey knew even Mel would not deny.

That night, mounds of carpet laid under the half moon, a dying moon. Geoffrey sat on the concrete, rubbing the strange markings, lights off, his fingers seeing through the black, except the blue glow from the moon hiding by the windows. Geoffrey didn't move, but stroked the same spaces around where he sat repeatedly, as if to memorize, or read, those indentations. He had had so much time, while cutting up the carpet—far too weak himself to carry one large section through the house and outside. But his eyes gave him nothing, they saw only a foundation, faulty and needing repair. In his hands he held hope that his skin would recognize, or at least understand, those markings. But at 2:34 AM, he knew no more than before the carpet came up. Sleep tugged his eyelids and even the moon could not persuade him to stay. His body dragged down the hall and fell into bed.

Geoffrey rubbed the night from between his eyes, erasing his unremembered dreams and the markings from the floor. On the

edge of the bed he stopped, muscles sore, his body refusing to follow orders.

Geoffrey stretched. Joints popped, and he groaned. The clock read 10:17 AM. He rubbed his right hand, rough and soiled, over his face, then stood and draped an old brown robe over his shoulders, eyes still adjusting, body still resisting. A low grunt slipped between his lips. He hated that floor, the extra work it created for him. He thought maybe Mel muddled his brain, made him a little off, that's all; maybe there weren't any markings, just, he wasn't sure. Still too early to be sure of anything.

Geoffrey dressed. A box of Fix-All and putty knife waited outside in the garage; he brought them in. On his hands and knees, he opened the box, but even through his work-jeans he felt the uneven floor. The symbols.

He closed the box. Put it in the hall closest with the knife. Geoffrey grabbed a piece of paper from his room and a wood pencil. He set the paper on the living room and started to rub the pencil's tip over the page. Little shapes started to emerge, but unrecognizable. And all too slow. He took a knife from the kitchen and shaved away the wood, until he was left with the thin piece of graphite and peeled away pencil flesh. He started the rubbing again. Long, uniform strokes, back and forth. The page filled. He held it up over his head and laughed. But that piece would not be enough.

The graphite and paper were abandoned for the library again. Engineering he knew somewhat. Mechanical structures, schematics, he knew how to read them. He started with architecture, Modernism, in his realm of knowledge, and worked back through centuries, beyond A.D., to the ancients he heard little to nothing about. South American and Roman, “natives” of all lands. But nothing familiar, only that each book contained images accompanied by phrases such as “symbolic structure” or “examples of prehistoric language.” He refocused his search on symbology and dead languages, secret societies and ancient civilizations. He started with Greek and Latin, thought it only natural. Then Hebrew and Farsi and Sanskrit. But they too were nothing close, not even distant relatives of language, or anything. He tried researching cave paintings and Egyptian hieroglyphics, but those too were something other, more or less, or something he wasn't sure. But they weren't right. Aztec statues, and Mayans, any ancient dead civilization that had no language in diminutive symbols attempting to capture universal sounds of communication. But still, nothing.

Geoffrey sat on the floor, a half dozen more books open next to him, and in his hand a large magnifying glass he examined the floor with. The box of Fix-All still in the closet.

"What the hell have you been doing?" echoed Mel's voice in his head. Her most frequent words.

"Research," he would have said. I'm learning. Look at this floor. Look at it. You have to see something's not right here.

"Clean this up." Her distant voice clawed at his ears' memory.

The books blurred and words jumbled on the pages. *What am I doing?* He closed the books and walked to the hall closet.

Geoffrey worked through dinner, filling in the symbols. The sun was down and he worked by the ceiling's florescent lights. Lights that skewed and warped the symbols, made them into cracks and blemishes, into fractures that disrupted the delicate balance of the house's foundation. He began to question himself, the books, the idea. His memory. Unseen inconsistencies in the cement now. He worked faster, nothing to preserve, only the misguided confusion of an old man. But he wasn't an old man, not really, and only retired for a few years, and even then he was young for retirement. But the state offered it to him early, to slim out the overhead they said. Cutting back, trimming the fat, streamlining productivity. Phrases he heard, but were never said to him. He knew and understood. And so what? Why work, really, when he didn't have to? Bullshit office work he hated, with people he hated, for a "company" he hated. If anything, a blessing.

But on all fours, finishing up filling in the floor, questions surfaced. Of understanding. Of time and decisions. The symbols

vanished, but he still sensed them, shadows in his mind, fabricated memories he couldn't authenticate.

After midnight, he finished. He left the floor to dry and crawled into bed, alone. He rubbed his hands together, thinking of Mel, of her warm skin and long nights.

The morning bit at his eyes. He fell out of bed, trying to walk to the door. He groaned, a yawn spreading open his jaws. Geoffrey rubbed the night out of his eyes, rubbed Mel's memory off of his hands, and saw the floor: all his work for nothing. Gawking back at him was the floor, fresh, uncovered. All his work, all the time, gone. Geoffrey didn't move, didn't blink. His mouth dropped open then shut, over and over like a suffocating salmon.

"I did," he started saying, but the words faded into the floor. He scurried over to where he abandoned the Fix-All box against the wall. He picked up the box.

"Empty." Geoffrey stared at the floor: the empty, clean, cracked floor.

Most of the day he spent sitting in the middle of that room. Gazing at the unworked cement, all the markings visible. Where the Fix-All had gone, all that work, he couldn't understand. Again, he massaged the indentations, trying to absorb their meaning, a meaning he abandoned hope that existed. They felt like mistakes. Architectural oversights hidden under the old carpeting before an inspector could point out the flaws and

demand a new floor. He slapped his palms down, yelling and screaming, a toddler defying his silent mother. Pain tingled in his skin, the hard floor resisting weak flesh. Next to his legs, he saw the putty knife, crusted with Fix-All, with evidence of his labors; the facts were simple, but evidences contradicted. The white-gray plaster, caked on that silver blade, laughing, lauding his anger and frustration, Geoffrey had it. He picked up that mocking tool and threw it at the wall across the room: it stuck. Small paint chips dusted the floor under the penetrated wall.

“Shit,” he sighed. Still half awake, he lifted his body off the floor, and dragged to the wall opposite. He examined the incision, was impressed, really, without trying or thought he made a decent throw. Somehow the putty knife sunk all the way up to its handle, the soft dry-rotted wood soaked up the metal. Geoffrey pulled the tool from the wall, peeling more chips of paint from around the hole. They were going to have to be repainted anyway, so the flakes didn’t matter; he wasn’t about to remove all the dry and cracked paint, not to just cover up that terrible wood again; but still, the marks were there, and he’d have to do something about them, they would show through even with a small touch up. He examined the damage, the thin two inch wide slit through the wood. He put his fingers against it, feeling the damage. But he brushed something more. Around the cut were strange markings, similar to the markings on the floor. But only just, because these too had a life, an idea, of their

own, an image that complimented the floor, an additional notation. Geoffrey remembered Mel's placebo, digging splinters from the dilapidated boards. He scanned over the small hole in the paint where she used to burrow, inches from his own, and there too: imperceptible symbols. Head cocked to the side, he started picking away the paint.

An hour wasted away before he realized the large patch exposed under the paint. He dropped his arms, staring at the brown spot among the cracked color: the precise lines curving around each other, a ballet of delicate and minute scorings swirling on the wood's surface, some attempt at, what, communication? Geoffrey snapped. He ran outside, leaving the door open behind him.

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He made rubbings of the floor. And walls. Took those impressions to the library, his stack of books useless and uninformative. But he was too afraid to ask for help, and wandered around the facility until closing: taking down books, scanning their pages, realizing he didn't understand what he read, but also didn't recognize the markings made on the rubbings, moved on to other books, kept a few under his arms while he progressed, but never really finding answers, never

really finding hints to ancient civilizations. No dead languages or government encryptions, no ciphers to uncode the 'text'.

The drive home haunted him, knowing those symbols waited in the wood, unseen and encompassing. Geoffrey kept his hand on his right pocket, over the rubbings he made. The paper was warm, he thought, heating his body. Perhaps.

A resolve flourished that the house must be stripped. Nothing could change his mind. Mel's voice disappeared from the halls and his thoughts, the house beckoning to be exposed. Day and night Geoffrey carried or dragged all the furniture out onto the front lawn. Couches and dressers and picture frames and chairs, nothing left in the house except a tool box and his rubbings. After six days, his true work began. He started with the walls, scraping all the cracked and peeling paint, letting the remains fall on the carpet yet removed. Only the front room required cleaning. It was a week before the walls stood bare, holding up the roof. Each tattooed with different symbols, variations sometimes in the slightest, variations he could not perceive. Not at first. They placated his interest. Ameliorated it. Showed him everything he could not understand. He made no effort to try and understand. Not yet.

Another week for Geoffrey to rip out the carpets and linoleum, piling their remains in the back yard. A bed he set up on the front lawn, too perturbed to sleep between all the unknown, all those unspoken histories watching. At night, under

the lamps' light next to his outside bed, he studied new rubbings he made, now in the hundreds added over the previous weeks. A notebook, too, he'd invested in to record his discoveries and postulations, if perchance he should make any. Each night lengthened. He, laying in bed, rubbings blanketing his legs, the lamps burning like little suns while he held two pages next to each other, hoping for validation.

Geoffrey forgot about everything, absorbed by the symbols. When the sun was up, he possessed the courage to walk the halls and rooms of the old house, make new rubbings, measurements, trace the markings with his fingers, tasted their shapes on his tongue and lips, but all remained silent. In time, Geoffrey stopped speaking altogether, seeing the markings, feeling them, pressing their indentations in and through his skin. They became his voice without him knowing. Those inscriptions dragging him out of bed before the sun woke him, constant study and examination of the walls. The house, those markings, they became more than material, than objects to be studied, misread and ill-interpreted; they became all Geoffrey's cognition, a synthetic soul expanding outside his body to fill the rooms, those subsurface furrows. He now ignored the floor, such a small sampling of the languages, and lesser than those that stood. A footpath to the true symbols, to the true language, to the truth.

The rubbings became illegible. Circles and lines connecting similar symbols, diagrams of supposed grammars and vocabularies, hopeful execution of an alphabet unifying the varied tongues. And when the papers no longer served their purpose, he made to the walls. He pinned color coded yarns to the etchings, constructing multicolored webs, joining the walls and their words. The labyrinth started small, one skein of red yarn pinpointing and connecting one symbol Geoffrey found in almost exact replication on all the walls. Or time had made the symbols appear analogous.

Without knowing, he'd constructed a labyrinth walled of multicolored yarns. Narrow passages slithering between the solid walls, pocked with pins holding the whole artifice together. No longer did he quantify and examine and articulate to his notebook, or hypothesize about the writings themselves, but examined their spatial relations. He measured the yarns' lengths and angles made with walls or other yarns. Started marking where similar colors intersected, then mapped those coordinates on a three dimensional grid. Constellations evolved; depending on his point of view, the stars aligned in his living room: Ursa major and Cassiopeia; Draco, Hydra, and Orion with his belt and bow; Pleiades with her seven sisters. But those were only visible from inside the house. His maps uncovered something else, some other symbol entirely new and foreign; other worldly, even. To recreate the object—he couldn't simply sketch out the

findings, graphing cardinals on the tri-coordinate system, the limits of the page, the tabula rasa, incapable of representing the findings hanging under the ceiling—true depth, a tangible third dimension, was needed.

Construction began with miniature wire armatures that he hung off the porch eaves. Over 1001 variations on the celestial object, all dangling in Geoffrey's front yard, over his bed, a metallic melody clanking throughout the night, lulling him into deep dreams overshadowed by those symbols, that large, intersecting alien, materialized among the yarn strands. Shadows whispered the polysyllabic phonics unspeakable on the walls and floor, permeating through the rotting wood planks, the cement, insulation, even Geoffrey's skin. It was everywhere he looked: under his eyelids, replacing the emptiness he scratched at on his ring finger.

He stopped eating.

He stopped sleeping.

Day and night and day he sat on the floor, rubbing the markings while staring through the yarns, drawing the tied points into shapes, the full figure aligning above his sunken, sallow eyes, in constant motion, drifting in and out of view; no time to stop, to rest and understand and dissect and know the spaces in-between.

Both eyes rolled. Dry and red. Blinking, squeezing his lids tight, did nothing. No moisture could cure the burning. All those yarns crisscrossing, vertices populating the void between ceiling and roof. Geoffrey needed there to be something, anything, unification of some kind. After all the hours, the months, tearing the house apart, analyzing shapes he still misunderstood. And now, all that was left were the yarns and the cross points, thousands of almost intersecting joints that meant nothing more than the chicken pox he had as a child. Just various points, floating. On his back he tried connecting them with his finger, drawing imperceptible lines in the air. Drawing and redrawing. Various patterns repeated. Always triangles, always. Like with stars, there was always three points he could bind with his finger: isosceles, equilateral, right, obtuse, acute. Triangles and triangles. He added in more. Tried squares and rectangles and rhombi, but no four points lined up parallel with each other, forcing him to be content with irregular polygons. Yet, those polygons, too, like triangles, began repeating. Five sides, over and over, caught in various orientations in that space, all fused, some other whole shape he could not quite grasp. He waved his hand before his eyes, erasing his work to clear the room, to start again, but only using the irregular five-sided polygon. Each one lined up with the next, perfect creases conjoined without Geoffrey and his illustrative finger. And, through the invisibles lines, he saw it. The true form,

suspended—caught in its own web, his web—twisting over itself, cryptic and precise. He blinked. Still there, still perfect. It emitted a temporality to him, a fleeting revelation to dissipate when the clouds parted and the sun blasted away the iconography. He rushed for his wire, dozens of unopened spools like shiny new corpses watching the overgrown grass. No thought, no control, a possession animating each limb, that symbol pupating its own progress as each point was wired to the next, and next, and next, and next, and next, and next, all the while increasing the strain on the wool fibers. The strands sagged. Geoffrey continued wrapping the wire around each point, the manifestation taking corporeal form, permanent form, infinite form.

The weight strained Geoffrey. He anchored the heavy mass to the ceiling—an artificial point, one purely out of necessity, yet not a detraction, the integrity of the object codified just enough to keep the metal from ripping all the yarn and annihilating the constellation.

Nimble fingers fabricated that behemoth, every point connecting to every point, insuring no loss of shape, the true image solidified in galvanized steel, eliminating the need for the weak yarns, the inconsolable pursuit of those unspoken, unknown, insubstantial languages; their whole existence tied to the growing structure. Geoffrey knew it. He felt it. Hardening his bones, each twist of the wire vibrating through his whole

body, writing the memory into his mind, opening a new link of synapses for that moment in time, nothing but the wire and the object and Geoffrey and the work and truth, everything that ever could be known, or would or should be known, electrifying his fatty gray tissues. The imprinted façade covered within and without, holding itself together with language unspeakable, memories and time and the universe collapsing into some new shape. And after the whole lot, the months toiling over the immutable symbols, the infinitude of misunderstandings, Geoffrey stopped. On his back under the great accumulation of wire hovering above him. A matrix of metal lines he cherished. He knew. And alone, he and the object, he was, he thought, the object, an extension of his knowing, a piece of his flesh fashioned from new flesh, better flesh, stronger flesh, superior flesh. And in that thought he lay beneath the monolith, dangling in his yarn web, completing the work, giving meaning to the chaos that consumed his world.

All rested silent. Geoffrey, asleep on the cool concrete floor, the night wakening outside the house, and the object, solitary, shifted. Like blinking an eye, it moved, subtle and brief. Perhaps the wind, an alteration in the earth's rotation or magnetic field or simple plate tectonics.

An apparition. Dancing in the center of the object. Long hair, hanging over a dimpled lower back. Dark and straight.

Weightless in its motion. Sheer folds draped the curvy body, rustled by a silken motion. Symbols stitched in gold script glittering in the lights. It danced. Ever changing. Ever present. Its form swaying, enticing, attracting interpretation, examination. To be touched, and opened, and read.

Geoffrey woke. Eyes open, delirious, he thought he saw the object twisting, all the yarns taut, shaking at the tension. A chunk ripped from the wall, snapping Geoffrey in the face. He reached a hand up: blood. More fragments ripped from the walls, dozens at a time, whizzing past his face and chest, wood splinters scattering over the cement floor like large chunks of bark on a forest floor, making it impossible for him to sit up, evermore yarns tearing out wooden shrapnel while the object, straining against those threads, tighter and tighter, spinning and spinning, all at once the object accelerated, the walls exploding in splinters and whipping yarns and pins, and Geoffrey curled up, fetal, face hidden, listening to the whistling yarns-ends snapping overhead, wrapping around the now furious object, and that whistling raised in pitch, until it disappeared in an unrecognizable frequency that opened Geoffrey's eyes to show him the cement covered in wood and yarn and dust, and above, the object spinning uncontrollably, ripped from the walls and ceiling—a small hole opened to the night air, the faint waning moon illuminating the rapid mass while Geoffrey noticed the

ground began to tremble, and the walls groaned and creaked and fractured, throwing large boards and sections of wall overhead, attaching to the object's gravity, and he had to run, forsaken by his creation, his discovery, himself, running out of the house, watching the small models on the eaves smashing into the object, become the object, melting to a hot solid whole in that rotating blur, Geoffrey no longer able to distinguish the connected constellations, no longer a house at all, only the object, unperceivable, and growing, spitting out a high screech that cut through the air, crippling Geoffrey, until a bright flash illuminated the night, brighter than the sun.

Then black.

No light, the now nothing compared to the blast. And Geoffrey, alone, on his lawn, nothing left but the foundation, wiped clean.

# Warmth

Johnny Sittisin

Two people stood at the funeral among the tender falling snow, the priest who had arrived at the wrong the grave site, and Flynn Lowground.

“And so shall Solomon rest in peace. Amen.” Flynn shifted his weight from his left foot to his right foot, elevating his scuffed oxblood oxford an inch above the white ground, inhaling deeply the last drags of his last cigarette. Tiny ashes fell onto the patches of his grey, wool suit. His chest itched from all the wool, flaking like little heartbeats. The priest, slouching from the heavy cotton of his gold, embellished Cossack, shuffled towards Flynn,

moving his eyes to the dark circles just below Flynn's deep brown pits, hazy from the rising puffs of smoke.

"Go and say some last words, my son. It's just you and him now," he said, tapping Flynn on the side of his arm with his sharp, withered fingers. Something about the priest's fingers reminded Flynn of crows. He turned imperceptibly towards the priest, softened his eyes, and said in a whisper, "I'll take it from here, Father." The priest vanished like a dream into the white drift, leaving Flynn alone with the death black casket and an itchy chest.

"I'm sorry, Victoria," Flynn said in a hush, holding the lifeless hand in his own, caressing the still veins on the top of her hand with his left. Despite being dead and limp, Victoria's hand nuzzled itself smoothly into the crevices of Flynn's right hand. He laughed. Her hand nestled its dead fingers better than when she had been alive. Flynn gazed at the pale skin along her fingers and smiled as he squeezed her hand. He squeezed again, closing his eyes to see the image of a fireplace sparkling with embers, his hand in her hand, time swirling around them in streaks of blood red and gold, the overtones of a deafening roar from a beast slouching towards Bethlehem, Victoria's naked white body shimmering, smiling a full smile of black teeth. Black as crows. Black as night. Black as dry blood. A needle drop. A single drop of blood. Billie Holiday's voice creeping through the hollow walls of darkness somewhere inside the memory.

*In my solitude*

*You haunt me*

*With dreadful ease*

*Of days gone by*

*In my solitude*

*You taunt me*

*With memories*

*That never die*

Here. Now. Here.

Flynn opened his eyes to a tear of blood staining the top of her snow white hand.

Blink.

Breath.

He felt the sweat sift between their palms, and, using his left hand, wrapped his thumb and forefinger around her wrist. About three inches, he measured. Nearby, an ancient gravedigger was going about his job, hunchbacked, hungry, already two feet deep into his plot. Flynn walked over to him with small, methodically sterile steps. The gravedigger looked up to Flynn's waist with his grey, wrinkled face, deathly with sorrow.

“Do you have a hacksaw?”

Without a word, the grey-faced gravedigger turned slow to his pile of tools, dug up a black hacksaw, and held it up to Flynn, keeping his eyes down. The rough, black edges of the saw shone flat, complimenting the stark grey overcast of the snow-ridden day. Flynn took the saw, and without missing a breath, if he did breathe, the grey-faced gravedigger went back to digging.

Bone is surprisingly easy to cut through with the right tool and applied finesse. Or is it tenderness? There didn't seem to be a difference to Flynn between tenderness and anger anymore. Flesh begets cold steel, and cold steel begets heartache. Cut. Hack. Saw. Saw. Saw. Saw. The jagged blade moved back and forth, moved like black and red waves, rhythm of a train – cut, cut, cut, cut, cut. No eye contact, that's what Flynn promised himself, and he intended to keep his word even as tiny spews of blood sprinkled his wool jacket. "Who's hand am I cutting anyway?" Flynn muttered, a question just as much for the hacksaw as it was to the ghost swaying its arms to the pulse of the distant Red Seas. This isn't what was supposed to happen. Flowers, tears, cursing fate, a hand of dirt, and possibly an angry prayer, this was the scenario that played out within Flynn's mind driving here. Yet, here he was with a dull blade clashing against pure white bone, a pureness he loved. Blood passed. Time passed. Yet, it never seemed as blood and time passed together. Each beat of blood sprinkling onto his hands existed in its own universe, free from the corruption of time, like his coal fire love.

Flynn expected a horror-film scene to explode into being sawing through the bone, muscle, and sinew of Victoria's sylph wrist, but only a pixie splotch of blood splattered over his hands and shirt cuffs, now stained velvet crimson, one bloody hand in another.

"Thank you, I'll leave this here," Flynn said with negligible warmth, to the grey-faced head hovering just at ground level. The gravedigger continued digging, saying nothing, as if the day was one of the same millions of days he had lived and died through. Despite Victoria's severed hand bleeding on top of the cold, beige leather cushion of his front passenger's seat, thoughts of the gravedigger's life haunted his mind. Did he like his job? Did he know anybody buried there? Did he have any living friends? Thoughts like these flooded Flynn's mind, maneuvering through his psyche as he did through the dim, grey streets of downtown. He couldn't feel his hands at the wheel the entire drive home. He forgot to turn on the heater.

Bloody rare steak, green beans, and mashed potatoes and gravy. Two plates were on the table, one for Flynn, and one for Victoria's hand. Dinner was easy as it had never been before. "You need to turn off the stove now. Why do you always burn everything you touch?" Victoria said, her ghost crimson red dress lulling on the back of the mahogany chair over the checkered

kitchen tiles. Without moving from his seat, Flynn looked out the window into the white dark, "Eat up, your food is getting cold, dear." The knife in Victoria's hand reflected the washed out light of the snow outside. "Here, let me help you cut up the steak, dear," Flynn said in an almost singsong tone, guiding Victoria's hand in cutting up the meat. "Oh, no dear, you should eat up yourself. I couldn't possibly take a bite of yours." Victoria's knife stabbed into one of the steak cuts lead by Flynn's hand. Victoria's sharp tip stayed pointed at Flynn's mouth while he chewed, the faintest blood running down the edge and dripping onto the black and white floor.

Silence.

Red silence.

Flynn lowered Victoria's hand down onto the table, clenching her hand into a fist.

"I'm sorry I didn't cook it to the way you liked. I was just scared of making ashes," Flynn said, swallowing, his other hand floating above hers. "Okay, you don't want to be touched." Flynn kissed the top of Victoria's skin with his fingers. "But your hands are cold. They're always so cold," said Flynn, enclosing the hand between the two thick tombstones of his own, rubbing warmth into her skin. Bone to blood. Blood to muscle. Muscle to skin. Skin to touch. Touch to warmth. Flynn smiled, unclenching her hand, interlocking the coast of his fingers with tides of hers.

"For once, let's clean the dishes together. I'll show you how."

Night came over the apartment like a warm blanket, and the two snuggled themselves back into domesticity as easy as sleep, the television turned on to some static show, the electric fireplace roaring with artificial flame, lamps turned dim, all was easing into the dark bed of dreams with Victoria's hand in Flynn's. The mattress seemed much bigger and warmer than before, Flynn thought, sinking back into the deep grave of his grey pillow. "Good night, my love," he said, squeezing Victoria's hand. The hand squeezed back.

# When the Truth Creeps Out of Nowhere

Josh Fernandez

The detective's lanky body, pleated slacks and awkward disposition betrayed the law enforcement stereotype. He took a seat on the couch and slid a large photo album across the coffee table, knocking over a near empty can of Pabst. A vein of beer cascaded around a few other empty cans, pooling finally into a little pond near the ashtray.

“Sorry,” he said, adjusting his wire framed glasses. His goofy, non-descriptness was comforting.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’ll clean it up.”

“Now before you look through these pictures, it’s important to remember what the men looked like,” he said. “Can you remember?”

“I think so,” I said. I knew there was a black one and a blacker one.

“Are you picturing them right now?”

“The one I remember best wasn’t actually the one who tried to kill me,” I said. “He was light-skinned, about 20. Thin. Peach fuzz mustache. Thick eyebrows and relaxed, really messed up hair.”

“It’s ok,” the detective said. “You don’t have to verbalize it. Just make sure you have the picture in your mind.”

Even when he was telling me to shut the fuck up, he remained professional.

“Yeah,” I said. “I got him.”

“Mr. Fernandez, before you look through the photos, there’s something you said at the hospital.” The detective wore an impressive look of concern, like he’d practiced it a thousand times in the mirror.

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“You described one of the assailants as ‘nice.’”

I tried to remember the hospital, but could only recall a series of blurred lights, a thick tube lodged in my throat and a beautifully fat nurse giving me the occasional sponge bath. The rest was lost in a haze of morphine.

“He *was* nice,” I said.

“Nice?” the detective shot back, confused.

“Kinda.”

“How so?”

“Well, we hung out a little before—”

“Before he robbed you?” he asked, cutting me off.

“Uh-huh.”

“And sent you to the hospital?”

“Yeah.”

The detective caught himself lapsing out of professionalism and straightened his posture. He took a deep breath, shook off his line of questioning and changed directions entirely. “Do you feel alright? Do you need anything? Water?”

“No,” I said, remembering that my entire head was five times its original size, wrapped in a gigantic bandage. I probably looked like the fallen mascot for a football team that never won a single game. It must have taken all the detective’s strength not to laugh out loud whenever he looked my way.

“So you felt some empathy with your attackers, you were saying,” he said.

“I mean, yeah. They bought beer.”

“Mr. Fernandez, would you consider yourself an alcoholic—” he said, stopping at the tail end of the sentence, before he could even get to the question mark. Had he continued, I would have answered. Or I would have at least lied and told him *no*.

“Do you have family I can talk with?” he said.

“No,” I shot back.

“No parents?” he said.

I shook my head.

“Brothers?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Why?”

“Just to get a better picture.”

“Of what?” I asked.

“A sister, maybe?”

“Dead,” I said. “Everybody’s dead.”

That was a lie. But the idea of being alone somehow made me feel less lonely. My grandmother used to tell me that she hated being lonely because that meant her soul was empty. But what she failed to understand was that emptiness and loneliness are different. Opposite, even. Loneliness can fill you. It can fill you up with so much feeling that it can drive you out of your mind and into a hospital with translucent tubes jutting from your throat.

“You know what?” the detective said, pointing to the photo album. “Why don’t you just look at the pictures now and see if you recognize anyone.”

The night of the robbery, I walked with my Jewish pothead friend Lazar a few blocks over to The Flame Club, a joint where all the real drunks hung out, the kind of place you could wear sweatpants and a wife beater, go barefoot, pay for your drinks in loose change and nobody would know the difference. Nothing good ever came out of The Flame Club, but that was kinda the point: stewing in a dark room with likeminded scumbags, drinking until something interesting happened.

As I told the detectives in the hospital, I couldn't remember the exact details of the night, in a linear sense, at least. It was more like the facts came in unrecognizable segments, an unfinished puzzle with half of the pieces jammed where they didn't belong.

I know it started with Jack Daniels, that's for sure. I took a few shots, got a Jack and Coke and ordered several draft Budweisers. At some point, Lazar wandered off to a group of girls while I stayed at the bar. I didn't talk with anyone, just sat there drinking.

The dead yellow room reeked of mop water. An exotic woman drank with her exotic friend and the more I drank the less exotic they became. So mundane, in fact, that I walked over and took a seat on the booth next to them and started talking, the force of the whiskey pushing my language like a coal powered train.

“I am a Mexican,” I said. “Are you Mexicans, too?”

Neither of them said a word. I couldn’t tell what they looked like underneath the makeup. The lipstick was so red that it was almost black.

“Have you ever lost anyone?” I asked. They looked at their drinks. “I’ve lost everyone. I don’t have anyone left. Everyone’s gone. Do you know what that’s like?”

They leaned into each other and looked at me like I was a pigeon who had flapped into the bar, perched on the stool and started talking. They leaned into each other and giggled like idiots until their boyfriends—yoked up Arab boys with tank tops and gelled hair—strutted through the bar. I ordered Jack after Jack until they went away, until my head loosened, until that tight feeling in my chest cleared into a wide open space, like a dog trapped in a cage for the entirety of its life being finally set free into a stretching pasture.

I don’t remember leaving the bar, only walking home with Lazar trailing behind, talking with unfamiliar voices. I traveled at a quick pace, enjoying the warm Sacramento night, a slight breeze plastering my sweaty shirt to my back. I counted the cracks in the sidewalk but only got to six before I was distracted. The unkempt bushes forced shadows to creep like demons in the grass.

“Where you live at?” an unrecognizable voice said.

“Just up here,” I answered. “Who the fuck is that?”

They didn’t answer, just kept walking ahead while they shouted behind me all the way to the apartment I shared with my roommate Roderick, a lanky black kid who played basketball and wrote poetry. He was upstairs sleeping when we got back home.

In the light, I got a drunken look at the two men with Lazar: one was dark brown and nondescript and the other was lighter skinned with wild hair. The darker one went immediately for a beer run while I smoked a cigarette with the lighter one on the front stoop. The stars were crisp, the moon huge.

The light-skinned one asked question after question. The words rushed from my mouth in a river of drunken language.

“What set you claim?” he said, as if everybody in the world was in some sort of a street gang. The answer, of course, was that whitewashed Mexicans who ride skateboards don’t join gangs, but I told him I knew some Tongans—Sivili, Joe and Sufesi—who were Crips, but we only drank together sometimes. The light-skinned one turned serious and said he was a Blood and flashed a quick hand sign that showed me what set he was from. Just then, his dark friend came back down the street with a 24 pack of Bud Light.

I shouldn’t have let them back inside.

We drank for an hour until Roderick clomped downstairs wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“Sup,” he said, trying to figure out if he knew our guests. “Y’all play chess?”

The dark one nodded and Roderick produced a chess board from the cabinet.

While they played chess, I drank can after can of warm beer.

Concentrating on a single face in the photo book was next to impossible, especially with the detective in wait, his steel gray eyes burning holes into the side of my neck. Each portrait shared a similarity with the next—the slow curve of the nose or the point of the chin or the tightly cropped curls and yellowish eyes. Picture after picture of incarcerated black men, like a bastard American history captured in a flimsy, 15-inch photo album.

My mind wandered to the first time I’d taken a drink. I was 15. My mom and step-dad went out and left me to babysit my three-year-old sister Monica, a blonde-haired angel with a smile that broke my teenage angst clean in half.

That night, we ran circles around the house until neither of us could breathe. We lay on the carpet side-by-side, panting, holding our burning chests.

“Blue,” she said, breathing heavily.

“Blue?” I asked.

“Blue,” she said. “The sky.”

“But we’re inside.” I could barely catch my breath.

“Blue.”

“But it’s nighttime.”

“The sky is always blue,” she said.

When I put Monica to bed, I kissed her on the forehead.

“Goodnight, little sister,” I said, but she was already sleeping.

I went to the kitchen, found a bottle of vodka in the liquor cabinet and twisted the dusty cap. It smelled like poison. I gagged, but drank it down. And another. By the fourth glass my head swirled and I gave myself a field sobriety test by walking a straight line across the cracks in the tile floor, but fell over in a fit of laughter. I made myself another drink and tried to watch *The Wizard of Oz* on the television but my head filled with helium and spiraled into a windstorm. I crawled to the bathroom and vomited a heavy stream of orange juice and vodka into the toilet until the bowl glowed orange. The acid burned my throat. I crawled into bed. The room spun me to sleep.

I awoke to the sun stabbing through the blinds. My head burned, like all the moisture had been sucked away by nightmares. I shot out of bed, afraid that I had left the bottle of vodka out for my parents to see or that I had vomited all over the bathroom floor. A pain shot through my skull, emanating from my sandy eyeballs.

“Mom?” I called out. Nobody was in the kitchen.

The house was empty. I found a note on the kitchen counter.

*Josh, something happened to Monica. We are at the hospital. The Larsons will pick you up at 11 a.m. to bring you to Sutter General.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

It was 10:30.

*Something happened to Monica.* I read that part over and over again. *Something happened to Monica.* I repeated it, like a mantra, until the words carried no meaning.

At the hospital I watched her under the hard light with tubes taped to her arms. Her body was purple and wrinkled, like a fallen plum. I could hear my mother's breath behind me. I held onto her boney fingertip until the doctor whispered through his mask, "Are you ready?"

I stopped at his photo and focused. He looked right at me, exactly as he appeared in my apartment. Peach fuzz mustache. Thick eyebrows. Wild hair, like a lion's mane.

He didn't look like criminal. Even in his mug shot he looked nice.

I tried to remember what he was like—his personality and that night—how he asked me what gang I represented, how he concentrated on his friend's chess game with Roderick, watching

every move as if studying for an exam. I drank most of the beers. Maybe all of them. As the night stretched on, I could barely stand. The world turned thick with drunkenness. Roderick went to bed. I tried to tell our guests that it was time to go, but I could only look at the skinny one and smile. I tried to get up but fell back onto the couch.

I watched the darker one steal my bike. It made a clicking sound as he wheeled it across the living room and out the front door. He unplugged my computer and carried it away. The skinny one demanded money. I didn't have any. I was too drunk to argue. The room spun. I ran toward the kitchen, crashing into the wall, fumbled around the drawer and found a small, serrated steak knife. I made my way back to the living room where I showed the lighter one my weapon. I might have been crawling. I waved the knife and he backed up toward the door. He pulled out a knife of his own. It was gold. Even the handle. I couldn't understand why he had a golden knife. It wasn't like the movies. My movements were wild and clumsy. Everybody looked scared to death. I waved my steak knife at his face and he backed out toward the door, trying to keep my eyes focused on his gold knife.

There was a crack and my head exploded into a wet mass of pressure, as if I was under the ocean balancing a boulder on top of my head. I turned around to see what hit me. Everything went black.

I woke up in the hospital with two tubes in my throat and a couple detectives waiting by the window. I heard the humming of machines and fell asleep to a cool river of drugs rushing through my system.

“That’s him,” I said, pointing to his picture in the photo book.

The detective straightened his posture.

“Are you sure?” he said. “Look harder. Make sure.”

“It’s him,” I said. “I’m positive.”

The detective sat expressionless, as if he didn’t want to put his bias onto the situation. I admired his composure. Nothing seemed to faze him. Nothing was either right or wrong in his world. Everything was a series of facts that all led to a specific point. *He’d make a good father*, I thought.

“So what happens next?” I said.

“Well, if your roommate Roderick picks the same suspect then there will be a trial.”

“No,” I said. “I mean what happens to me?”

“To you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” the detective said. “I suppose that’s up to you.”

A wave of sadness washed over my body. I don’t want to make decisions, I thought. I’m not good at them. When the

detective got up to leave, I stayed on the couch, thinking about the last night I spent with Monica.

The sky is always blue.

The sky is always blue.

The sky is always blue.

“Do you have kids?” I asked, before the detective reached the door.

“Yeah,” the detective said, without turning around. “But we don’t get to speak much.”

He closed the door gently behind him.

A couple months later, the detective called out of the blue. He said he’d been thinking about me, that when he left he had wanted to give me some advice but he was sure I wouldn’t want to hear it. It plagued him to think that he left me there all bandaged up with an unanswered question.

“Do you remember what you asked me?” he said.

“Not really.”

“You asked me what happens to you.”

“Yeah.”

The detective’s voice shook on the other end of the phone as he spoke. “Look, I gave you the wrong answer,” he said. “I should have told you that when somebody invades your

home, you get over that pretty quickly. When they take stuff, it's only stuff. Your physical wounds heal. Time passes. You get your things back. Or you don't. But it's not about what they took. The true damage is done by what they left."

"What they left?" I said.

"It's something like a little bomb they leave inside your brain and one day—it could be a week or a month or 20 years from now—that bomb will explode into a billion microscopic fragments, jagged and impossible to clean up. That kind of mess in your brain will cripple you to your death. The only way to stop that explosion is before it happens . . . Are you there?"

"I'm here," I said. "I'm listening."

"Good," he said. "Then be with the people you trust. Hang onto the people you love. Don't let them go. And if they do let go, keep them in your thoughts so there's no room for anything else. No anger. No bomb. No explosion."

It's 104 degrees today and even the walls are sweating. A stack 80 student essays stares at me longingly, but I'm tooling around the internet, wasting time, reading stories about celebrity coke binges gone awry. Charlie Sheen's face is gray from narcotics. Lil' Wayne is skateboarding now. I scroll through Facebook and then check my work email. Among the dozens of cryptic messages from the administration about pot lucks and

retirement parties, I click on a message marked urgent from one of my students, Whitney.

*Dear professor, my fiance left ..I feel pathetic and weak...im not sure what's happened and I stayed up all damn night.crying .. he got drunk and broke into my house and stole everything. I had to have my daughter picked up because im just falling apart and after everything we've been through this happens??? I don't get it! I hate this life, I'm lonely and I guess you can say im being a little bitch about it. I feel so stupid.*

Part of me wants to tell her “Yeah, join the fucking club” and another part wants to tell her it only gets worse. But the other part wants to say something else—something that will make her at once feel better, but also probably more hopeless and lonely; something closer to an existence taken out of a literary, romantic context, closer to the real story about the truth, how it’s always right in front of you but sometimes you’re just too distracted to see it. I could tell her to quit drinking or what the detective told me about keeping your loved ones close. But instead I tell her something simple:

*The sky is always blue*, I write, but it’s probably too cryptic to understand.

# The Evacuation Plan

Erica Sanders

Home. House. An attempted drawing of a basic, three-dimensional rectangle with an angular sloping roof, a narrow cylinder for a chimney, a slim rectangle to indicate a front door, and a couple of side-by-side squares for windows. A compilation of geometric figures. It's really very simple, just a combination of lines. It was one of the first things I learned to draw in elementary school that looked like what it was supposed to be without demanding any real drawing talent. Unlike my peers, I knew my skill level and therefore did not attempt to go "above and beyond". I was not going to be that kid whose drawing you

look at and say, “Is that supposed to be a house? It looks like a tree. And why is the sky green?” My house was definitely a house. Figuring out how to draw a cube or rectangle was key to successfully producing mediocre drawings on notebook paper throughout my student career. These houses have been mass-produced from elementary school all the way through graduate school. They’re like tract homes. Sure, some drawings were better than others, but more or less it always looked the same. And for some reason when I think “home,” I think of that simple drawing.

Many people, no doubt, think of their parents. Hell, I should probably think of my parents. Apparently when I think of “home,” I am an orphan and my house looks like the early draft of one of those cheesy Thomas Kinkade cottages in the snow, with fluffy smoke floating out of the chimney. I suppose it could be worse. The word “home” could elicit some horrible memories: divorce, abusive parents, absent parents, no furniture, a diet composed primarily of mechanically processed meats and Fruit Loops.

For some, home is the place they couldn’t get further away from. Fortunately, I came from a comfortable home with loving parents who banned sugar cereals: “Whole Grains for everyone!” But then again, the word makes me think of a drawing. Go ahead and psychoanalyze to your heart’s content.

The first house I ever lived in is a blur. I was a resident from birth until age three. If it weren't for childhood photographs, I wouldn't be able to tell much about it, except that it was big and I wasn't. I used to sit just outside the kitchen, locked into my strategically placed highchair, eating Yoplait yogurt while my dad watched *Good Morning America* did his morning exercises. All the bedrooms were upstairs. My room had very busy fairy wallpaper. My parents had a queen-size bed with a floral patterned bedspread with a gold brass frame. Occasionally, I sat on that bed while my mom tortured me by doing my hair: braids, a ponytail, or simply brushing it. Either I had a sensitive scalp or I was a wimp—possibly both. It was a painful process, but it was the only source of physical parental induced pain, so I can't complain.

As for the house itself, it was and still is nested in a neighborhood in Woodland Hills. The word "Hills" is the only descriptively accurate part of the city's title. There were trees, but it was a far cry from woodland. In order to reach the house from the main road you had to drive up a hill or two past several other houses, and there was ivy somewhere nearby. I don't know why the ivy stuck with me. Maybe I saw it from the car window on rides to and from the house. I couldn't draw a picture of that house from memory if I tried. Of course I couldn't draw a picture of the house in West Hills where I spent the next 21 years of my life either. Once I tried to draw the front exterior of

the West Hills house for an art assignment in middle school. I became irritated with my inability to draw a perfect picture, and surrendered to a flat mess of curvy lines. The house was not architecturally complex by any means. There were archways over the front porch, and the roof was flat. The house was not at fault. I just couldn't draw it. It wasn't my little cottage; there was no sloping roof. I don't think there were very many houses, if any, in our neighborhood with sloping roofs. I'm certain the absence of sloping roofs pertained to building codes and fire safety. Given the frequency of evacuations due to brush fires, I was very familiar with the front exterior of my house. Nature allotted me several occasions to stand out in the street and gaze at the front of my house. Los Angeles' West San Fernando Valley, and for that matter most of Los Angeles, is known for its ability to burst into flames at nearly any time of the year. I'm surprised my imaginary house was not ablaze, because that would make sense.

Sure, Los Angeles has its perks like the beach. And, well, the beach. So there's not a whole lot to be said for Los Angeles unless you have money, in which case you can afford the luxuries that allow you to not feel perpetually stuck in traffic while surrounded by burning hills. At times, it bears a striking resemblance to Dante's Seventh Circle of Hell. I used to live 30 minutes from the beach. I miss that. But even Malibu could turn into an inferno with the proper combination of dry heat and

wind. Then poof—there goes your day at the beach. By no means is it the worst city ever, but I am inclined to think that barring some extreme, unforeseen event, I will never move back. It's nice to visit friends there once in a while, but after several days the most satisfying activity is to get on the freeway and drive north on I-5 to Sacramento.

Here's the deal: I got the memo early on in life that open flames are hot, painful if you got too close, and potentially destructive. I don't like lighters or matches. I proceed with hesitation when turning on the stove: there's a slight chance the gas flame will burst out of control. And I couldn't tell you the last time I lit a candle. The ash from my dad's cigarette fell and burned my hand when we were walking to Open House Night when I was in First Grade. And one night when I was having trouble sleeping, I was reading a book about Santa Claus—it had pictures of authentic-looking reindeer. My reading was interrupted when the hillside across from our house caught fire.

I don't like fire. And I really don't like fire around my house. It's unsettling. One moment you're in your house feeling relatively comfortable and safe, watching a family sitcom with you parents on a random Thursday night, when your ears perk up at the sound of sirens—the emergency vehicle kind, not the mythological kind—a sound that seems to be getting louder, indicating proximity. Then your dad notices an orange glow coming from behind the curtains, peers out the window from his

chair only to find that the entire hillside directly facing the backyard is in flames. When decorating, my parents should have seriously considered what goes well with orange. In any case, the calm of that night was ruined. We saw the flames and thought, “Maybe we should leave.”

Fortunately, it was only temporary. Still, it was inconvenient and alarming; we didn’t know what would happen. We didn’t have time to pack or take anything with us. Just got up and got out—at least that’s how I remember it. How else do I explain me standing out in the street at nine o’clock at night in a Cat-in-the-Hat nightshirt with no shoes holding Bianca, my guinea pig? I’m sure there are few in-between steps I’m forgetting, but when nature’s landlord chooses to evict you, it’s difficult to remember the details.

There were firefighters with their trucks, hoses, and gear, the police (I’m not sure what their purpose was), the Super Scooper—a plane from Canada that scoops up water from nearby and drops it on the fire—helicopters, and a whole lot of flames and smoke. I walked down the street to my friend’s house. It was away from the fire and I didn’t have to stand outside with bare feet like the rest of the useless onlookers watching how bad the fire got. Plus, I had Bianca. As nice as it was to be away from the firefighters and police and host of seemingly concerned neighbors, it was strange and seemingly inappropriate to sit idly in someone else’s home while ours was

under attack. It felt as though I had wrongfully abandoned my post. I was guilty. But what could I do? Man the hoses? My parents stayed back at the house to look after the dogs and keep a close watch on the firefighters' progress. They were the supervisors, since most parents are excellent supervisors. It's their calling. My calling was to stay out of the way and take care of my small guinea pig who had no idea what was happening. Bianca was a soothing element in the crisis. She peacefully resigned herself to sit in a towel while my friend and I fed her lettuce. She peed and pooped all over that towel, which was unpleasant, but the fire didn't matter to her. The potential for structural damage was of no concern. Just another night for a guinea pig.

Eventually the fire was extinguished and Bianca and I returned home. I tossed her into her cage. The neighbors trickled away like concertgoers after a show. Like nothing ever happened. Except the thick smell of smoke in the air and the house, and the sound of distant chainsaws as firefighters made sure nothing was left smoldering.

A few days later, even with the black and ashy hills, we forgot anything happened; it was business as usual. Then years and years of near misses, and I was certain that one day, our time would come and our home would burn. Every time I heard a siren in the distance, I would look out the window to check for smoke and/or flames anywhere, unless it was raining.

The end of August—a time when it is a comfortable 90 degrees in the shade. No breeze. No humidity. Just the heat and a whole lot of crispy, highly flammable brush ready to explode. All of a sudden a guy on a dirt bike sped out of the trail adjacent to our house and then poof: a huge fire in the canyon. The popular theory is that a spark from the bike started the fire. In any event, this fire came too close to our house: right next to it. Not across the way, next to it. Fire was our new neighbor. We had met before, but we were never properly introduced. This was our introduction.

Like family members who only get together at Christmas, the same untidy combination of nosey neighbors, police, firefighters, helicopters, and the Super Scooper appeared. The fire department said we could stay in the house because the fire was under control, but the police department said we had to leave. A fireman said the police didn't know what they were talking about and that we could stay. We wanted to stay. It was scary, and the house could catch fire, but leaving was such a hassle. My dad tossed the patio furniture into the swimming pool and stood watch. Despite the semi-reassuring words of the firemen, my mom and I chose to leave the house and go to the neighbor's down the street. The same house in the previous incident, but different occupants. The odd thing was that in the midst of all the smoke, my friend's dad was standing in the backyard smoking a cigarette. As if there wasn't enough smoke. There

were a few other evacuations, and one that demanded the gathering of belongings. Up until then the fires always looked worse than they were. And all evacuations only required at most that we leave the house and come back later or simply stand across the street. We never had to take anything with us. This time we did. The fire was as bad and as close as it looked. I was 23. I was an adult. I had belongings and responsibility. I was no longer the kid whose only role was to stay out of the way. I was now in the business of fire supervision and management. For hours my mom and I watched the news coverage on the fire, and then we began to watch the actual flames and smoke move closer and closer to our house. We knew it was coming. Long before we got official word from local authorities that we had to evacuate, the unearthly orange glow emanating from the smoke covered sun, the flames rapidly rolling over the tops of surrounding hills signaled it was time to go. I figured there was a good chance the house would be fine, that we'd be back. I stuffed the back of my car with boxes of photos and other valuables, mostly my dad's stuff since he was working in Fresno and unable to participate in this fiasco. The back of my car was filled with heavy boxes of 30 years worth of photos, photo albums, autographed baseballs, commemorative plaques, a framed picture of JFK, Rabbit Sanders — a stuffed animal that I had since birth—my school textbooks which were so important that I don't remember what classes they were for—a pillow, some

clothes, shoes, and basic toiletries. I half hoped that the house would burn down so that we'd be forced to move out of this godforsaken area and never have to go through another evacuation. It was a stupid idea. The rest of my clothes were inside, and everything that makes a home comfortable, and I was leaving it behind. You can't eat, wear, or sleep comfortably on photo albums. The pictures of people sitting on a couch can't replace the couch. Still, I didn't panic. I packed what was ready to be packed and drove away. At that point, I was ready to get the hell out. Easier said than done. The air was full of smoke and ash; visibility was slim and it was hard to breathe, making it difficult to do anything. The streets were blocked off in order to force people out of the neighborhood. Fire trucks everywhere, fire hydrants in use, and many people doing the same thing we were: trying to leave.

That was my last evacuation. The next time I drove away from that house with belongings in the back of my car was when I moved to Sacramento—a voluntary evacuation.

Since then, I've moved from a house to an apartment to a house, then to another house, and then to an apartment. Even though each house has varied in size, they have all been home at one point or another. Never my quaint little imaginary cottage, but a home no less. Maybe I'm adaptable. Maybe it really doesn't matter all that much what it looks like, but the contents that makes it home. If you've ever been on vacation or some sort

of trip with other people, at the end of a day of activities, someone is bound to slip up and say, "Let's go home." That person will quickly correct himself or herself and say "I mean 'back to the hotel,'" as if it is unacceptable to call the hotel "home," even if it has functioned as a home for a number of days. Ideally, home is where you can relax and keep all your belongings that make every day comfortable. These days, I live in an apartment and my parents are 15 minutes away. It's a pretty good deal; fires are not an imminent threat. If there is a fire, it won't be a brush fire, and I'm not in Los Angeles. Perhaps I am one step closer to obtaining my imaginary cottage, since like my apartment, it is the home I never grew up in.

# 16-Bit Babylon

Ulises Palmeno

## **Pressing Start**

Late afternoon; the gray clouds rolled in from the hills and covered the playground behind my school. Balls bounced, chains from the swings tapped metal posts, and the sand blew across the blacktop and skittered across the chain-linked fence. We rode our bikes up the hill to find warmth inside a friend's house. We had all been to my place yesterday and blasted through a couple of levels in Super Mario World.

We went to a friend's around the block, next to the guy that watered the lawn at 7:00 pm. Our faces smelled like cold air brought in from the east hills, the coast to the west, and the sounds of shotguns somewhere beyond the rows of houses further outside of town. All seven of us drank Safeway Select sodas in the room. Third grade almost out of the way. We turned on the SNES, laughed and played; away from the outside, we dreamed of a world not our own.

### **Different Levels**

Undefeated, up and down the block and all over the neighborhood, gamers always wanted to find the next challenge for me. Nintendo, Sega; anything they put in my hands became a victory. Kids crowded around the TV and admired the game play.

Even with homework still due, challenges racked up and it didn't seem to end. I wanted to lose, maybe to gain something more. Losing wasn't easy, even then I wanted honest defeat. The gamers would come from all over, through the shattered alleyways and clustered apartments just for a touch of the game. My house, somebody else's house, different apartment complexes.

Sometimes I rode my bike alone, regardless of the stories of the kids getting their bikes stolen. I set a different story, one they could remember, or maybe already forgot. My name synonymous with video games, good or bad. Said I had it all. I played to forget, to dream.

Even as I turned the corner, the faded blood on the sidewalk smelled like gasoline and beer. The shattered glass crumpled in the yards, and the empty bullet shells curled on the concrete. I dreamt of outer space and fireballs before pedaling away.

## **Power Ups**

You came across one and it gave you a small boost or an extra life in the game. More fuel to go. More stamina. A white box with a red cross on it. Or items with a special power like the Chaos Emeralds. Out on Cardboard Hill, the vacant lot in the neighborhood, a syringe was in the dry grass next to bottles and spoons. A rubber hose curled around. I'd see them scattered around. You couldn't find power ups around here, just power downs. My friends and I stopped going there for a while. Sirens; red, blue, and yellow lights drove around the street more frequently. We went home earlier. The fights outside weren't colorful. Villains, like in the different levels, only with a higher

difficulty, they fought for powered down items. Maybe we needed the power ups to get rid of it, to get rid of them. But there wasn't much of any. The villains trampled through the streets, paraded with lost flags strapped to their belts, and killed those in their way. Stray bullets broke through and pierced the innocent when not aimed at their "enemy." The reset button was broken, and the number of lives went down.

## **Purple Shoes**

A new kid in the neighborhood, I don't know his name anymore, but he wore purple shoes and a bowl cut. Taller than me and a mole on the side of his left cheek. Just as skilled. We went round after round on the SNES and threw fireballs back at each other on Street Fighter II Turbo. I said I lost, and he laughed and said we tied. Sometimes he was over at my house playing late. His parents worked in the fields and when he got home, dinner wasn't always ready. We ordered pizzas and borrowed games from friends. He fell asleep and woke up without seeing his mom or dad for days, until the weekends when his dad passed out on the couch and his mom fell asleep watching Spanish Soaps. After he cried in his mom's arms on Sunday nights, she stayed home with him after her regrets. We

put our high scores up next to our initials on *Gradius*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Final Fight*, and *Streets of Rage*.

### **Versus Mode**

Purple Shoes and I hit up the local arcade machines nestled inside liquor stores around the neighborhood. As a couple of eight-year-olds, we took on the teenagers and kicked their asses. Our initials scrolled on almost every machine. Space ships in *Raiden*, race cars in *Rad Racer*, and fire dragons in *The King of Dragons*; our quarters ran out and so did our opponents. While we did battle, the tattoos and bandannas marched in and threw a guy across a candy rack. The villains didn't want money. They pointed their guns at the owner while cutting the other's face fallen on the floor. Wet gurgles. Blood pooled between the *Skittles* and *Starburst* in the broken linoleum. We stared at the screens and imagined worlds, the honor that would be placed on us, and the impossible accomplished. We left the store after the high scores were up. They dragged him outside. The blood on his *British Knights* left streaks on the sidewalk. Down the street, we heard the shouts and broken bones against the concrete bricks. We looked but kept walking away.

## **Debug Mode**

Just playing didn't suit us. Crayons scribbled against thin binder paper. Our first hero. A green and white suit with an orange lightning bolt on it. A hero from space. For truth and justice. He, with a smile inside a glass helmet and ray gun phaser in his hand, flew down in his space ship and zapped away hatred. He had our traits, our good intentions, but even within that spacesuit, behind that smile, he carried the hurt from the outside world. That nameless hero dreamed, too. Lunchboxes packed, the bell rang, and recess was over.

## **1-Up**

I didn't see Purple Shoes for a couple of days. When I did, we played, but only for a few minutes, not the long hours we had before. His family spent more time with him. Even bought a new pair of sneakers, but still the same color. I went to CommSource, the video store on the good side of town, to rent new video games. Video games arranged in rows next to the glass. The store smelled like a mixture of plastic and bubblegum. The sun always shined in during the day, and at night the store glittered. I went back home and played new games alone. And while I played, I thought about how Purple Shoes was doing,

since the last time I saw him renting the same game, then wanting to meet up again.

## **Digital Rainbow**

I played in the arcade at the mall since I was a kid. One of the only two-year-olds to actually get far in any game. Out Run, Super Hang-On, Street Fighter, Afterburner II. At age four, I beat my first, Night Striker: a robotic shooter trying to save Neo-Japan from terrorists. When Purple Shoes and I met at the arcades again, we teamed up and inscribed our names on the top lists. He had never been to the arcade before, but he could hold his own. Everywhere there was a score, our initials were found. Pit Fighter, Heavy Barrel, and Ninja Gaiden. Even if we weren't at the top, we were among the greatest. Every machine a different world. Our Saturdays spent in the company of glowing screens. In Contra, we were commandos, one in red and the other in blue, killing aliens trying to destroy humanity. Level after level we completed the game and tried to reach for one million.

The mall arcade was on the other side of town, away from everything; we still believed in dreams. The games we would design one day. We sketched in notebooks and loose sheets of

paper. Going home, we didn't want to remember everything happening outside. Mothers crying over their kids in stretchers, some over empty body bags. Street corners arranged with candles, flowers, and prayers written on torn memo pads in Sharpie. Pictures taped to the aluminum or wood frames of the street lights. We had our ideas, somewhere to escape, but our reach was only so far. We went back to the arcade every time we had the chance. We were only kids, but we could hold our own.

## **Legacy**

The week Purple Shoes didn't come to school, I knocked on his door but nobody answered. I asked around, but nobody knew anything. As if he hadn't existed. My mom knew his mom, said he went to live with his grandparents. Afterwards, the family moved away. His house at the corner of the street hung dark. Everything dark inside, except for a Sonic the Hedgehog poster I gave him still hanging in his room. I didn't play for a few weeks and worked on the unfinished game we designed hoping he'd knock one day and ask to play some more SNES. I packed my crayons back into their box and flipped on the power switch. I fell hard on the first level, so I read GamePro instead.

## Electric Waves

Lights glowed over the transparent ceiling, dimmed through the shadows between neon cabinets lined up in rows. Purple and black carpet covered the floor from wall to wall, separated by yellow and red shapes between the maze patterns. Banners flickered over the monitor's fuzz; on the screens some bricks fell, monsters chased knights through mazes, cars raced across Europe, and the green neon letters flashed "press start" while shirtless commandos shot at aliens in the jungle. Two commandos, one in blue camouflage pants, and the other in red, both shooting plasma cannons at tentacle floaters creeping through the jungle.

Gamers hunched over the screens, arms and elbows swept back and forth. Some had groups cheering while the scores increased and others when the next level was reached. Then there were those who played alone, even where there were two joysticks, the second one remained untouched. Long journeys made on a solo run. The blue commando ventured out without his red buddy, ignoring the flashing signal in the corner for a second player to enter. But I only made the run with him, the one with the initials topping every game in the room. Both of our names in the same breath sharing the top high scores.

I touched the plastic bulb at the top of the joysticks, staring at the banner with two soldiers at either side holding futuristic machine guns. Aliens underneath their feet, piled high in victory, and a sky full of red lightning and orange clouds. The second joystick almost felt warm, but it was another's heat, somebody else's victory or defeat. Colors flashed back to the demo screen with high scores listed. There weren't enough quarters for me to make the run by myself.

# Grandpa's Garden

Carmen Micsa

*The house is sanctified, in whole or part, by a cosmological symbolism or ritual. The house is an imago mundi.*

- Mircea Eliade

1

My birth place was somewhat foreign to me. I was only two years old when my parents separated, and my mother and I moved from Birlad located on the Northern side of Romania, to Lugoj on the Western side. So anytime someone asked me where

I was from, I would say Lugo, as Birlad was my birth place, my grandparents' home, but not mine. I couldn't think of any wonders that Birlad had other than its amazing zoo, where my father used to take me as often as I wanted. The monkeys entranced me. They alone were wonders that gave me different answers as to the playfulness that we were all born with, but forgot to fully explore it. I called them monkeys, not caring whether they were primates or monkeys, had a prehensile tail, were nocturnal, etc. My father and I fed them pumpkin and sunflower seeds to watch them eat and spit out. Others gave them cigarettes to see them huff and puff for entertainment. The signs reading do not feed the animals were invisible to most visitors, oblivious of the future generations, of the animals' safety, and of the cleanliness of the zoo, shaded by many linden trees whose fragrances effaced most communist foulness, and the flowers turned into an aromatic tea served with spoonfuls of perfect white sugar cubes.

Birlad was my birth place that reminded me of monkeys and linden tea, of littered streets and an ugly downtown with square communist buildings. Birlad was also where my cousins and my favorite grandparents lived. Visiting every summer felt like crawling in and out of the birth canal, riding this never ending water slide. And there was Pufi, my grandparents' white, fluffy dog that barked happily every time I touched the front gate. He had soft fur and the most serene eyes that spoke every time I fed

him bones and leftover food. He used to lick my hand with gratitude. The chain my grandparents used on Pufi was heavy and thick. I dreamed about letting Pufi run free through my grandfather's garden and orchard the size of a soccer field, but I knew I would get into trouble

“Little girl!” Grandpa used to call me, waving his thin, black cane he used as a shovel and a weapon against worms, slugs, and any other intruders trespassing his slice of paradise. “Don’t you dare step on my vegetables and plants, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Grandpa,” I would reply, scared of his thundering voice and his sudden gaunt appearance in the garden. The garden was his home. The roots of his beloved trees entangled and ensnared his being, helping him forget about his diabetes while fueling his sweet tooth. He made frequent rounds to pick the sweet grapes, apricots, plums, and tomatoes. He ate each fruit with relish and hunger right off the trees, squinting his deep blue eyes, with the satisfaction of a boy who steals fruit from his neighbor’s yard. His garden was a home with multiple chambers sparsely furnished, yet abundant in its fresh and sweet smells that triggered his sniffing and inhaling. I believed Grandpa gave up smoking to snuffle the earthy and fruity aromas of his garden that I loved to explore as a child. I climbed his beloved trees, picked the forbidden fruits, broke branches with my growing feet, and built tents underneath their shade.

Birlad was also the home of scraped knees, where I taught myself how to ride a dusty, old bike I found in my grandparents' shed. It squeaked under my seven-year-old weight, but I was determined to subdue and ride it downhill from my grandparents' house. I fell more than five times, scraping my skinny knees on the rocks and loose gravel. After about 15 minutes of fighting to keep my balance, I rode that bike with ease and confidence. I avoided rocks and bumps in the road. I talked to myself, mainly shouting left-right orders, since I didn't know much about the bike, other than it resembled an untamed horse. I was the jockey who had to keep the bike straight and follow an imaginary line in the dirt to avoid falling.

During that ride through unpaved roads, I ended up in an unfamiliar neighborhood with derelict homes, overgrown lawns, stray dogs and cats in the streets, and clotheslines full of hideous shirts, skirts, and pants fluttering in the wind. *That's where the gypsies lived*, I thought, hugging the handlebars with resolute, but shaking hands. I can't remember much, other than the thick dust that wrapped around me. I coughed, but stayed alert and pedaled my bike with wide motions, until I finally broke down crying. Deep down, I felt I would find my way back to my grandparents' house. Yet, I feared being kidnapped by the gypsies and turned into a little gypsy, wearing colorful and strident long skirts, no panties underneath, as the rumors went around about them. Face smeared in soot, sleazy hair standing

up, big earring hoops in my ears. I pictured myself turned into a beggar roaming around the dusty lanes lined with mulberry trees.

After almost an hour of horror movies running through my head, I found my way back to my grandparents' house, exhausted and short of breath. Returning home had been more rewarding than learning how to bike that day, which is why I forgot to tell my dad. Instead, I told him that I would never get lost again.

I learned to explore the little park in front of our apartment in Lugo, the place I called home for 16 years.

While my mom was busy working as a preschool teacher at her new school 10 minutes from our apartment, I looked for ways to entertain myself when I wasn't reading or studying, as summers were always busy with reading between 10 and 20 books for the new school year. After our move there, I transformed. The park across from our apartment complex became my own vast garden, where none of Grandpa's shouts, warnings, and menacing fist pumps could reach me. I was queen, or "her Majesty" as my new friends called me, more in jest than serious, but as long as I ruled over the park and the small, barren courtyard behind our apartment, I was immune to their sarcasm.

When I was not playing hide-and-seek with my friends, climbing on roofs to steal fruits and linden flowers for tea making, and exploring the basements below our apartment where some residents stored their home made pickles, sauerkraut, and gardening tools, I discovered the lucky dandelions, or "blowing flowers," as I used to call them. The fuzzy, rounded tops tickled my nostrils, but I still blew hard to send their little fine hairs dancing in the wind, while, of course, making the same wish over and over again for my father to

move back with us. Every time I picked the slender dandelions, I became mesmerized with the gossamer threads and feather-like flowers. In my childish and silly heart, the dandelions could magically transform my dreams into reality the moment I plucked them from the black and hard soil, as they never seemed to fuss over water like some of Grandpa's vegetables. Their name comes from the French "dent de lion" meaning "lion's tooth," due to the jagged-edged leaves of the weed that grows both wild and cultivated. In the spring, the park exploded with dandelions, fine parachutes of sanity sent out all the way to Birlad, where my father still lived and worked as a watchmaker.

I always loved to be his apprentice when I was little. I got to sit next to him at a little roll-up desk where he kept his tools and hundreds of watches he worked on. My duty was to dust off each piece inside the watch with a fine brush he entrusted me with. Cleaning and polishing was precious time I spent with my dad repairing watches and talking about them as if my brushing could bring them back to life right away. As if I could grant them immortality.

"Look at this watch! What an intricate machine keeping time," my dad would point out.

"How do watches keep time, Daddy?" I asked him, getting closer to the mechanism he held between his thumb and forefinger with reverence.

"Through energy."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the energy fueled by its wearer, either by manual winding, or by the motion of one's wrist."

"Does this mean we're all magical?"

"What?" my father asked with his usual light snort that grew louder depending on how hard he laughed.

"We can make the watch work by moving our hand, right?"

"But we must not forget the maker of the watch."

"Sure, Daddy! And now can we go outside for a sleigh ride?" I would ask him.

"Give me ten more minutes to finish repairing this watch."

"Ten minutes is a long minute," I used to tell my dad, stomping my feet and making circular motions with my arms, as if jumping over an imaginary rope.

"No kidding!" my father would reply, amused and enchanted by my affirmation. He saw how long minutes were the antithesis of being, doing, and living. Maybe he thought short minutes simply infused more beats into life's veins.

He continued working while I stood in the small hallway that my father used as his work space. He had his own little watch repair business, which was not very common for communist Romania in the late 80s. I adored watching him brush and bristle the hands of time. He polished and cleaned each watch mechanism by hand—no ultrasonic cleaning machines. Even his paced walking matched his unrushed

brushing motions. His moves almost sluggish—resembled an unfinished pirouette—relaxed and careless of the final landing. All that counted was his measurement of time in hours, minutes, and seconds.

“You’ll make a fine watchmaker, Mit,” he used to tell me while pinching my cheeks and stroking my hair.

“You know I want to be a doctor, not a watchmaker!”

“Yes, Mit, but I just love the way you help me repair these watches.”

“All right, Daddy! Time to go! You’ve been brushing that piece 100 times already! You promised! Now take me on the sleigh ride. No more waiting!”

“Yes, my dear,” he replied, taking off the small, black eye loupe that covered his right or left eye depending on the angle he needed to peer inside the miniscule and intricate pieces of the watches he repaired.

Seven years after my mom and I left Birlad, my father decided to move to Lugoj and be with us. I could again be my father's full time daughter and apprentice. I could finally show him my dandelions rustling in the wind.

My father loved the dandelions and the Timis River meandering in front of our apartment.

"I can go fishing every day," he exclaimed.

"And we can swim every summer." I clapped my hands.

My mom did not know how to swim, but she took me to swim lessons, and after my dad moved back with us, I was proud to show off my strokes. The first summer my dad lived with us, we simply turned the river into our playground—our home embedded inside the river. While my mom cooked chicken dumpling soup, yummy potato stews, and polenta for us, my dad and I spent long afternoons in the murky river which crossed our small town, dividing it into two almost perfect halves. I particularly enjoyed swimming against the current, as if getting ready to take life head-on and prepare for the challenges that were to come. The water was brownish-green and the bottom mainly sand, with sharp stones that hurt my bare feet.

My dad and I used to play water volleyball with a yellow, red, and blue ball until our feet hurt from treading water. Afterwards, we would sit on the grassy beach and play

backgammon. We also liked to play a guessing game, looking at the clouds and trying to find the object they looked like. In those moments, the Timis River snaking around town as peaceful and uneventful as the town itself became my anchor. I could dig my heels in the sand, or run on the grassy beach, without realizing they were becoming the cinematic pictures and frames of my home.

My home town—small and stubborn in its own ways—followed nobody's thoughts and ideas other than the river's murmurs. I walked everywhere on the banks of the river Timis to get to the bookstore, the market, the church, any place I needed to go. The river guided my steps. When looking at the weeping willows that stooped by the banks as if in deep meditation, I could not help wonder at their deep roots. I read someplace that willows grow as much as 10 feet a year and they even make their own rooting hormone, helping root other plants. Although I was a clever girl, always at the top of my class and reading up to eight hours a day, I rarely thought of my roots, my ancestors, or the trees' roots. To me, roots were just anchors.

From the balcony I saw the river ever day. I saluted it in the morning and whispered good night before going to bed. The river was a quiet friend that only spoke in parables. During communism we learned to unveil truths that were meant to sink to the bottom of river and seas that crisscrossed our country. We learned to look for codes and secrets everywhere, as if solving an

infinite rebus whose words long as the weeping willows' branches took deep root in our consciousness. At times, I wondered if the Communists tried to cement the roots of our trees by not allowing us to travel abroad, unless it was to visit former Russia, our communist neighbors. I wondered about the many rivers that snaked around our beautiful country, especially the Danube. It is not only Europe's longest river—more than twice the length of the Rhine, and nearly three and a half times the length of the Rhone—but it flows through or forms the boundary with eight different countries.

When I turned 14, my parents agreed to send me to boarding school in Timisoara, the city of roses, where I was admitted at the Colegiul Banatean High School to study English, literature, history, and philosophy so that I could become an English professor. Only 30 miles away from Lugoj, Timisoara was close enough for me to travel by train and go home every weekend to see my parents and get extra food for the following week. Going to a big city like Timisoara, a beacon of light and culture during the communist regime, I felt confident. I remember my first day in Timisoara, my newly adopted city with Bega River running through it like my beloved Timis. I sensed a remote feeling from the familiar sight of Lugoj, “the place where nothing happened.”

My first day as a freshman was dull. I tried to make friends, but it seemed that everybody already knew each other. The classroom was big and impersonal, but I enjoyed all the pictures of famous Romanian and international writers on the walls. I discovered later on that that was a special classroom, the Literature Laboratory. It sounded funny to me at first, but before long I found out that the Literature Lab deserved its name. Like the Chemistry Lab or the Physics Lab, since we were little experimenters of ideas and ideals.

A few of my classmates came from neighboring towns, like me. It didn't make any difference to me, but my classmates

treated us as outsiders, not understanding why we left our homes behind. I had to live in the school dormitory together with my other classmates. Most of them were from small villages, which made them feel even more estranged and self-conscious than me.

I remember one of my classmates, who became my best friend through high school. Her name was Camellia. I will never forget how we first met. It was a hot September day. I wore pink shorts with a white top and decided to take a walk around the school and dorms. I liked the front yard very much, which was surrounded by roses, dandelions, forget-me-nots, and even snapdragons. Then there was cement; everywhere you looked, you could see a little something made out of cement. Big, white walls surrounded the school like a protective shield from the ignorance of outsiders. There was a gurgling fountain that resembled my Timis River in the morning when I woke up to greet it. The lover's nest, and indeed it was a magical fountain, was surrounded by a little round pavilion, where I had my first date and my first kiss.

As I was strolling in the yard, feeling the warm rays of the sun on my neck, I sensed two staring eyes following me. I didn't want to turn around immediately, but I was curious to see if a boy was staring at me. Looking behind me, I almost burst out laughing because I saw a tall brunette girl, well-built, almost a little bit plump, with dark blue eyes, looking at me intently.

“Gee, that’s strange,” I said to myself, changing my direction, and going towards my new prying acquaintance. When she saw me walk towards her, she reddened to the tip of her ears, and almost ran away, but I cried after her: “Hey, don’t run! I just want to meet you. My name is Carmen.”

She was still embarrassed, but she turned around fast and came straight to me with a timid, almost frightened look on her face.

“Hello,” she said. “My name is Camellia. This is my first day on campus. I feel kinda of lost, don’t you?”

“A little bit, but we’ll feel at home in no time,” I told her.

“Yes, I think you’re right, but I’m from Remetea, a small village near Lugoj. I feel kind of bad that I don’t live in Timisoara.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m a provincial, too, from Lugoj, and quite proud of it. Besides, every sucker lives in Timisoara, so what the heck!”

She laughed with a snort and looked at me with admiration.

“Well, it seems that we’ll get to be good friends,” Camellia said, as if begging for my friendship.

“Oh, yeah,” I replied.

\* \* \*

Departing home was not only a rebellious gesture against my family, but also against communism, which I viewed as quarrelsome and alienating as my parents' never-ending fights. I soon find peace in my new town Timisoara far from my parents' fighting and close to the rock music that was my true solace in the 80s.

I enjoyed going to discos at least one day a week. Camellia and I loved to dance to the loud, adrenaline rushing music. We use to throw ourselves on the floor, tear our pants around the knees, and wear ourselves out so that we could forget the incarcerating forces of communism. Our tumultuous teenagers' souls glorified and worshipped the music with the fervor of a religiously fanatic group. Discos were an oasis of hope. In our naiveté, we wished to get rid of communism with the power of Western music that not only liberated us from the fear of not knowing what would happen to us or our parents the next day, but it was also cathartic.

Our solution: riding the tramway. We jumped on and off. No tickets. Just our jittery souls hopping, in search of a place we could belong to and call home. That was one of our ways to rebel against communism: refusing to buy tickets. Yet, light rail ticket masters – most of them big and surly men who hid their badges—did not put up with any of our schemes. They chased us when we rushed out of the trams before they checked for tickets. They threatened to fine us, even took us to the police

station a few times, but we laughed in their faces with childish dreams of changing the world. Determined to mail the fines to our parents, the ticket masters bawled at us and shook their double chins like wild turkeys, until we agreed to give them our addresses—bogus ones, of course.

Ceausescu, Romania's president in the late 80's, wanted to subdue our people. I felt like shouting that the Communist Party and regime could not censor my thoughts indefinitely, because I was free to make Timisoara home and take free tram rides with Camellia. We felt we didn't need our parents' guidance to carve our own paths in life. To us, life was a big slab of ice that we had to scrape and chisel with the confidence of fake sculptors. Shaping and reshaping life by avoiding the ticket collectors who wanted to check our tickets and punch a hole through them, but we resisted. The Communists left enough holes in our lives, strangling our voices like string bags that needed tightening. How much of their shit were we supposed to swallow? What if we all refused to live in a hole-punching world and chose instead seamless lives as vibrant and abundant as my grandpa's garden?

Our game continued on and off, fear squashing our young souls in the garlic press that our parents used to make mujdei. Perfect for combating vampires and communists, Camellia and I used to joke. That fear squeezed our hearts, turning them into punched tickets we refused to dump in the garbage bins spread along the sulfurous river banks of the Bega River. The city stank

of that putrid river. Most of the time, the brown water smelled of dead corpses. Beggars strolled along and harassed whoever came close to them, asking for money. Mostly gypsies. Other times, the river smelled of freshly brewed coffee, a staple of Romanian households. Sipping the grounds of discontent. Chewing them. Swishing our mouths with the last drop of coffee to clean up the cup well enough for a fortune teller to peak into the future.

And then came the evenings when Camellia and I talked long into the night about political changes while gazing at the moon from our dorm room searching for answers. I was mesmerized by the moon's oversized silkiness, guiding our steps towards the light that parted the doubts that hovered over us. "Man no longer looks at the sky. Alone like the moon nobody sees," Milan Kundera writes. I felt I could make it a point to prove Kundera wrong by seeing moons upon moons packed up neatly like stacks of pancakes we used to eat at home.

Home turned into an incommensurable web that captured the most intimate corners of my soul and followed me for years to come. It was a never ending stroll down the busy arteries of Birlad, Lugoj, and Timisoara, that intersected and created a distinct heartbeat that would be heard down the lanes of my grandpa's garden. The deeper the roots of our trees, the harder it is to leave home. Yet, we learned to transplant our roots to Sacramento and create a tree with adaptable roots.

# Mountains + Ocean = Home

Tess Perez

Some days I imagine us living by the ocean, but I can't imagine being away from the mountains. Other days I imagine us living in the mountains, but I can't imagine being without the ocean. Then, I hear a song that makes the world seem endless in possibilities, and I know that some day, if we choose, we can live in between both: in a place where the mountains melt into the ocean and we won't have to travel far to either one.

We need to live near water. The flow keeps us from dying out, from getting bored. When we run our hands across the crystal top of a lake or watch our reflections in a creek, we will feel the force. We understand that just like the water, our hearts will ebb and flow, but the current beneath will always be moving.

We will never get stuck for too long.

That is why we live in the middle. You from the mountains. Me from the ocean. The river our center. It is what brings us home.

# Logar

Jamil Kochai

1

See the shadow. The fossil of the light. The remnant of the sun's obstruction scattered along the surface of the bridge. Black trees painted against stone. See the stones. Jagged caricatures of men. Shattered bones of the earth, jutting from the trail like the crooked limbs of clay. See the clay. The flesh of the roads and the homes and the men. The makings of the village. The skin of that rusted earth, stained by a single drop of the stream's water. See the water. The frothing dribble collected upon the chasms of

the country. The wet drippings of the sky. See the sky. Swallowing the total reflection of all that is, of all that can be seen within and without that pastoral town, that lowly Logar. The skies which seemed to me the gaping mouth of a God about to sigh.

I see them. Painted there against the wall just in front of me. All of the images blending into a single projection of my mind, reeling against the backdrop of my bedroom wall. A reflection of my dim memory. The entrance to the beginnings of my father's village. I look behind me and I see Sacramento. I see America. It hasn't left. But I look forward and again there is Logar. My Logar. Existing, for now, only as the substance of my one dying dream. I sit in my room and I type and I see—  
V 302 miles away a mule laps up water into its shattered jaw from a stream carved by the fathers of my father. And Logar has almost become an illusion. A fading memory. A figment of a dream. Every dream. I scribble markings, just scratches on paper, and I look at them, and they are Logar. The markings recreate a semblance of the old and the new. Things of Logar I have never seen before. Things that might not actually *be*. Things that cannot *be*.

When Allah (Subḥānahu wa ta'āla) first created existence, He did it with a word. “Kun Faya Kun”. He said to it “Be” and it was. All He did was to say the word. A single word. He *said* “كن” or “Be” and we became. All of creation, all of existence, sprung from a word, born from a single utterance of the voice of God. And in that same way, even now, even as human beings, to speak and to write and to create is merely an imitation of Allah(swt)’s first act of creation. When I write or speak or utter a word, any number of words, I am attempting to capture, to portray, to recreate a semblance of some part of existence, of Allah(swt)’s original creation. All the words and all the pages that I or any other writer that has ever existed (Plato, Al-Ghazzali, Derrida, McCarthy) is merely written in a futile attempt to recapture what Allah(swt) first created when He said the original word: “Be.” All words, all sentences, all chapters, all books, are created in imitation of “Be.” My attempt to write Logar is an attempt to bring her back into existence, to recreate her as only Allah(swt) can. I as a human being, a form of existence, a handful of earth shaped into man, am doomed to fail. But still I write her, continue to write her. *My* Logar. Still I try to pull her out of that void of the unwritten, the unspoken, with essays, narratives, and love letters:

*Dear beloved,*

*Your skin of dust, your veins of river, your shivering chin, your body in which I swam, your clay in which I danced, your mud: dripping from my fingers, painted on my face, staining my white clothes; your scent of smoke and fire, your rifle shots, your rocket's squeal, your trembling voice, your call to God every morning, every night your call to God, your weeping, moaning, crying, singing; your sun and your moon, the tips of your black mountains, your fields of wheat, your burning flesh, your starving children, your hidden daughters, your maddened sons, your rifles and your frozen graves and tattered flags stilled above those frozen graves, your snow fall, your ancient flesh, your unborn fire, your cannibal appetite, your swallowing, touching, loving, dancing, killing; your meat and your grain, your face, your every face, your every inch, your every image is all that sustains me in my existence as a refugee. You who are my end. You who were my beginning. You who were my father's dream, my father's story, my father's birth. Away from you, your memory is my agony, and I fear so much that soon you will become that which is not yourself, my beloved. I used to love you because my father loved you, because you were my father. But now I love you because I love you,*

*because you are myself. Because to be carried in the womb of the country, to be cut open, to be exiled, to be suffered, to be known, to be hated, to be loved, to be as part of yourself, to “Be”, is all I’ve ever yearned. All my life I have felt very far from where I’m supposed to be, so that I did not live in the “now” (which does not exist) but lived in constant anticipation of the next. Except for when I was within you. Your danger, your violence, your chaos, your earthen nature, your constant threat of death, of oblivion, gave me my first glimpse of reality, of existence, of dying and of God. My revelation, my Mecca, my Ayah, my valley. My Logar.*

*If there were words*

Allow me, for a moment, to present a brief structural illustration of the village of my father's birth: In the houses of the countryside, the home sustains itself. It is built directly of the earth. A clay compound surrounded by high walls of dried mud shaped by the same hands that live within it. And inside the barriers of these walls (the necessity of which will become clear), there is a second community contained in the original. Each home has within it, not one, but several families: each of the sons of the father inherits their own room and patch of land, living in separate sections of the large and earthen structure. The heart of each home is centered on its well; all the workings of the house revolve around this source of water. Whether through bathing or cooking or cleaning or muddying, the well of the Logari home is never at rest. The home contains its own means of water, vegetation, meat, and sustenance. Each home has its own orchard of trees (apples and berries), its own crops (sometimes to eat, sometimes to sell), and a variety of livestock (chickens for eggs, cows for milk, mules for labor, sheep for wool, and steer for meat.) The clothes are hand-spun, the meat is self-slaughtered, and all the fruits are planted and grown and picked by the very same persons. A home in Logar is self-sustaining, thus the markets and the hospitals and the cities are distanced. They are outside the black mountains which guard the

lush valley. The home exists in its own solitude, exists of itself, without crutch, without government, far off from the rest of the world.

The houses of the village are netted close together, the passageways of the neighborhood are tight (about the width of a single car), and these thin trails are surrounded on both sides by the tall walls of the separate clay compounds. The roads have not much room for a vehicle to maneuver within them. This becomes even more evident in the case of a murderous ambush, in which gunmen suddenly appear before your vehicle and fire without mercy. The clay walls trap you like an earthen mausoleum, so that when the gunmen leap from the shadows of the apple trees and stand before you on that dark trail in the nighttime, and when they empty the flaming massacre into the flesh and blood and bone of yourself, when your car is halted on that road amidst the falling of the mountain's snow, on its way back to your home and your children and your woman, and the passengers are cut down with that burning lead of stone, and the walls of clay will not let you move against them, so that all you can do is try to duck down as the cartridges are emptied, as the bullets of the Kalashnikov vomit themselves all about you and splatter all the remnants of any form of matter amongst the quivering form of your own flesh, and you are trapped. The roads of Logar have trapped you. And as the assassins empty their machine guns into the car, the flash of the muzzle's fire

bleeds deep into the night, and you lay in that seat, and you look down the road, and there is such an impenetrable darkness that you imagine it painted all across the land, patches of light, brief momentous light, brief grating roar, then silence again. Then darkness again. And when they empty their weapons and flee down some corridor and into the dark fields, and your women pour from your house and pull your dying body all tattered to bits, dripping your blood and your father's blood, whose blood you now realize pumped through you all your life, and you look up at the bits of ice falling in the night, and you hear the bitter moans of your daughters, the rage of your sons, the quiet weeping of your only wife, and you realize that the nearest hospital is an hour away and you do not have that hour to give. So, it is not the gunmen who kill you (even though they do), not their bullets and their fire, and not the tears in your flesh or the carving of your body, but the isolation of the village, of Logar, which dooms you, which has always doomed you. Logar, in all her terrible solitude, will swallow you in her roads, will mark you with wounds within her clay, and she will bury you into such depths that the light which exudes from your own burning flesh will be seen by no one, and your wails will go unheard, and you will die as she will die. In solitude.

So then the families of the martyrs flee, and again they are exiled (just as in the time of the communists). Again they flee toward the capitol, toward Kabul (the infamous city of shit), and

that is what Logar does. She exiles her children, she eats up her sons, and she widows her daughters. Because although she is free, always will be free, she is lonely. She is so very much alone. And that is the way she was built, that is the way we built her—in all that perfect solitude. So we were doomed, all along, to be exiled, to become refugee, because that is the lonesome nature of Logar. She cannot be of seclusion if so many children are breathing in her flesh. Dancing in her womb. She is free, even of her own children. But isn't that the nature of every paradise? Of every home? Because didn't Eden exile her children too? Isn't Eden empty now? And wasn't that the original Home? So that the first man and the first woman were also the first refugees? So then aren't you a refugee too? Banished from where you came and seeking, always seeking, the sight of Eden and only ever finding Earth? Is Earth enough? Has it ever been? I can't recall.

I am sitting in my room. I am writing. I pause. The shutters are open, a wind blows in, and I feel it. The breeze is cold and smells of the absence of the chinar. I shudder at its touch, knowing its birth is of some orchard seven thousand miles away. This wind. This breath. A single breath. I look out the window, out onto the horizon of Sacramento's dawn. I breathe and I type, and then, as if through sudden immaculate creation, an orchard springs up all about me, right there in my room, shattering the floor beneath me, scattering apples and leaves, breaking through the foundation of my house. The white walls weep and crumble, the streets of my suburb split open and are flooded with a spewing of old clay. It spreads and covers and seeps into the skin of the houses and the streets and the sidewalks. A stream collects from within the clay and drifts through the land. The winds keep blowing through me. The apples and the leaves and the dust lift and fall and gather and turn. I try to swallow the breeze, I try to breathe it, but it is too much. My house is in ruins, and all that is left are the trees and the clay and the water. I see it so clearly, sitting at my desk, my chair leaning against the trunk of an apple tree just beside a rifle. I see it. I swear I see it. And if I see it, it cannot die. If I keep on seeing it, and I keep on showing it, she cannot die. She will not die. I say "Be" and she is. I see her and I show her and she is. Do you see her?

She is magnificent; her skin of earth, her dribble of stream, her leaves falling all about me, lifting and falling, Eden always falling. I cannot breathe. Do you see her? Is she there? Do not tell me. I see her. I swear I see her. And that is enough.

Let her Be.



# Acknowledgements

There is no one to thank for this book except the writers themselves. Editor's notes are archaic and self-serving, and to that end there will not be one.

Thank you writers for working hard on your craft and sharing your work with others through this book; it would be nothing without you. Keep on being amazing people and writers, and don't forget to be awesome.



# WHO'S WHO

**Rebecca Woolston**'s work has appeared in *Calaveras Station*, and she participated as a reader in the 2013 San Francisco LitCrawl: "Writing From the Cunt". She was awarded First Place in the art contest "Writing About Art" as part of the opening reception for artist Doug Rice's show "Faraway, So Close". She currently attends Mills College, in Oakland, California, pursuing her MFA in Fiction. She is working on her first novel, and likes to write from moments of intimacy and nestle inside them.

**Jenni Wiltz** writes mysteries, thrillers, paranormal romance, and romantic suspense. In 2011, she won the Romance Writers of America Kiss of Death Chapter's Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Category Romantic Suspense. Her short stories have appeared in *The Portland Review*, *Gargoyle*, and the *Sacramento News & Review*. She's worked as an editor, a copywriter, and a USAID grant program coordinator, which gave her the opportunity to travel to Kenya. When she's not writing, she enjoys sewing, running, and genealogical research. She lives in Pilot Hill, California.

**Eli Turner:** "Wow, so you'll really put anything I want you to put as my biography in the book?"

Johnny Citizen is the incorrect spelling of the writer **Johnny Sittisin**.

**Erica Sanders** is a legislative assistant for a California State Senator, where she performs a variety of tasks including research, writing, and editing, as well as assisting the Senator's Communications Director with press releases and maintaining the Senator's website. She graduated from Sacramento State University with a Bachelor's degree in English, with an emphasis in American Literature, and a Master's degree in English with an emphasis in Literature. Erica is originally from Los Angeles, but currently lives in Sacramento with her black cat, Charlie.

**Tess Perez** has a BA in English with a Minor in Theater, and an MA in Creative Writing from California State University, Sacramento. She is currently an Adjunct Professor and teaches both English Composition, and Literature and Film. She is also a Copy Editor for *The Black Rabbit Literary Magazine* and is working on a book called *Pieces* with several other local Sacramento artists. *Pieces* is slated to be out in March 2014. Tess writes both Fiction and Non-Fiction, but pulls from her poetry background in everything that she writes. She likes long walks

on the beach, drinking soy chai lattes, cuddling with her dogs and watching Indie films with horrible endings.

Born and raised in Salinas, California, **Ulises Palmeno** has always had a fascination with stories and science fiction. He has spent most of his time dreaming of the impossible and writing it down on paper, sketched far away worlds, and outlined heroes that would triumph over evil. To Ulises, storytelling is much more than just letters written on paper, or words spoken, it is a new universe with different outcomes, a vision that allows the writer to express his dreams. The path that he has chosen has led him to Sacramento State University, where he pursues a Masters in Arts degree in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing.

Born and raised in Romania, **Carmen Micsa** had a fascinating life filled with the desire for freedom. In December 1989, while a sophomore in high school, she joined her father, Danut Gramatic, whom she always admired and loved deeply, to fight in the Romanian Revolution.

These early experiences inspired Carmen to write *Freedom Rocks*, her memoir about growing up during an oppressive period of Eastern European history and her new life in America. Once settled, Carmen returned to school and completed her BA degree in English at Sacramento State University, where she

graduated with Honors. She then continued on completing her MA degree in English (Creative writing).

Carmen also writes short fiction, travel articles, and picture books. When she is not reading and writing, she runs her own real estate company Dynamic Real Estate & Mortgage, helping clients buy and sell homes. She and her children train in Taekwondo and have received their black belts in October, 2013. Carmen has also been in the top five in Northern California in women tennis at her level. Besides tennis, Carmen loves to bike and has done 100K and Century (100 miles) bike rides for the last six years in a row for Diabetes Tour de Cure in memory of her beloved father.

An enthusiastic, energetic, and outgoing mother, wife, daughter, writer, real estate broker, and friend, one of Carmen's favorite quotes is from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." She also applies the lessons learned from Anatole France, who said: "To accomplish one's goals, one must dream, as well as act."

**Jamil Kochai** is a practicing Muslim. He descends from a long line of Pakhtoon Nomads. He is currently studying literature at CSUS Sacramento. Although he has lived almost his entire life in West Sacramento, Logar is his home.

**Josh Fernandez** has written for *Spin Magazine*, *The Sacramento Bee*, *Sacramento Magazine*, *Submerge*, *Boulder Weekly*, and *San Antonio Current*, and teaches writing at the Los Rios Community Colleges. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2011. Fernandez's first, full-length collection of poems, *Spare Parts and Dismemberment*, is available from R.L. Crow Publications.

**Jon Alston** has an MA in Creative Writing. Good for him. He writes things, sometimes people publish them. Good for him. On occasion he will photograph things, and maybe write about them; sometimes there is money exchanged. Good for him. He is married, has one and a half children, and is also the Assistant Editor for Copilot Press, designing, editing, and producing handmade books. Good for you, Jon.

**Elison Alcovendaz's** work has appeared or will be appearing in *Gargoyle*, *under the gum tree*, *The Alarmist*, *Agave Magazine*, and other publications. He has a graduate degree in Creative Writing from Sacramento State, where he won five Bazzanella awards. When he isn't working on his novel or short story collection, he is either: 1) struggling to get through the first ten pages of *Atlas Shrugged*, 2) telling the best stupid jokes ever, or 3) wondering if people actually read author bios. Learn more (or less) at [www.elisonalcovendaz.com](http://www.elisonalcovendaz.com)