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To contribute poetry, short stories, essays, interviews (or other creative writing), black and white photography, and other visual art, please send electronic submissions or inquiries to Heather Hutcheson at hutcheh@crc.losrios.edu between October 2009 and March 2010.

Send three to five poems and up to three stories or other manuscripts (up to 2,500 words, MS Word or jpeg formats) per year. Reporting time is up to six months.
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We humbly dedicate the 2009 Cosumnes River Journal to two outstanding colleagues who have served Cosumnes River College with excellence. They are shining examples of our campus mission.

Ann Rothschild has generously contributed her time, talent, and spirit to our community for twenty-three years. We have been inspired by her intelligence, elegance, fairness, and engagement with students and all things English—not to mention her involvement on campus as a storyteller, environmental advocate, and Women’s History supporter.

John Pratt has vigorously offered his expertise to students and colleagues for nineteen years. His boundless enthusiasm and energy, visible in his student-centered classroom and holistic approach to writing, his passion for the Arts and how they enrich and vitalize our lives, and his willingness to embrace controversial topics and new technologies have paved the way for our institution.

As these two extraordinary colleagues retire, we celebrate them.

acknowledgements

We are sincerely grateful for these supporters and for the many writers and artists who submitted their work for consideration. Thank you.

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A Sliver of a Mountain and a Long Stretch of Lonely Highway

My side of the glass was a little less appealing and I’ve often wondered if windows were introduced to that place merely as a means of ridicule. Through this cruel sliver I stared and often reflected, sometimes with my nose pressed up to the cold glass so hard my teeth would chatter.

I’ve heard it said that the very walls of my “stone-scrape” were held together by despair I believe it. The thick, stale walls, dingy with the sweat of forever, seemed as though they would endure until the end of time, and I had lots of time.

I guess at some point though, you have to get on with living or get on with dying. I chose the former one morning over a plate of warmed over, runny grits and a brick of cold, grainy, scrambled egg “product.” The echo of the hard plastic tray slapping against the shiny sheet steel still makes my nose want to repent, a sentence I’m afraid I may never be able to escape. I stood up from my culinary predicament and took a step and a half to the corner of my cage where a large yellowing mesh laundry bag had started its transformation to brown. My makeshift weight bag had seen better days for sure.

Many years ago my father sent me a great many books. He often told me, first when I’d fight in the schoolyard then later when began to box and finally when I had aspirations of going professional, that I should use my head “for more than a punching bag.” And he had compiled quite a library, which of course was never read, but the books were heavy. I think he knew that I didn’t read them but he continued to send them anyway. For years he sent them in fact, and would only ask if I had received them and leave it at that. He even sent them after many of them were sent back to him with a note telling him “no excess reading material” or words to that effect. I was lucky but didn’t yet know it, and through my sliver I continued to stare.

I still don’t know what possessed me to open the bag that day and liberate its contents, but it was through this rabbit hole that I discovered the world. First, escaping to the breezy streets of Dublin where the cobbled pave of O’Connell Bridge gave movement to my feet and the words of Joyce sang in my ears. After that, I went on safari, terror pounding in my chest as I hunted big game in the Ebro valley with Hemingway as my guide. I learned how to love through the works of Whitman and Shelley (and how not to) and learned to feel compassion from Remarque and Thomas, then later how to imagine through Shakespeare and Milton.

I can still feel the excitement I felt pulling each new text out of that time capsule with their smooth, unmarred covers and pristine spines. The feel of the crisp new pages against my fingers and sound of the bindings cracking as they opened up to each new chapter were like plotting a course through the freshly driven Sierra snow that was just beyond my reach. I truly learned to live through my experiences with literature and eventually the walls began to fade. The eggs were still horrible, though a little less so, and my sliver got a little bigger I’d noticed (whenever I pulled my nose out of the wind to check) and then one day it was gone entirely.

I “hit the streets” as they say, with a new head and enrolled in school eight days later. I hadn’t been in an academic classroom in nearly a decade and a half. I spent most of my childhood and all of my adult life looking through slivers. I was no more prepared for college than I had been for the gladiator school I had first encountered as a thirteen year old boy, but I was every bit as scared.

Young faces looked at me with no particular perspective at all except to regard me as out of place, and I felt old maybe for the first time in my life. The years had come and gone and the hurried sun looked just a little bit bigger than I had remembered it. I took my assessment test and did well. I had been called a lot of things in my life but “smart” was a first. I, of course, knew better. One look at life happening around me told me quite the contrary; there was much that I did not know.

For instance, the parole system is not very fond of “smartasses” (they prefer dumbasses, I suppose) and a college educated ex-con is something that threatens some people. I would routinely be asked to show up at a given time for example (usually during a scheduled class) and provide proof of where I received the money to pay for my tuition or books.

On occasion and at rather random and equally inconvenient intervals, my house would be ransacked and my written materials would be confiscated. Sometimes this was done to make sure I wasn’t “up to something” and others merely as amusement they would hold their own readings with me as a captive audience. The world had gotten smaller on me again.

I found work as a commercial truck driver, which gave me pay stubs to show my parole
officer and he eventually left me alone (sort of). I had to quit school as I would often work twelve hour days, but the pay wasn’t too bad and my work allowed me to see many new horizons, and some old ones.

One particular trip took me up to the high deserts of Susanville and I found myself staring through the wing window of my truck at the very same range that I had explored so long ago. The mountain looked much the same, except it was August and the heat from the valley floor seemed to punish the air around it. I pulled my truck off of the highway and parked. We stared at each other for a while as my truck fumed and shook, protesting its idleness. It was the last time we would meet.

I was laid off just weeks later and the company ended up folding entirely. By this time, I was off parole and didn’t have to worry about my jackbooted watchers approaching me for any more readings. Those few close to me asked me loaded questions like, “Are you okay?” and “How are you doing?” to which I would answer diplomatically, “great” or “can’t complain,” but something was missing.

I went back to school that fall, married the one woman who sees more in me than perhaps anyone alive, had a beautiful daughter whose eyes are the bluest pools of hope you have ever seen (and who has the poor misfortune to have her father’s big ears, of which I will tell her someday is a sign of intelligence or some such silly, fatherly thing).

My journey’s been long and my regrets have been many, but a sliver of a mountain and a long stretch of lonely highway have taught me that where you come from isn’t as important as where you are going. And while I still stare through slivers from time to time, though imagined and mostly as a sort of view finder to gain perspective, I never look back.
Hearing and Listening

There are a few differences between hearing and listening. When hearing people talk, you may or may not care about what they are talking about because what they are talking about may not be of interest to you. You may not want to be rude so you keep eye contact with them but your mind could be wandering elsewhere. What they’re saying or referring to may not even phase you. It could possibly go in one ear and out the other. Therefore, you might not retain it.
I’m a prime example and I’m guilty of it. For instance, when I am washing the dishes with the TV on full blast, I can hear noises and people talking from the background, but it doesn’t phase me. I would not be able to tell you what was going on or what they were talking about if my life depended on it. All I know is that I’m forced to listen to the ruckus on TV, but I’m not paying attention. I cannot care less. Maybe that’s why I don’t know what’s going on with the program. A lot of times, when my husband tries to talk to me while he is doing something, I often hear what he has to say to me but I don’t listen. After a few minutes, I would ask him the same thing he had told me earlier. For example, Jay, my husband, would say, “I took the trash out.” My response after a few minutes would be, “Jay, when you get a chance, can you take the trash out?” This is an example of not listening because I would ask him to do something that is related to what he just told me.

When you listen to people talk, you are paying attention to what they have to say and you absorb it. You understand what they say. However, if you don’t understand what they say, then you respond with the appropriate question by asking them to elaborate, rather than asking them a question that doesn’t even pertain to what was said. When they ask you a question during the course of the conversation, you want your answer to be related to the topic. You don’t want to answer a question with a similar question. This shows the person you are conversing with that you are not listening.

I often try to give my undivided attention when I listen to a person talk. I watch their mouth movements just in case I missed something they said. I tried to be attentive because I might lose my concentration on what they are telling me. I want to be able to follow what they have to say and absorb it. I think this is part of listening.
Grandmotherly Espionage

“I hate my teeth,” my aunt said. “No matter how much I brush them, they still look like pieces of corn.” I tried not to listen, and to just keep my mind on the comic my Mom bribed me with. Normally I wouldn’t come to a place like this, but Mom said a free comic and meal would be in it for me if I did. Mom needed me to haul some painting she bought at this Café-store last week. It was a pink Auschwitz. The decorum of this café could only be described as a grandmotherly nightmare; doilies and lace curtains, pink faux flowers and roses like perpetual Easter. Even the napkins were pink. I took great pleasure in honking my nose in those napkins. It was the kitschiest place you could imagine. I expected pink flamingos in the front, but that wouldn’t have been elegant enough or French enough. It was barely pink enough. The café was small. A baby grand piano sat near a bar where tea and coffee and hot chocolate were served. Cracked oil paintings hung on the walls of parks and rivers and trees. The brick was rich with scarlet age. The Tree Leaf Cafe had a room adjacent to the sitting area filled with old junk from the recently deceased, dropped off in cardboard boxes that smelled like old apples by grown children who just didn’t want to deal with the mountains of crap hoarded for the last sixty years.

“Here,” my Mom had said as we sat down, handing me an Archie comic. “Behave yourself.”

“Yeah, I like good comics, not this Archie crap,” I said.

It was always good to absorb as much comics as possible because I wanted to write them. I always kept a pad and paper with me, jotted down ideas or sketches of heroes and villains.

But I paged through the thing anyway. If nothing else, it allowed me to think of ways to improve the story. Maybe Archie became a drug dealer or something.

“Heard his name is O’Hara,” my aunt said, referring to the freakish man in the comer of the café. “He was a professor or something. But something made him leave.”

“Like what?” my mother asked.

“I don’t know. But did you see his hands? Cracked and raw. Over washed, I’d say.” My aunt Dorothy cut another dainty little piece of her chocolate cake with her fork and held it up to her face for inspection before popping it into her mouth. She straightened her thick red glasses. “I get a horrible,” she raised her hands and waved them around her head, “vibe from that one.” My mother and aunt looked across their table at the man.

“Why do you think he washes his hands so much?” Mom asked.

“Don’t know,” my aunt replied.

“Maybe he killed a man,” I said. I peered over the top of my faded comic and glanced at my aunt and mother. “And he feels like he has to constantly wash the blood off.”

“Oh, that’s hideous. Stop reading such filth,” my mother said. “I don’t know what you got against Archie. He’ll help un-pollute your mind.”

“The man’s mental,” I said, ignoring my mother and gesturing to the man. “He who in their right mind would come in here every day? It’s like he’s waiting for a sadistic Easter bunny.”

“Oh, shut up,” my mother said, sipping her cup of tea with the dancing deer on the side.

We left the Café, me hauling my mother’s painting, and had to sit in the backseat of my mother’s ridiculously small Toyota Celica on the way home, the damn wrapped painting bumping me on the head. I was taller than both my mother and aunt, but I was forced—since the time of my birth—to inhabit the backseat. Now my knees felt like they were almost past my ears.

“Have enough room back there, hon?” My mother said.

“I can’t breathe.”

“Oh, shut it.”
I got through the trip trying to rationalize why this man would choose to sit in silence in that pit, watching the fallout from the Saturday market pass by with crafts and vegetables. We drove away down evergreen lined boulevards where the oldest houses in the town stood strong and wise above their lawns. As my mom and aunt discussed whatever the hell it is they discuss, I knew the man was hiding there because frankly, no one would look in that place unless they were looking for a sociopath, which led me to the conclusion he was clearly a sociopath in hiding, a spy and in hiding from the government. I pulled my pad of paper out and started writing all this nonsense, and when we got home, I drew instead of doing my homework.

I sat at the dark red desk my grandfather had made, surrounded by posters of AC/DC and Batman that lined my walls. My grandpa made the desk for my uncle Carl who never used it, having dropped out of college and moved to London. So the desk remained in Grandpa’s garage for two decades. I saw it once under a sheet in his garage, behind a bicycle - for two my grandparents used to ride together before grandma got sick. I mentioned it and he asked me if I wanted it. I said absolutely and used it for everything from building forts to doing homework. That day, after my mom and aunt’s search for more annoyingly small and cute crap, I sat at the desk writing in a leather bound journal my sister bought me one summer when she was home from school. As an artist she encouraged me to draw and write and surprised me with a leather bound journal. Much to my shame, the journal rested on my bookshelf for the last three years with hardly any pages filled. I’d grab it now and again, near bedtime, and stare at the lined pages, wishing I had some idea, but mostly everything I wrote was a rip off of Batman or Superman. So I just put the damn thing down and went about my life, watching T.V. going to school, hoping the girls didn’t see the new explosive zit between my eyes.

But that Saturday I poured an entire history out for this character inspired by that freak of a man. There was no doubt he was a spy. His name was Boulevard Quinn, named after an ancestor who sailed the English Channel with William the Conqueror, named Robert DeSpence of Quinn. Boulevard was raised on the east coast and entered the military where his genius and athletic ability caught the attention of a shadow government.

I grabbed some computer paper, bit the eraser of my pencil, chewed it, and then started to draw. I drew his nemesis Dr. Adrian Huxley. The man looked intelligent, but unstable and sinister at the same time. I ran into trouble when I tried drawing Boulevard Quinn. I wanted to capture the lonely fear, the hawk-like silence and the fierce stare of the man in the café, but it just wouldn’t work. I distilled nothing of the mystery of this man, even when I drew in an AK-47 and sunglasses.

I threw my pencil down and left my room, stepping over heaps of road kill like laundry and leaves of school paper left to blow in the wind of my dusty ceiling fan like tumbleweeds, and went out to the kitchen. The chatter from the other room was gone. I called to mom and asked where aunt Dorothy was. “Left,” she said, “dentist appointment.” I poured myself some chocolate milk. I still enjoyed blowing bubbles in it because it annoyed mom.

“Stop that right away,” she said. “I’m not raising a heathen.”

“Okay mom,” I called to her. I began slurping it instead with loud gusts.

“Samuel Prosper, you stop that right now.”

“Fine.”

“And come here, you should see the painting.”

It was a very strange painting, but I loved it. It displayed a view of clearing in a foggy forest, with a few light beams desperately blasting through the mist. In the middle of the clearing was a grand tree, like a redwood, wise and ancient, and growing out of the tree trunk was a clock, woven out of bark, the clock face swirling with age rings, branches for the hands, and branches for the heavy weights dangling below. I was glad mom bought it.

“What do you think,” she asked.

“It’s all right I said,” taking a large slurp. I wouldn’t let her have the satisfaction of getting something I actually liked. She hung it up on the wall of the living room in between two paintings by native artists, which were resting beside framed medieval European tapestries of gold and brown. Mom’s decorating tastes were eclectic and odd.

“Mom,” I said. “Why do you and Aunt Dorothy go to the Tree Leaf Café?”

That was grandma’s favorite little café, Mom said, taking off her cat eye glasses, with the rubies, wiped them on her skirt then placed them back on her head crowned with flamboyant silver hair.

“Grandma’s been dead for twelve years,” I said.

“Yes, but she used to take us there as kids,” Mom said. “It’s straight out of my childhood.”

“Right,” I said. I watched in irritation as she straightened those cat eyes glasses again. “Isn’t that why you wear those glasses, too? A little 60’s secretary nostalgia?”

“So what?” she turned, annoyed. Satisfied, I changed the subject.

“I’m writing a comic about that hobo in the café.”

I told mom I had to stay after school to help out for track. Instead, I took the bus downtown and walked by Tree Leaf Café. There he was, sitting at the table in the corner I walked inside and saw a girl was with him, a young woman around my age, sitting at his table, reading a book. I couldn’t see her face, but poking above the top of her book was a thicket of black hair. I sat down. Why hadn’t I seen anyone with him before? I only ever came
Mrs. Finnegans brought my chocolate with a swirl of whipped cream on top. It was served in a hideous, dainty vessel with a twirling handle and a saucer. I reached over for my cup of hot chocolate after I had scribbled some notes. The man still hadn’t looked over. His eyes were strictly concerned with the passerby outside in the sunshine, and I was annoyed with not having a good look at his face. I glanced up and watched in fascination as the man felt his pockets and pulled out a disposable napkin packet, ripped it open, then slowly mashed and rubbed the alcohol soaked cloth over his red hands. He folded the napkin, now ripped like a weather worn sail, without looking at it and placed it on the table. I got a heavy whiff of rubbing alcohol. The man removed a comb from the inside pocket of his worn coat—still staring out the window as the girl mumbled—and strained it through his wild twigs and tendrils of white hair. He removed the comb from the hairy thicket then delicately removed the strands of stray white hair in the comb teeth.

The girl read aloud, “Mrs. Goldman never thought of asking a priest such an inquiring question. The business of the clergy was the business of God, and therefore not for the curious commoners.”

What the hell was this? He was about to speak. I waited for this stranger, this mysterious demigod and spy, to utter his first words, like an Olympian’s conception. But the man didn’t answer. She continued reading out loud while he stared out the window onto the street, his face cemented in concentration and pleasure, his head rocking slightly back and forth to the rhythm of her voice. Mrs. Finnegans walked over to their table, with two drinks and set them down. The girl closed her book and thanked Mrs. Finnegans.

“Here,” the girl said, placing the cup of tea in the man’s hand.

“Thank you,” he said. I stared at my spy. That’s not the sound of my spy’s voice. He raised the cup to his white whiskered lips and blew onto the tea. He turned and his flaming blue eyes looked vacant. He set the cup down, and reached over, feeling the table for something. I watched, fascinated, as Boulevard Quinn found this girl’s hand and held it tight. He reached out in the dark for a hand.

“I’ll miss this place,” he said, his voice like the sound of a dying flute, the notes tired and ready to rest. “I wish I could see it one more time.”

“It’s changed a lot. Your hands are too dry,” the girl said. She rubbed his hand in both of hers. “You need hand lotion.”

“Won’t do no good,” he said. “Keep washing them anyway. Can’t stop.”

I set my pen down. Their voices were so soft, and when the man reached up with his hand, and placed his palm on the girl’s cheek, absorbing somehow, I looked down at the commande drawing I did of Agent Boulevard Quinn, old, beaten, an eye patch, scars, and one hell of a badass attitude.

“You look more like your mother every year,” he said.

“How do you know? You can’t see me.”

“I know,” he said. “This is all I need.”

I closed my journal and folded up my drawing, a little ashamed. The man looked small, tired, and weary. His eyes roamed the room, grabbing for images that could never come, but his hands and ears and nose saw more than I could. And I remained quiet. My mind stopped clicking and I watched. I just watched. The girl looked up at the old brass clock on the wall.

“We’ve got to go.” She reached into her bag and removed a collapsible cane, the end dipped in red, and placed it into her father’s hands. He hefted himself up with confidence. This was the first time I saw him move, and he strode to the café door, tapping from side to side with every step.

“I’ll miss this place,” he said as they left the café. “Your mother used to drag me here.

I wadded the pink napkins on my table up into a nice firm ball before I set out the rest of my equipment, and tossed it under the table.
all the time before the accident.” His voice disappeared with shutting door. I stared after them until they turned a corner and disappeared. I glanced at my skimpy dressed witch and international spy, and tore the pictures up. I tossed them into the trash bin as I left. When I got home mom asked me where I’d been. I told her I wanted to get a better look at that guy, this man in the café.

“He’s blind,” I said, sitting on the couch across from the painting of beautiful hands. “Why were his hands raw?”

“Sounds like OCD to me,” Mom said.

“I feel like a bastard, writing about them like that,” I said, leaning forward. “They were just interesting. I just don’t understand why he would want to go in there every day, when he can’t see.”

“Well,” my mother said, removing her glasses. “Sometimes we only do things because it reminds us of our past.”

“That’s pretty deep, mom,” I said.

“Thank you.” She was quiet for a moment. “What did you say his name was?”

“Sounded like Miller.”

Mom got up and inspected the bottom corner of the painting. “Looks like he wasn’t always blind.”

I got up and looked where mom was pointing. There was the name Jason Miller in the corner of the beautiful painting of soft, delicate hands.

I never saw them again, Mr. Miller and his daughter. The Tree Hill Café eventually closed, and at the time I pretended gratitude, but I’ve since gone back to it, now a Korean restaurant, and just sit, wishing I could blow my nose in those pink napkins.
The message

When slaves were granted freedom with no money and no where to go what message could be clearer? when black people were refused education, jobs, housing, medication or a ride on public transportation what message could be clearer? with the shameful treatment after Katrina of the black and poor in New Orleans what message could be clearer? with the high black unemployment and infant mortality rates the number of deaths of innocent people at the hands of police when they cut back welfare dismantle affirmative action cut food stamps and deny us reparations what message could be clearer? when they bombed the Philadelphia MOVE family killed 6 adults, 5 children and burned down 61 homes on Osage what message could be clearer? when black neighborhoods are flooded with drugs and guns causing self-destruction followed by amazing upscale gentrification what message could be clearer? Rosewood Florida, Birmingham Alabama, Greenwood Oklahoma did you get the message? Strange Fruit, Medgar Evers, Emmet Till, Bobby Hutton, Paul Robeson, Fred Hampton, Marcus Garvey. Dr. Martin Luther King, Amadou Diallo, Do you get the message? the death penalty is legal lynching racism is still prevalent and unflinching we must be diligent, be strong, be brave for our children and grandchildren we got a planet to save what message could be clearer?

Brown Dog

Ironically, I am aboard A multi-wheeled Greyhound bus Threading sleekly across concrete Elevations when I look down into Spartan wire cages of the city pound. A large brown dog sits looking up At traffic edging toward destinations He imagines or remembers. Do you see me inside this bus? Am I with you inside your cage? Do the tiny cars amuse you? Are you hoping someone finds you? In two hours I'll be rain soaked In a city brushed with neon Stealing moments to remember A warming touch to light the dark. Brown dog, your eyes reflect my own. Your dreams must be the same as mine. Someone see me, touch me, keep me. Stay close beside me while I sleep.
Snapshots

The hot blue of the sky and your eyes
the yolk yellow of the striped beach towel
and the deep red of your hair and beard
are so bright (even now) they sting my eyes.
We were happy in Kauai

and even the summer after,
the summer of farmers’ markets
deep purple plums
and semaphores of laundry
flapping on the line.

That final summer
all that remained was a fleeting notion
we should fly to Hawai‘i,
and a deep craving
for juicy plums.

Wednesday Question

Morning, I pour coffee into my mug – the one that hangs
from a cup-hook under the kitchen cabinet – and find cat-
ibble rising to the surface, honey-brown small crisp stars.
So fresh from sleep, I’m hungry for caffeine, its black zing.
Waste nothing, I skim off the kibble, drain the mug to dregs.

Catfood in my cup? A mouse more frugal, quicker
than our cat. I imagine White-Footed Deer-paws scampering
from the upstairs cat-feeder, along exposed beams,
down wall and light-fixture, to deposit each tiny star
in my mug, one perilous trip at a time.

A deer-mouse should be foraging the great outdoors, not
robbing catfood. Our worthless feline, too fat to hunt mice.
Mouse-trap? I think of small famished creatures
born inside human walls, knowing nothing of a larger world
beyond. Existential questions, another cup of joe.

Grief hides

in the yellow striped beach towel
(still smelling of the sharp blues of Hawaii)
and in the perfectly balanced red kitchen spatula;

in the predawn stillness
in mistaking a sharp horn blast for a friendly dog bark,

in confusing the rattle of a homeless cart
for the rattle of you making coffee and pancakes.

I awake, sure you’ve been beside me
but your side of the bed is cold

the only impression
left on the sheets –
memory.
Sub-Saharan African Bride

A few drops
of your perspiration
fall
into
the pot
of plantain stew

and
in the evening
when the family eats
the world
feels
full.

Sacramento Deity

He’s inexact. Some Octobers,
the rice falls from his sleeves
like spring pollen. Others,
he’s stingy and irritable. Not enough
offerings, not enough bowing,
not enough.

Then he likes to walk in full winter light
among the shaky farmers and people
of the streets. He softens, drapes his arms around them,
dips his hands in their pockets, leaves a little something.
The whisper of a thread that the finger worries.
A smack on the cheek in the guise of a junebug.
There’s never any shortage of amusement.

Still, the water wells up in him and finally
he cries like a newborn, rivers, streams,
broken levies of tears. His melancholia thins
to white desolation just past New Year
when the rafts of swans depart.
They leave, and there’s no comfort.

Spring is the cure, summer his revenge
when he sleeps all day in barns, shade
spilling in lengths from his head.
But Fall is his alone, the harvest
secondary to his need for color,
for that fragrance of burn
before death, for the rice field’s green and shine
and mud-swelled river. Grain beads up
like thought that can’t stop.

Mostly, through everything,
he’s hidden, watching us
trespass, kick up the chaff and hulls.
Habitually, he takes the high view of his wild,
which we’ve squared up, which we think ours.
**Traveling for Mac**

Julian was his real name
but everybody called him Mac
Uncle Mac, brother Mac, Daddy Mac.

He loved ravioli from Lucca
oozing with cheese and gravy
and Little Smokies, greasy pig
sausages swimming in BBQ sauce
and he laughed so hard
his big body shook.

He was a Marine
but we loved him anyway
forgave his military posture
his way of shouting orders
then saying, “Please.”

He pleased Aunt Bessie
in every way and worked hard
to keep earning her love
she who knew Korla Pandit
personally and loved Jesus
with a full heart, forgiving
those who did not.

Riding through worn hills to Napa
I look for Mac in the rain clouds
over the gray green rises
call out his name silently
traveling over the undulate road
to the valley where he grew orchids
played Beer Barrel Polka on the accordion
he brought home from the war.
It was too heavy for any of us to lift
when he was gone. No one could play it.
It sat in the closet waiting for the next
big man to come along.

**Lip Smackin’ Blues**

Wanna bellow these blues like
Turquoise and solar yellows that
Emanate from my soul
Golden sunbeams streaked with indigo
Gonna burst from my lips as every
Line in my face
Contorts to make a way
For these vocalizations of torment
To purge themselves from me
I wanna growl these blues
Like barbeque chicken burned black
On the spit and hot coals in my
Momma’s kitchen stove wanna
Howl baby oh baby daddy oh daddy
How could you leave me
Sing the real down and dirty
You got me all tied up in
Your head rag and house shoes blues
Wanna moan and groan these blues
Like soppin’ up blackstrap molasses
With home made buttered biscuits
And the good morning heartache
Hurt me so bad make me so sad
Hues of dark chocolate and
Hot southern summer nights blues
Take another little piece of my
Heart now cause you ain’t nothing
But a hound dog got me hypnotized
And cryin’ a river over you blues I
Wanna yell and scream these blues
In purples and maroons and
Tell the world it takes a fool
To learn that love don’t love
Love don’t love nobody knows the
Trouble I’ve seen down on my knees
Cause I’m eating corn bread black eye peas
And collard greens on New Year’s eve
Without you hummin’ the I want you back
Ummmmm, yeah, I want you back
So bad I can taste you
Blues
Poet, Rinse Yourself

Poetry is love,
love for words
you choose
with care.
You take a sentence,
you polish it
the way you would
your silver
dinnerware.
Once your words
are shiny,
you line them out
on a paper-white
tablecloth
like forks and spoons
for your guests
to admire and use.

So poetry
is a gift you give
to all those people
you’re
expecting,
They’ll arrive soon.
But good for you
your words are
already here,
steamy and sweet
oozing from you like
apples in sliced pie.

Your words.
Not you.
You are just
a buffing cloth.

Go.

Rinse yourself.
Hang yourself
out to dry.

The Home Coming

When this era of madness comes to an end
When the dark clouds of
Uncertainty clear;
And the drums of fear stop
Rumbling in my land,
I shall go back home;
I shall go back home,
And see my mother;
To lay my bruised pride and ego

On her shoulders of love,
I shall go back home
And see my father
To listen carefully to his words of
Wisdom,
As he takes me through the
Pathways and byways of my youth;
And tries to explain
How it all went wrong;
I shall go back home and see my lover;
To feel the sensuous touch of her lips,
As we discuss the brief but sad history of our Motherland,
The tabernacles of pain,
Upon which our youth, our dreams and aspirations have been sacrificed;
I shall see my friends,
We shall sit down at the table of regret, anger and disappointment,
Engaging ourselves in the futile discussions of the what-might-have-beens,
Seeking to find solace in the still pulsating dreams and hopes
For a better tomorrow,
I shall go back home;
And in the shadow of our beautiful flag

We shall attempt to rebuild our land;
And as the waters of the mighty
Zambezi cascade over Mosi-o-a-tunya,
We shall stand together and begin to walk,
Towards a better day;
Full of hope, promises and never-ending tomorrow…
The Haystack at Cannon Beach

Meringue tide buckles and quivers
over Poseidon’s craving fingers --

Conducting talons that lead a chorus,
under a fickle, double-smile, moon.

The rock is draped in sheets
of chocolate satin,
while we eavesdrop on an aria
performed in sotto voce.

Chance Encounter at the Rosemont Grill—1985

In the dining room, leather booths
line the perimeter. A brassy hook
for your hat hangs on thick wood posts.
Lunch hour I sit at the counter
alone with others. I order

Fried Halibut: inch pieces dipped
in egg batter, grilled golden till the edges
creak, mashed potatoes, canned peas, fluffy
white dinner roll with hard pats of butter.

The woman next to me, gray haired
and smiling eats the same fish.
We talk, believe the Rosemont
will be here forever.
She comes for this particular meal
and a break from a remodel in Midtown—
a new marriage, she says, a new start.
I want her life, but must rush back to work.

The Rosemont is gone.
I have a new marriage, a new home.
Heart-healthy, flash-frozen halibut
cooks on the non-stick grill pan.
A regular customer waits in the rain
for a cab, and bent, yellow newsstands
line up in front of the double doors.
Sub Judice

After sitting through opening statements feeling a little guilty about being there with you in the jury box sworn to silence and I the only courtroom spectator, the only breathing person with no stakes in the proceedings but simple curiosity, that first sin; after listening to alleged wrongs on either side, seeing how easy it is to transgress someone else’s rights without intending; at the noon recess I walk out into Monday’s interrogative daylight and turn the car’s ignition as if I could find a way home without colliding with an already injured world.

Watercolor Sketch

The broken line along sea and sand then, higher sea and horizon. A boat defaces planes of light and water with red snapping sails, metal banged by rope. Waft of noon whistle across the bay mournful as a baby left asleep in the shade of an olive tree for gypsies to raise. Red sails are just chambers, a heart full of love for you. We drift toward the opposite shore where sea meets sky, horizon. Man the tiller or meet the rocks, the old men say. We take turns steering, blind, lying on the ribs, looking up to learn the curve of heaven from a moving boat.
To a Peace Corps Volunteer in Africa Who Fixes Computers and Bicycles

A salute to you,
to the man who fixes
broken things. Do you fix
broken wings and dreams?
How about broken hearts?
And my other question:
Who will fix you
when you are in need
of repair and cannot bring
your healing art
to potholed places and
children with scars running
down their cheeks like
darkened teardrops?
You know,
African children’s troubles
roll through gutted streets
like cars with flat tires.
So, my friend,
collect their smiles;
carry them with you
as tools and spare parts.
Wear laughter
like a beaded amulet
around your ankle.
Hear it rattle
when you walk
and learn to dance
to the music of poverty.
Can you hear it?
It’s the sound of boys
calling out to each other,
hitting rubber sap
soccer balls with
dark-skinned knees;
and girls singing and sliding
pebbles over gravel
with rough-soled feet.
The children, they
hear your words
and clap their hands.
You are a song
they love to listen to.
They catch your voice,
take it home and talk about it.
They shake it like coins
in an almost empty
aluminum can.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia only lasts as long as your memory.

Many years ago you were a night guard
In an old, beat-up Baltimore hospital.

At dawn you would climb the fire escape
To stand on the roof. The first light
Would slip over the city. Sunrise
Over redbrick rowhouses. White
Marble steps.

Your life was empty, there was no one.
Often you would walk the five miles to work
Because it just didn’t matter.

You knew every sidewalk in Baltimore, it seemed.
Garbage trucks on wet morning streets.

Time passed slow, slow, slow.
You wondered if you were endless.
A long, dull nothing
That would never stop.

Nostalgia only lasts as long as your memory.

The Sound of Chairs

I wake up with a jolt, the clock shines 3 A.M. at me. I lose my dream
of a girl who shaves her head but has a long mustache like a man;
the ends frame her mouth and seem to point south, to South America.
In the dream I kiss her to see if the mustache is disgusting. It isn’t,
but it isn’t fun either. We are in a seedy, run-down cafe somewhere
in this strange city I often visit in dreams, and with the kissing over
we stand to leave. The sound of chairs scraping across the dirty floor
is still in my ears as I bolt upright in bed. It is a lonely sound.
A jar of faceted ruby eyes sits on the table.
At one time, on some machine, they glowed
Red for “on”; or, “hot”, or “gentlemen, start
Your engines”, or, “Fender amp set on twelve.”
Now they amuse my cat who likes to dip his
White paws with extended claws into the glass Enclosure, hooking the non-seeing red things
Until they drop onto his harnessed placemat.
And, with one stroke of his muscled forearm,
He scores a basket, a hole-in-one, a home run.
A goal. Then, cat-bored with the thrift shop
Goodies, he curls upon his second-hand quilt
To nap -- dreaming of tuna juice, or whipped
Cream, or pieces of raw ground beef which he
Believes are bits of yummy minced mouse meat.

my mother strews seed pods
that cling to me with black threads.

She stoops in a field of whirling seagulls,
raking the sleepless.

She’s the woman who knocks three times
foresetting another departure,
or presides at the crossroads,
painting four ways.

Sometimes she hovers in another room,
the door wide—

her face either toward or from me.

Last night, I dreamt you were making love
with another, using all the words you used with me.

Now I am in the dark, putting on skirt after skirt,
trying to find the one I left home with.

My mother laughs.

The Can Man

The can man called to me one early
sultry Sacramento midtown morning
“Eh eh eh, eh sistah, how long it take
to grow your hair like that?” he asked.
“Thirteen years,” my reply
as we walked toward one another
he with his hefty bag full of cans
me with my struggle-bag full of essentials.

“I used to be a Boot Dancer,” he said.
“Been to Africa too.”
“Well alright.” I said wanting
to give him something but not
knowing what or how.

We walked together a minute
until he met and joined his
partner with the shopping cart
then said, “Take it easy.”

“Tutaonana” I said to his back
and he stopped in his tracks
turned and with rheumy
eyes in a sad and bearded face
said, quietly. almost reverently
“I haven’t heard that word in years.
I haven’t heard that word in years,”
he said to his partner who
was already hungrily harvesting
a mine of cans from a trashcan
near Lucky’s market.

“Tutaonana. I don’t believe
she said that.” He looked back
at me then continued his search.

I saw the can man yesterday
loaded with cans and stepping
oh so fast he looked at me asked
“Don’t I know you from somewhere?
You know I used to be a Boot Dancer.
Been to Africa too.”

“Tutaonana is a Kiswahili word used when parting”
Living with HIV

Can’t remember exactly when it moved into my house, I think it was in ’82 when my friend Humphrey’s dance instructor got sick with the disease and gradually wasted away and she gave me detail by detail of his demise and I cried with her many a day.

Then around ’83 Brotha Al at Delaware State told me about one of his friends. Al was gay, crazy and always clowning around and I thought he was joking when he pointed his first two fingers down then put his other index finger across them to make an A but he wasn’t smiling not even a taste HIV had come to stay.

Because not long after that my sister-in-law was infected by her husband, then my oldest sister who moved to New York with a bass player in Bill Doggett’s band got positive from using dirty needles and my friend Ibeshi graduated from Berkeley and one of her first jobs was at an AID’s clinic in West Oakland. “Listen Sista, ANYONE can have AIDS,” she said. “You just don’t know.”

Then one of my cousins was diagnosed and two of my nephews died of AIDS and right after that my friend Phil who graduated Columbia took a job a hospital in New York to direct an HIV program and he tells me almost every time we talk on the phone in the most urgent tone “Look I’m telling you Sis, do not under any circumstance have unprotected sex. Make sure you tell your daughter and granddaughters that for me will you?”

Yes, I whisper, because it chokes me up to realize how much suffering and pain he has witnessed and because I live with HIV now every day.

No, I don’t have AIDS but because of my family and friends, their stories their sorrows, their letters, their calls, their deaths – HIV has come to my house to stay.
Clean Love

We met on a bus became friends then lovers moved in together he hated his work had secrets loved me from a far off land I could feel in his thick heavy dread he lead I followed because his far off love was more tender and sincere than any of the possessive ego involved mechanical obligatory copulations of my past

We had no car and no washhouse near enough to walk to so I washed our clothes by hand and didn’t mind because we both loved the smell of wind and sun in our small place that mingled with the frankincense and wafting whiffs of cumin, fava beans, collard greens, goat cheese, dolmas, coffee, along with the nag chapa, patchouli, marijuana aromas on the clothes of visiting friends speaking Arabic, Swahili, Spanish, French, Jamaican Patois Louisiana Patois and Ebonics on weekends

Our mat was full and soft and clean and he slept still his body dark ebony, long lean sinewy, face full bearded and peaceful on the last night we spent together

The call came from his friend in broken English he was gone and my only solace was the comfort of knowing that when he gently kissed my forehead and left for work that morning everything he wore even his coat had been freshly washed and smelled of wind and sun

Remembering Sato

Watching Sato-san eat his way through an entire plate of kim chee—standing, laughing with his guys—or a hunk of watermelon, dripping sticky and spitting seeds on the floor. He’d hang around outside—I’d finally venture out to call him in to dinner; he’d act like he didn’t care, but maybe he was on a diet. After I’d made the fluffy, white rice he loved, even though I knew it has zero percent fiber, he’d sweep the floor with a big, rubber-tipped squeegee until you could eat off it—which we practically did, in that old, converted warehouse. Roaches in the dead, dry icebox where I’d tried to hide the cereal. A jumbo cup of coffee on his desk. Bluster and arrogance, the infected toe he’d cut working fish. those stupid rubber fishing boots in which he limped around. The 100-foot, homemade, wooden lobster tank he kept clean enough so that it didn’t smell in that unairconditioned, funky shop. The afternoon I caught him crashed out exhausted on a pile of mattresses at the plant. The way he’d peer over his newspaper to look at me or to flirt, with that silly intense stare that burned through me. The arrogant squeal of his tires at 6:30 a.m. while I hung around, hoping he’d give me a ride. Standing behind the door in my room, silent, in secret, tears running down my cheeks, when he called from Japan—he was coming back to L.A. Morning service, kneeling together, the day I was transferred to another house, another town. Writing letters telling him all I’d been silent about. Thinking, loving for years, waiting. The letter from his parents’ friends, finally replying to mine tissue-thin airmail envelope, Japanese characters: Just please leave their son alone.
Love is backwards.

Love me backwards.
Marry me, then take me to a movie.
Just tug on my heartstrings, and tie me in a knot.
I want to see the butterflies turn into caterpillars.

Love me forwards.
Tell me you like my shoes, and offer me your heart.
Show yourself to me, reveal your truth.
I want to see the butterflies flicker in your soul.

Love me sideways.
Let’s hold hands, and just dance the night away.
Make me the only truth that you can see
I want to feel the butterflies linger in my soul.

Love me every- way.
Kiss me now, and call me family,
And in the endless day we’ll find eternity.
I want to feel our butterflies entwined.

White Leash

We’d spend our time driving
Eyeing the asphalt as it rolled by,
Catching quick dashes of plastic light
Stretching out the school-night.

He was riding high
Eyes as red as
My flushed cheeks
Whenever he’d whisper a smile for me.
Silence was only silver.

We’d share our scars,
Arrogant abrasions,
And broken-down egos.

His smoky voice
Was delicate
Like the tender, yellow hair on his head.

“Not made by the hands of children.” Yeah right, but do you really care?
As far as I’m concerned we are all getting what we want.
You demand and we supply. The parents are in need…
And out of the kindness of my heart, I negotiate a way to take them out of a bind.
But I’m the bad guy? I think not!
It’s all you. The mothers and fathers who trade their children’s innocence…
The millions of naïve buyers…
There is no time for play in the business I run.
Instead of kicking the soccer ball, my “slaves,” as you would refer to them,
Are creating them.
I call it…
Teaching them a trade.
Does it really matter to you? We all get what we want after all.
Balls, money, bondage,
Fun, pain, lies…
The kids are handed to me, it’s not like I’m abducting them…
They eat, they sleep, they work.
After all, we all get what we want.

Made in India

Destiny Robbins

|
What is the edge of the planet of love?

You send a picture of the Portuguese coast.
This, you write, was once thought to be
the end of the world. On the other side
of sunlight we are preparing a package.

Went to the store for your
peanut butter and crackers.
Burned you baby’s naptime CD.
Added his bib with scent of milk
on new skin, and a sugar skull,
icingspilling out of its eyes, crafted
by our nephew’s preschool hands.

Nothing can hold you
the way this house could.
The dogs huddle in their bed.
Leaves rustle along sidewalks.
You wish you’d packed a jacket
and boots for the rain.
We add a tub of brownies.

This morning I spotted leaves
along the fence near squash flowers blooming.
Look, I said to the boys, autumn.
It was the closest thing I could imagine
to packaging love—pluck something alive
and changing.

In ten days you will receive
leaves glued to a page
by preschool hands,
tree stars halted forever
in their turn of red,
arms outstretched
like startled children
pointing home.

At the Bus Stop,
Rain Blowing In

Dusty pines intersperse with deciduous trees;
plump new leaves like a fat boy’s lips
fringe the blacktop’s wide circle.
I remember my childhood in Illinois;
trees’ changes marked the seasons--
leaves blazing in autumn; winter’s stark, black bark;
all over pale-green fuzzy behind spring’s drizzle;
summer shade long in hot, humid afternoons.

I’d forgotten that richness
as I lay, long abandoned, on the coast,
in a fairy’s bower,
redwoods unchanging, eternal,
rainforest wet and green year-round,
fog blowing in, mysterious sea’s ions.

Inland once more, the trees here
mark the seasons.
At my feet, crumpled litter,
cigarette butts peek from tender yellow leaves, fallen;
slick-haired fat boys thunder by
in a shiny red convertible.

Custard puff cumulous, heavy with gray,
ride cool, pre-rain breezes.
Silent, straggly-haired lady haunts
the tree-lined groves,
covered bus-stop benches;
sidles by the edge of the grape arbor,
its trellises interwoven with sweet blossoms
nursing fat, drunken bumblebees.

Where does she sleep at night,
when it rains?
It was a house that was always shut. The windows were draped with old white sheets, the exterior was white stucco. When the sky was overcast it disappeared during the afternoon, reflecting the light away from its edge. For a while it never existed in my mind, it was nothing. The Cavets lived there when I was young. They were a family of three; a retired army clerk and his two sons, and on occasions when Michael went duck hunting, Edgar and Nathaniel’s mother Euclid stayed over. The boys were three years apart, twenty-one and twenty-four, respectively. I lived across the street on the second story with my aunt and uncle. Our floor was accessed through an alley in the back where a yellow wooden stair led up through a canopy of Jessamine. My room was my home, it was my vaulted perch where my thoughts ran unhindered by the pressures of my peers boiling on the streets below; I was insulated from the quiet anger of my aunt and uncle, who resented their burden though they seemed to savor the charity as a conversational boon when they entertained.

The neighborhood maintained a large population of marauding kids who wandered the suburban avenues lined with stunted olive trees and Bermuda grass lawns. On any night without torrential rain I could hear the voices, sometimes hushed, sometimes brazenly shouted, each person speaking within the emerging hierarchy of strength and weakness evoked in the imagination of one boy. Bryan Carver’s father was a biker whose lack of work and hard company led many to believe that his income was illicit, though we never knew for sure. Bryan was a small kid, smaller than I was, but he had already lost his youth. He sought to legitimize his father’s lifestyle by introducing the Machiavellian poison, which had eroded his own innocence, into the rest of us. It sold, it was edgy—it spoke of the power we saw in carelessness. Faustian dares to lift a video game from a house would be levied in front of the group, and woe to him who denied this challenge. Bryan bargained for our innocence with a shadow in his eyes that was tempered by his own fall, a gleaming pair of dark eyes that sought out life and exposed it to itself. His pockets were full of cash from dealing and his father’s violence had left his face hardened like a lump of pale rock. I tried to avoid him, my aunt and uncle told me to stay away from him. “Being an adult has nothing to do with the frivolity of misdeeds,” they would say, pointing me toward their dank modesty which looked to me like a concession of courage. I remember the smell of fear that arose in a boy who had just moved into the neighborhood when Bryan told him to give him his tennis shoes. I looked at the faces around me and realized that all of us were scared of Bryan, yet each of us clung to a notion that his way was the way. I felt both ashamed at being a child and disgusted that I walked under this oppressive banner. I’m not the one doing it, I would say to myself when I went home. My face which I had worked to match the laconic sneer felt stretched out of shape, it was a relief to let it go limp and watch from my window. Through the panes I felt
I remember reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and thinking of my own Boo Radley. I wondered whether Euclid left Michael to escape, and if Nathaniel was enlisting to escape. I looked at Michael’s face, creased with care and burden, and felt.

Bryan was like a hyena around Edgar. He smelled his scent like a rotten zebra. The pack would assemble around him and chant his name and push him, “Hey, fatty, what you going to do.” Bryan was like a conductor blending the nuances of his satanic followers, gaining momentum until the blows began to fall upon Edgar in earnest. I stood in the back mouthing out an epithet without feeling, horror welled up inside me yet I was responsive to some primitive instinct driving me to save myself. The frothing crested like a wave and the children left the carcass to move on to the next thing. Edgar never responded much, his arms never covered his head as he fell to the ground. He didn’t curl up, he just lay there issuing small grunts from his wet mouth.

These deeds were despicable to me, they showed me my bottom with all its dark melodies. I asked myself if I was a bad person, if my parents were justified, and I didn’t know. Bryan caught me coming home from the Bellvue Park one day and decided that I would be his attendant for the walk home. It was a cold day with high clouds that lay shapeless and uniform like a field of snow. I smelled tomato soup drifting out of a brick cottage, a thin breath of fire issuing from the chimney. When I was alone with Bryan I felt that part of him, deep inside, that longed for something soft. He would ask me about my fishing trips with my uncle; where we went, what we caught, how the rivers hid beneath their ripples, a rainbow and a brown. I was shamefully eager to answer; I felt like a companion drawing from him his inner self while I drank of the power in his empty eyes. I became him for a moment and knew that the fear he probed for gave him no warmth. Even so, his power drew me to follow. We approached our street through a gravel alley that ran behind the Cavets’ house. I heard the sound of Edgar raking his back patio. Bryan snuck up near the magnolias and started whispering: “Fattie is a freak, fatty is a freak.” Edgar stopped raking and for a minute it was quiet. Bryan opened the back gate while I stood by, he grabbed Edgar by his black hair and dragged him into the alley, not caring about Michael or Nathaniel. For the first time I heard Edgar protest. He said, “stop,” very silently without conviction, like he was asking a question. It was strange to me, it made me feel sick. “What,” Bryan said, “What you say, fatty.” Edgar stood up and started to lope away from us. His arms hung straight down as he ran, shoulders turning back and forth is disunion. He looked like someone would run if they were kidding around. Bryan started to laugh as he picked up two stones; he gave me one and directed that we nail him. My palms were sweating, the air seemed thick, and time was slowing down. I remember very clearly the brown stone in my hand, like a river stone polished and worn by decades of rolling downstream. Bryan unleashed his rock at the same time as me. I felt the stone roll off cleanly, releasing purely off the middle and index fingers. I watched the two rocks ascend and descend again towards Edgar and felt a fear born of intuition. Like a center fielder who knows without seeing that the ball is on target I made a motion to my left as if this would move Edgar like a puppet. He came back from the darting and a continued straight. I heard a heavy thud like a coconut on cement. My stomach lurched as Edgar fell to the ground. In my mind he fell for an hour, limp and unconscious. Bryan ran towards him, “oh no.” I looked up and saw blood gurgle from the back of his head. My mind was frozen, I wanted to help him but my legs bore me away down the alley. I ran like a madman, adrenaline coursed through me so intensely that I couldn’t feel my thought. When I got home I had no breath and blood rushed through my head. I sat beneath the window with my back against the wall. I think I sat there for an hour without moving. I remember pawing at my eyebrows till they bled. I looked up to the ceiling and watched the mobile circling in the waning light. Seven swans swung gently around, again and again, never leaving the circle. The sun shone upon the paper birds in ever darker shades of red.
After my father was buried we had to leave quickly, back to the Mekong for the last time. Looking out, my eyes teared fearing it would be the last time I would see it until after my death. We floated through Cambodia and finally to the South Vietnam shore, where we would find passage to America.

My uncle Dang Yong had left for America a few years before the war had started. After jumping around the west coast, he finally landed in Fresno, California. That was where we were too settled; we were four adults and an orphaned child, each of us was from different families. They weren’t related to me, but they were my uncles. Before the war they were friends of my father. During the war they were generals under his leadership. I was raised to treat them as uncles and after my father’s death they were my family.

I had never met my real uncle, Dang, before my arrival in Fresno. My father rarely spoke of him, never any praise.

“He was a coward that ran for American at the first sign of hardship.” My father would say, “A pathetic shell of a man.” When I would ask why, he always gave me a stern look and the conversation was over.

Uncle Dang had four children, each more spoiled then the last. My uncle’s weakness shined through his children. They spoke out of place, seemed by habit. They refused his requests at every turn and were openly defiant. While they spoke to him they looked him in the face, removing any authority he had.

When I first entered the military, my commanding officer would yell orders to the troop. The first time I made the mistake of looking up while he was yelling at me. His hand soon caught my face. My spit turned pink from the blood. The first time I saw his children disrespect him I expected the same, but saw a feeble man withdraw.

My earliest memories were in the plains and forests of Laos. Medicated with gunpowder, the taste turning the food bitter in my mouth. My father’s valor, which was instilled in me, forced me to into the war at such a young age. Although most children started their fight after the age of twelve, my debut on the battlefield was the week of my seventh birthday running through the grassy fields I had once knew with joy and innocence. The rifle vibrated in my hands, turned me numb. A jolt of terror after each shot, the rifle held awkwardly in my arms. Being displaced as far from my body as I could hold it without it falling through my arms. The blood and mud becoming one, painting my face and hands. The rain fell fast, the battlefield washed clean almost as fast as it was tarnished. Since then I’ve recorded the battles with makeshift tattoos. My character etched into flesh. After each battle the army official would scrape the battle into our skin with a rusty needle and ink paste made from various plants to commemorate our fight.
Life was hard in America. It was a different world. The concrete and stone was new to me. The paved roads filled with automobiles. We were aware of automobiles, but they rarely reached down to our small villages on the south side of Laos, since there were only dirt paths. We moved into a small apartment complex. Our two-room apartment was on the second floor; the building was painted in plain white cracking from the sun and chipping from the wind. Bars on the windows separated us from the sky, with a small ledge, which we kept plants on.

We were the poor, uneducated, and working class from southern Laos. We were simple people, former farmers and fishermen that lived off the land. We were called Lao Loum. Most of the older men spoke no English the children had picked up enough to put words together, although most of the words were put together incorrectly. We couldn’t find any work. We didn’t have any job skills outside of the forest and were illiterate; we were raised to work the land and more recently to fight. Luckily Dang who was a bit more educated and could at least understand English and spoke a bit of broken English owned an oriental food market, which he had opened a few years prior to our arrival. I worked, while my uncles stayed home. After a few months living in America word got back to our families. In the following months they made the voyage to the new world. The most concentrated numbers in the central valley of California.

My father was a simple man, poor and honest. He was a local well known for his generosity. His strength was shown through his face. He had a strong chin, thick eyebrows and the only expression he had was solemn. He was short in stature, having to stand on a crate to fix the ceiling of our small wooden hut when it rained. He was full of pride, unable to show weakness even when he had nothing else. He later became a leader for the people. He fought so our children wouldn’t be raised as servants to Theung. The upper class that lived in the high lands and mountains of north Laos were called Lao Theung. They controlled the government and ran the country. He knew with inaction it would only get worse. So he started the revolt for his children.

One Saturday afternoon a girl and her mother came to the market. She looked about my age. There was something different about her. She had dirty blonde hair, pale skin, and way too much makeup. As she passed me in the aisle I stole a glimpse of her hazel eyes, her hair shimmered in the light. She wore a small shirt that didn’t completely cover her and tight jeans that rode her low. I couldn’t help but stare; it seemed she purposely avoided eye contact. A shipment of catfish arrived at the market and my mind came back to me. I went to help the deliveryman move the boxes of iced catfish. After carrying three boxes, I began to sweat so I took off my shirt. My battle record partially shown from my tank top. Catching her eyes, she awkwardly stared. Her mother realized her interest and nudged her. She whispered something to her and her stares left partly. As I stood there thinking, my uncle yelled in Laotian, "Stop staring at the white girl and get back to work."

I returned to the delivery van to get the last of the boxes then continued to move them into the back room. As I stepped back into the storefront, the girl caught me off guard. "How did you get those marks?" she asked. I pieced the words together as she continued to stare at my battle wounds. Before I had thought of a reply, her mother grabbed her by the arm and left with her bag of shrimp.

I began to sweep for the end of the day. I saw a young boy from the neighborhood entering the market. He reminded me of myself, before I lost my childhood. My uncle gave me a package of fresh catfish to give to the boy for his mother. The boy gave me a few dollars in return and I handed him some candy from the shelf without my uncle seeing. The boy gave me a smile and went on his way. Right when he stepped out of the store a young man confronted him. He had a military grade buzz cut. He grabbed the little boy by his collar and lifted him off his feet. The boy clutched the package in fear. I moved from the counter. "No! It’s none of our business." My uncle yelled in Laotian. "He’s just a child" I reply in Laotian, looking him in the face for the first time.

I ran to the boy and grabbed him out of the man’s hands and stood between him and the man staring him down, not noticing I still didn’t have my shirt on. He looked at me and turned away. "I’ll walk you home." I said to the boy.

I went back into the store to get my shirt. We walked in complete silence for two blocks. When I got to his door his mother opened the door and welcomed me in. The boy gave her the package and went to the table. She offered me food out of custom, I agreed out of obligation.

When I returned to the market, there were two women shopping and my uncle behind the counter. I went to the back to finish sweeping when I heard a loud shatter followed by a rumble. The door way burst into flames. There were two more shatters and the flame roared. I ran to the door, but the flames were too big. I kicked the small fruit stand near the entrance into the flames, creating a bridge to the outside. My uncle grabbed one woman and led her outside over the platform. I grabbed the other woman and carried her over the flaming threshold to safety. I stood there with my uncle smoldering from the fire. We had no words as we watched the fire. Sirens whispered in the distance over the screams, just loud enough so you knew it was there.
The noise reminded me of the war. Every night was a symphony of sounds. The sound track of war, loud with the screams of men, cries of children and the fading whisper of bombs in the far background. Just loud enough so you knew it was there. Waking up to the people that didn't survive the night. During the day we had to bury them. Taking rifles, pistols, and ammunition, stripping the bodies of clothing and boots. We scavenged the dead bodies for everything we could use.

The flames illuminated our stone faces, breathing heat into our eyes. The sirens became louder. The big red monster stopped in front of the store, releasing a loud roar and spitting at the flames. Two policemen followed in a black and white car. While they spoke my eyes scanned the ground. Displeased, the man spoke louder and slower. My uncle, assuming the same position. Frustrated by our ignorance, they spoke with the men in red for the answers we didn't know. “Gasoline was used and there's broken glass on the sidewalk. Looks like a Molotov cocktail.”

The man in the red helmet says to the police officers. “The stone walls is what kept the fire from spreading,” he continued.

After the fire was put out, the door and frame were scorched black. The fire was the first assault.

The next day the doorway was replaced, the only reminder left was the smell of burnt wood. We continued our day as nothing had happened. I suspected I knew who was responsible for the fire. I didn't bother my uncle with the speculation. I knew he just wanted to move on.

Later that afternoon during my break, I went to the young boy I had walked home the day before. I saw the boy out in front of his house bouncing a small rubber ball. The boy gave me a smile from across the yard and continued to bounce his ball.

“Who was the older boy from yesterday,” I asked in Laotian. He hesitated and said, “A kid from the neighborhood.”

“Why did he attack you?” I asked

“Because we are different from him,” the boy said

“What's his name and where does he lives?” I asked

“Derek, he lives down the street in the blue house,” the boy replied.

I left boy and scouted the house down the street. I walked slowly casually taking glances at the house, gathering Intel for the attack. Seeing who was there through the windows, if there were any dogs, how many rooms were accessible from the front. I circled the block twice to get a good idea of the area and then returned to the store.

When I got back the girl from the other day was there, this time without her mother. She went out of her way to ignore me, but glanced at me at the end of every aisle. I continued to stock the shelves with cans. She made her way around the store to the aisle I was stocking, I felt her eyes on my back. When I turned to her attempting to greet her, she looked away and continued down the aisle.

After I finished stocking, I went behind the counter. The girl approached me with a candy bar. She handed me fifty cents and a smile. She walked toward the door and looked back at me quickly.

I swept for closing again as Uncle finished with the last customer. We closed the store and I headed out. Instead of walking home I took a detour to Derek's house. When I arrived at his house, I waited. Silently from the dark I watched through the living room window. From there I could see the adjoining kitchen and halfway down the hallway with two rooms, one on each side. Derek appeared from the right door and walked to the kitchen. I watched emotionless, scanning everything in the room. I began waiting for the time to strike. In the dark I was back in Laos, waiting in the forest for the twilight hour. Analyzing the enemy's camp for weakness and obstacles. Then I saw her come from the left room, wearing a short sleeve white shirt and gray sweats, her dirty blond hair disheveled. Surprised by her arrival, my objective was compromised, I returned home.

The next morning I went to the market to open up. There she stood at the door, almost lost. I walked past her to unlock the door. She followed me in. I went behind the counter and pretended not to watch her as she pretend to shop. We exchanged glances at the end of each aisle she walked down. She continued to browse for a few more minutes. When she finally made it to the counter she handed me fifty cents for the same candy bar.

“What's your name?” She asked.

“Dao,” I replied.

“Well I'm Lizzy,” she said.

My uncle arrived and the girl quickly turned and walked out.

“Who's the girl,” my uncle asked

“I'm not sure,” I replied.

The day continued slowly. I swept the floor and my uncle worked the register. Night crawled into the store, the sun still kissing the earth. I day dreamed of Laos. Most of the land untouched by modern hands. There were nearly no railroads or roads; dirt trails were limited. More than half the land was covered in thick luscious forests. The Mekong River was the best way to travel, but it had many falls and rapids. The raining season made it nearly impossible to travel some paths. My dreams invaded by the thoughts of war.
We found safety in the forests. We hid deep in the trees to survive the war. The Theung weren’t as familiar with the forests as we were. They often got lost while searching for our camps. This made surprise attacks and guerilla warfare easy to execute. We also use the dangers of the river to our advantage. The ravenous water is unforgiving. The correct paths throughout the seasons were well known to us because we had to navigate it year round. We temporarily dammed paths to force the opposition down the river to surprise attacks. The river turned black from the blood of our lives.

After a decade of fighting in the forests, on the plains, and in the water of our home the war came to an end. They had captured my father and the other generals. The Theung army swept the forests catching most of the camps unprepared, forcing the Loum army to eventually surrender. I was in the last camp waiting for word of my father. After the Theung came, I knew the answer. I ran into the forests while they killed any opposition.

The generals were taken to internment camps north of Vientiane. They were put in separate cells and tortured for hours at a time. They were hung by their wrists and beaten severely. For the ones that wouldn’t talk, they carved into their flesh. Slicing only the top of the skin to cause the most pain and reduce the amount of blood loss. While hanging from his wrists waiting for the next cycle of torture my father, whose hands were already dislocated from hours of stress, forced his hand through the ropes by breaking his thumb. Once untied, he released the other captive generals. As the prisoners attempted to escape the camp they were confronted with gunfire. My father received a single gunshot to the back and stumbled to the ground. Stunned, he was dragged away hastily.

A local fisherman offered the escaped prisoners a ride south through Vientiane. My father’s breathing became more rapid. Each breath less satisfying. The bullet pierced the right side of his chest ripping two holes through his right lung. In less than an hour his breathing became the enemy. The air a weight on the outside of his lungs. Unable to take in anymore air, he violently jerked, suffocating on the air that formed a cushion in his chest.

After my father’s death the generals had only one place to go. They had to bring my father home to be buried. They floated, down the Mekong through the morning mist to reach my father’s final destination. Where I was waiting for him.

The night finally came where it sets. We began closing the market when Derek entered the store. He walked around the store, his hands in his pockets. I slowly swept, making my way toward the front counter. I watched Derek’s movements, slow and awkward. Timing my movements to his, I was two aisles down. He stopped at the end of the aisle, and I continued walking closer to the front counter. Then he pulled out a handgun and ran toward the counter. My uncle froze. I quickly walked to him. Using the technique my father taught me to disarm enemy soldiers, in two moves his arm was displaced. A loud scream followed by a snap. Using that position, I hurled him to the ground. My uncle called the police, with his screams in the background.

The police came and retrieved Derek from the ground. Before I knew it, I was surrounded by police officers. I was restrained and handcuffed. My uncle tried reasoning with the officers, but they became deaf to his voice. He asked why I was being arrested; without hesitation they walked me to their patrol car. When we got to the station, they signed me in for assault and battery.

“What’s your name, kid?” the officer at the front desk asked.

“Dao Vong,” I replied.

“David?” he asked.

“No, my name is Dao,” I replied again.

He looked down and wrote David Vong.

I was put in a metal and stone cell with a small cot in the back corner.

“You’ll be lucky if that kid doesn’t file charges for breaking his arm.” An approaching officer said.

“He had a gun,” I said.

Unfazed, he walked away. I sat and waited, for what I didn’t know.
November
1973

Bombarded by white fluorescent lights, muzak, and grocery carts that jammed around her like bumper cars, Angie stood her ground, gazing at the meats displayed in their open, refrigerated case. Plastic-wrapped, bloody, raw, and cold, they nonetheless moved her stomach’s imagination, a highly-refined instinct that allowed her to walk into a kitchen, pull ingredients off shelves, and combine them into delicious meals without recipes; her body’s knowledge from centuries and millennia past, from memories of turning animals on wooden spits over open flames, of seasoning and stirring soups made from nuts, wild greens, livers, hearts, and haunches.

Angie gazed upon the meat case, but in her acid-induced state, having swallowed the tab just recently, thought about more than the possibilities of ground beef. She stood far back within her mind and saw herself slip a pound of frozen hamburger into the pocket of her parka and walk out the door so easily, as she had done several times in the last few months without getting caught. She felt herself standing at the center of her will, with enough stoppage of time that she had power to choose—ample time, which her body’s need usually denied her, in which to discern and act, one way or the other. The choice was hers; more consciously than ever before, hers to make. She sidled a few steps closer to the meat case, checking around her all the while.

* * * * *

August
1973

“Mmmm,” Jesse drew up behind Angie and nuzzled her neck with his full lips, his straight, shoulder-length, deep-brown hair brushing her skin softly. “That smells good. Can I taste?” He reached around her right arm that gripped the spoon and dipped the tip of his finger just into the pot, wincing and hamming in a grimace as the bean stew burned him. He stuck his finger into his mouth immediately and smiled at Ang. She stood relaxed, drenched in sepia and golden afternoon light before the tiny porcelain stove in their pocket kitchen, where she’d spent the last few hours combining and brewing split peas, marjoram, rosemary, sea salt, pepper, tamari—an onion, some olive oil.
was hot and humid, Illinois in August, but she hadn’t minded the sweat dripping from her forehead, rendering her hair and t-shirt sodden. Now Jesse’s appreciation made her work worth it. She dipped soup into two bowls, unfastened the tie from a jumbo bag of corn chips, and poured boiling water over peppermint tea bags. They devoured everything she’d prepared; talking, teasing, and laughing with each other—then Jesse piled the bowls into the sink with the empty pan and filled them all with water to soak.

Later, together on Jesse’s faded paisley spread, stretched over their rented apartment’s queen-sized mattress, Angie nestled within the gentle, possessive half moon that he formed, curled against her body. Lightly covered with salty, musky sweat; in sweet lassitude; content, with the night now dark around them, whippoorwill calling, and crickets chirping, Angie fell asleep on her side with Jesse tucked lightly around her back, one arm draped over hers.

* * * * *

“We have to go down to pick up our food stamps today, Jesse.”

The line stretched out the door of the utilitarian ground floor office and down the elm and oak-shaded sidewalk: hippies like Jesse; dropouts like Angie; teen mothers with babies; in that college town, mostly young, white, slumming middle-classes depending on government aid in order to eat. Ang wished she could sneak away for a cigarette; Jesse fussed when she smoked, but she still did it now and then on the sly. Mind’s emptied to counter frustration, wilting in the heat, the couple stood, finally making it to the top of the line and through the clerk’s careless and bored rudeness. Food stamps securely in Ang’s pocket, they skipped out, immediately lighthearted and energized again.

Ang and Jesse wound down Main Street—past trendy shops, the record store, Billy and Zadie’s basement deli and coffeehouse. She had been too shy to browse with confidence a few years earlier when she’d moved to town straight after high school to attend the immense University of Illinois. Oh, she’d occasionally gone into a shop and bought something—a bagel and cream cheese, a special record. Now though, she strolled anywhere with Jesse, relaxed, her fears and self-consciousness eased by her sureness of his love for her, the bond they shared, and the teasing lil and caress of his voice.

They stopped in the University’s student union, at the giant, clean restrooms just off the formal lounges with their stuffed couches and armchairs. As she regularly did these days, provided no one was looking, Angie picked up a package of toilet paper from among the extras stocked in the ladies’ restroom. They couldn’t afford to buy it, she reasoned; it was so little, and she had paid the University all those excessive fees as a student—and maybe no one would ever know. She stuffed the roll into her backpack.

Back at the apartment, they ate some cheese and made love, a cone of incense burning down and out in parallel time. Jagger in the background crooning “Wild Horses” on her stereo. Afterward, Ang showered and forced herself to leave for work, cashiering at the mini-market a few blocks from their apartment. She’d been glad to get the job a month earlier, since Jesse still hadn’t found anything. But it was mindless and tedious work and required that she stand on her feet for long hours. She made sandwiches to order for the working men and kids who came through the double front doors in waves; sliced and unwrapped fragrant, bloody haunches of roast beef and red-wax-covered rounds of cheese; signed for deliveries; kept everything priced and stocked (the most recent magazines and the penny candies); and operated both registers (one on each side of a counter-enclosed island, off limits to customers, where she stood). Usually she was the only worker. Afternoon shifts were a little better than opening at seven a.m., when she was further exhausted from getting up at dawn. The other morning she’d even dropped the entire day’s order of Dunkin’ Donuts (two full boxes) in the street, trying to bring them to the store before seven balanced on the handlebars of her bike.

She hoped Jesse wouldn’t come in as he had so often done, asking her to make him a sandwich (roast beef and cheese, heaped with mayo, lettuce and tomato, on a roll) and then not paying. He’d laugh the worry off her face in those moments, and she’d always comply with his theft, submissive—a ‘female’ response perhaps, to keep him happy with her; but inside Ang something cringed in those moments, resenting him and despising herself. They couldn’t eat like that on just the food stamps she got, though; the thirty dollars a month in stamps burned right through like dry tinder in August. And of course her paycheck all went to the rent.

Pushing herself to slice and wrap sandwiches, Ang felt disoriented, her feet and body swollen; she’d had a full day already, and the five o’clock rush wasn’t even over. It was still hot and bright outside, although soon the crowd would die out and the humidity-soaked Illinois evening would cool degree by degree, the dying sun sending long amber rays into the concrete parking lot and through the mini-market’s glass doors, covered with posters of hot dogs and sodas. Today she’d walked instead
She looked around, checked to make sure the store was empty for a brief second, and locked both register drawers, then ran back to the crusty pocket bathroom where she quickly emptied her bladder, holding her breath at the unventilated room’s smell. Returning to the still-empty front of the store, she took a few deep breaths, looked around, and then opened a large paper bag and lined it with a second. She half-filled it quickly with the supplies Jesse and she needed most, bread and peanut butter, meat and cheese from the deli, and then giddily added a few extras—a box of cereal, a jar of jelly, a package of tampons. She hid the paper bag under the counter until closing, then quickly raised her face and smiled at a customer pushing through the doors.

A few days later, Angie stood kneading bread in their kitchen as Jesse worked on his guitar riffs, seated on their mattress in the bedroom just beyond her sight. She stretched the sticky whole wheat dough, reveling in its familiar yeasty fragrance and working it just a little longer. She loved making bread by hand; it gave her quiet time when she could empty her mind of tasks, and the loaves she created came out scrumptious, brown and buttery. She and Jesse could feast on one for a week—in other days, she’d have easily have eaten a whole loaf in one sitting with plenty of butter, but with Jesse she held back, not just to save money, but shamed by his example of moderation, strengthened by her desire to stay slim and look attractive to him, and more than either of those reasons, because her passion, since girlhood often satisfied by indulgence in rich food, now found greater satisfaction in physical and emotional intimacy with Jesse.

She thought a little about the remainder of the meal she’d planned, based on food pilfered from the market. She could cut up and bake that winter squash with the bread. No, she’d rather eat the squash for breakfast tomorrow. Angie oiled the cream-colored dough, flecked with wheat chaff, and placed it into her bread pan to rise one last time. She rinsed and dried her hands, and walked to the bedroom door, where she stood watching Jesse’s fingers moving in sure sixty-fourth notes on the strings of his unplugged Stratocaster, the sounds just audible, his face quiet and solemn, lips parted in deep focus and passion. Ang’s soul rushed out to him through her heart, and she walked over and sat at his feet.

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“Jesse, they have new management at the store, and they’re going to make us take lie detector tests to find out why they’ve been losing inventory.”

“You’ll find something else. Just quit.”

She knew he was right, and so she did quit, and fortunately, the suited men who had replaced Hillary (the kindly, myopic manager who had overlooked Ang’s months of theft) accepted her resignation, no questions asked. She knew she was lucky not to be prosecuted, but now they were both out of work again.

The mornings were frosty, ridged ice yellow and thick on Urbana’s concrete sidewalks and on the weather-splintered wooden stairs that led to Jesse and Ang’s three-room aerie. She stayed home these days, just lying in bed together, or working on preparing astrology charts for their friends—a shared hobby that took them hours, since they calculated the longitudes, latitudes, and the planetary and house degrees by hand in those days before computer-based astrology programs. After erecting the charts, Ang and Jesse tailored interpretations to each person, plagiarizing from the astrology manuals to be sure, but adding insights of their own. They gave the charts and interpretations to family and friends as an expression of caring and a spiritual service, and didn’t think to charge for them.

Jesse’s mom sent them a check that had paid their rent, but there was next-to-nothing left over. Jesse continued to interview sporadically, but nothing bit. He would just pull on his deep purple jeans and boots and big fuzzy jacket—so wild and different from the redneck Illinois farm boys of Ang’s girlhood, but in cosmopolitan Urbana, home of tens of thousands of diverse adult students, he was just another hippie kid. He’d
march out to another interview he’d circled in the paper—and come home, and wait.

Then Ang saw a notice on the wall at the health food market and vegetarian restaurant at which Jesse and she sometimes shopped, even though she felt that she didn’t measure up to the cool of the free-spirited, longhaired and bearded, peacock-garbed young people who worked there—if what they did could be work. They seemed instead like a bunch of carefree inhabitants of an enchanted kingdom of color, play, and the senses—effortlessly preparing raisin walnut muffins, brown rice and veggies, and carob shakes; handwriting the day’s menu on the wall in colored chalk; walking around relaxed instead of hassled. Soft voiced and charming, to Ang those hippie workers seemingly not under the harsh mechanism of the working world that ran supermarkets and gas stations, but in a glamorous paradise, a playhouse where work was somehow easier. Some of the people who worked at the store lived together in a commune outside of town, others were musicians Jesse idolized, who played in a space-jazz band to which Jesse and Ang went to listen and dance at the University union or a local bar—the band with which Jesse should be playing guitar, if he weren’t so shy.

Ang asked at the register for an application and filled it out on the spot, and within the week was chopping olives and onions at a thick, wooden back table in the restaurant, for “Mexican Night.” Working in the kitchen ended up being perhaps even more tiring than in the mini-market, though. Ang toiled alongside the healthy, attractive, friendly young men and women, often stoned on pot they all smoked on breaks out back, flirting and tripping over each other in the kitchen’s hot, close quarters, while veggie sandwiches grilled, huge pots of soups (equal parts recipe and imagination) simmered on the back burners, and somehow service was rendered to diners from the town and money made.

By ten o’clock they had closed the restaurant and cleaned the kitchen. Soaked in dirty dishwater down through her sneakers, and flushed and relaxed from a long day’s work, Ang leaned against a peeling wooden wall, smoking, out in the cool air on the restaurant’s back porch with Tod, a tall blond co-worker whom she found glamorous and temptingly attractive, dangerously attractive, like a solar flare—something to watch from miles away, preferably with protective lenses, but not to touch.

She felt bloated and dull after nibbling on food all night, but here nibbling on food during work without paying seemed the usual thing, was not penalized—her physical discomfort perhaps being her own personal lesson in moderation. The cigarette didn’t help dispel her fog though; it just made her realize how tired she was. Jesse would be by soon, and she crushed the smoke out under her sneaker, and went in to finish up. She wished he was working here too, but he hadn’t wanted to apply, maybe wanting something connected to music, or that paid more—she was afraid to ask him why, and maybe to make him angry by pushing him to open up to her, and worse, nagging him to get work, like a man—and she loathed herself for her fear.

* * * * *

November

1973

Blythe, a fellow chopper at the restaurant, had sold Ang two tabs of mescaline for five dollars apiece—a huge cost to Ang, but worth it, and at least now she was making some money. She was always afraid before tripping, but it was her favorite high anyway, making her feel ruthless, indomitable, able to face things she normally feared and just walk right through the fear. So once again she dissolved the paper on her tongue like a communion wafer and waited for the world to change, for the drug-induced urgency that pressed and expanded under her skin. She followed her feet down the blocks, the leafless black trees wet, their branches swaying and straining in the strong wind, the gray-yellow sky around her building up to a storm, although not yet snow.

She found herself in front of the Safeway, and went in, walked through the aisles, past boxed foods and the vegetables, back to the meat counter. Lifted a pound of ground round in her hand, heart hammering, a million miles of space around her, time slowed. She weighed the cold beef, looked at its red flesh and white fat in regular rows, and knew the sure strength it would provide once eaten. She knew, too, that she didn’t want to take it, to steal anymore, feel a thief’s guilt—wanted to be able to live on what she made, what she and Jesse could make, together—for it to be enough. For their love to fill, satisfy, and sustain them both. Ang put the package down, stood still a moment to be sure, and then walked out of the store.
The first time I rode a bicycle backwards I was very skeptical of the fact that it could actually be done. My Papa (Charlie) was teaching me and helping me even though he himself could no longer ride in this fashion. The bicycle was grey and about medium height equipped with pedal brakes. My first try I grasped the bicycle handles in the reverse position and started off down the driveway. I immediately gained speed due to the slope of the driveway in turn causing me to turn to my left and lose control falling on my side. My Papa encouraged me to keep trying saying that I was a natural and just needed a little practice. I got up and tried again; this time I went a little further before I lost my balance and fell. I soon learned how to stop myself just before I was going to fall. An hour later I had scrapes down my left side and was a little sore, but had mastered the technique just well enough, to ride down the driveway in a straight line. That was enough for that Saturday evening, and my Papa said that I did a great job and was a very fast learner.

The next evening I started off just where I left off only I still crashed on my side at the end of the driveway. But after a few tries I learned how to turn the bicycle without crashing. The more and more I practiced, the better and better I got. An hour later I was a pro, showing all of the neighbors how good I was. My Papa was so proud of me. That was my first experience riding a bicycle backwards.
June 18, 1981 I came into the world, curious, active, and full of energy. Twenty-seven years later, I found myself complacent, frustrated, and disappointed. Over the years, I have gotten very content with staying in my comfort zone. I rarely tried anything new. If we went out to a restaurant, I would even order the same entree each visit. Remembering what my old boss used to tell me, “If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten,” I decided that I must try something new. June 18, 2008, I let go and jumped out of a perfectly good airplane.

As the plane ascended to 5,000 feet, I thought, “No problem, this is a piece of cake!” The plane continued to 7,000 feet and my tandem instructor yelled, “We are half way up!” Both reality and panic set in. What if the parachute didn’t open? I took a deep breath and thought of the thousands of people who skydive every day and tried to relax. The people piled out of the plane two by two until it was our turn. I focused on the directions given at the air center prior to leaving the ground. Hands crossed in front of my chest, knees bent, and feet up. Skydiving was a major turning point in my life. It reminded me to live in the moment, something I had forgotten long ago. After skydiving for the first time, I can relate to the popular saying “Only skydivers know why the birds sing.”

The First Time

The first time I ever saw a birth I remember that the circumstances surrounding it were sad, but that the actual process of it was beautiful. I knew then, that I had to pursue a career that got to work with those miraculous beings called babies. Seeing it for the first time was like someone whispering to me that this was the big secret that mankind has always wondered about, when it comes to what is important in life. I found something that really called to me and now I am chasing that profession to the end. Nothing to me is more beautiful and I am so excited and enthusiastic about going to school to become a midwife.

When I worked in Labor and Delivery as a nursing assistant, I loved the experience that I got to have with this new-found love of mine. I loved bathing the new children for the first time and noting the different reactions to such a usually unpleasant wake up call after hours of struggling to be born. I saw how each reaction was different and how even as soon as we breathe life we are truly who will be recognized to be when we grow older. I could only marvel at the complete complexity of it all. I cannot wait to have my turn at such a wonderful job as helping those who will live enter this world. To me, there is no greater honor than a job such as that.
The First Time

The first time I saw my parents wrapping gifts for Christmas, I saw big Toys-R-Us bags. I knew they were for us because the bags had toys in them. My parents forgot to close and lock their door. Their door was cracked open. That was the day I stopped believing in Santa Claus. I was about six or seven years old. After that, my parents didn’t know I saw them wrapping gifts. When Christmas day came, they both said, “Look at all the gifts Santa gave you!” My brothers and I had to play it off real good so they wouldn’t know we saw them. Since that day, I didn’t believe in Santa Claus, but I still love Christmas.

Back to School

The first time I stepped back into the classroom, seventeen years after having graduated from high school, was an exciting, yet frightening experience. I was excited about returning to school to further my education in an effort to advance my career, as well as to establish new relationships and friendships. So excited that I even did back to school shopping!

Then, the day arrived. Suddenly, I became anxious and began to wonder if I had made the right choice. “My children still need me to be home with them,” “I won’t fit in with the younger crowd that tends to be the majority of the population on a college campus,” “I work twelve hours a day, I won’t have time for work, family and school,” were all thoughts and excuses that flashed through my mind as I contemplated the decision I had made. I decided that my fears were unfounded and realized that I would never know if going back to school was the right choice, until I tried. I put my best foot forward, walked into that classroom, looked around the room, sat down, and began the journey that would lead me to earn my Master Teacher’s Permit.

It took some time to adjust to the demands of my new schedule, but I did it. I learned that my fear of not fitting in with the younger crowd was silly, as there are a lot of men and women, my age and older, who are in school for a wide variety of reasons, and I have developed many new relationships and friendships with people I have met on campus. Most importantly, I know now that going back to school was also the right choice for my children, as it has set an example for them. They now realize that going to school sooner, rather than later, in life is probably the easier route, yet they also learned that it is never too late to go to college should they not choose to do so after high school graduation.

I am happy and proud that I was given and seized the opportunity to return to school, and I encourage everyone contemplating returning to school after an extended leave to take that first step and do it. The rewards are immeasurable and the feeling of accomplishment is amazing!
the first time
The FIRST TIME

The first time I fell in love there were no beautiful, open skies with the promise of more sunny, happy days. For me, and for others, no doubt, it was a dark prison where the sunny days were only viewed through a tiny, barred window. Shackled and barefoot, I tried to live my life as I only knew how. But, I didn’t know how. Not anymore. My heart had been painted with a green sickness, and a merciless hand slowly squeezed the life and joy out of me, day by day, until there was no more me. It was just me, with an ever-changing cloud of you. Not a sun, a cloud. The weather never got better, only worse. You were not mean. In all honesty, you might have felt the same way, every day; I could have very well been a cloud suspended over your head, swirling in your thoughts, dampening your mood. Maybe we should have told each other how we felt, and we could have had sunny days with hopes of more. But no, my days will be pushed into depression by your constant presence. We will run into each other in the hall, or at a bar, or at school. That would be the highlight of my day. Anxious, stumbling, and red-faced though I be, and berating myself for my embarrassing behavior, that will still be the highlight of my day. I live for the next moment that our paths accidentally merge. For the nights we are in the same room together and I pretend not to notice you. I think I hate you…. I can’t get you out of my head. This sick feeling is not what love should be, is it? Let me out of this prison and back to my sunny days of free-spiritedness with no clouds to squeeze the very soul from my body. The only way to free myself is to stop loving you, and so far, that isn’t looking too good…. 
The First Time

The first time I lost a contest of wits with a teacher was in my tenth grade year at Sacramento High School. I was doing what every high school girl does multiple times a day in every class of every five-day school week – I was chatting when I should have been focused on my history teacher Mrs. Pongratz.

Mrs. Pongratz was a large woman who did all of her teaching from one spot, one seated spot, in the front of the classroom. “Jessica!” she snapped at me.

The homegirls in class move into position, halfway and half-assed at attention. I am stunned and fuming in the same instant. Mrs. Pongratz and I glare at each other. I don’t flinch. “Come here!” she orders. I don’t move. I stare into her black eyes. She’s trying to make me look like a punk. “Come here!” she demands again.

Slowly, like thick chile sauce oozing from a jar, I move out of my seat and take eight forced steps to the front of the room, in front of Mrs. Pongratz. She orders me closer. She says something to me, a warning.

Exactly what she said I don’t recall. What she said was not important. In that moment she had me. Before I had even turned around to go back to my seat, she had broken me.

The first time I got my hair cut I was four years old. The reason why I remember this so well is it was right after I burnt most of my hair off. Being the youngest in the family, my job on cleaning day was to sit in the living room and stay out of everyone’s way. I was quite good at my job, most of the time. On this particular day I was bored watching cartoons and started looking around for something to do. Earlier, my mom had thrown several old lighters in a small trashcan next to my chair. I reached down and pulled one out. At first I just opened and closed the lid. After doing that for a few minutes I started turning the wheel. After a number of turns I was surprised to see a flame. I stared at it then slowly turned the lighter upside down to see what would happen. I found out. The flame flared up and caught a long curl lying over the front of my shoulder.

When I realized my hair was on fire I jumped up and started running. I thought my mom was in the kitchen so that is where I ran, yelling for her the entire time. When I got to the kitchen and saw no one was in there, I turned and started to run back to the living room. By now my entire head was in flames. Hearing me yell, my mom ran from her bedroom and caught up to me in our dining room. She grabbed a wet dish towel off the back of one of the chairs at the table and smothered the flames. It was the only time my sisters didn’t get in trouble for leaving a wet towel on the back of one of the chairs.

I was very lucky that day. The doctor said by running I kept my long hair away from my face. The only burns I suffered were on my ears and along the back of my neck at the edge of the hairline. The doctor gave Mom a cream to put on the burns.

The next day I sat in the chair at the beauty shop and cried as what little was left of my hair was cut off. As my hair started growing out I had to return to the beauty shop and get it cut off again. Once again I cried. I was beginning to think that I was being punished for playing with the lighter and I would never be allowed to have hair again. When my mom saw how upset I was she asked me what was wrong. After I told her why I was crying she explained that the burnt dead hair had to be cut off so my hair would be healthy again. For weeks I wore a scarf to cover my strange looking haircut.

From that day on, until I was old enough to help on cleaning day, I faithfully did my job. I sat in a chair in the living room and watched cartoons. I wouldn’t move until my mom came in and told me my work was finished. To this day I flinch whenever I think there is fire anywhere near my head. It was a lesson I learned well and will never forget.
The First Time

I’ve usually felt that if a person brags about how good they are at something they are destined to fail at least once in the near future. I don’t know why I think this way. Maybe it came from watching friends say how good they were at shooting baskets or running a mile under five minutes, and when they can’t do it while showing off, their friends all laugh at them. I personally have experienced such embarrassment and it made me cautious of how I talk about myself. However, the irrevocable truth is that if you do something well it is a skill. A talent with which you can say without reserve, “I am good at it.” So it is without reserve that I can say that I am a pretty smart kid. Yet, I didn’t always think so. It all started back when I got my first straight-A report card.

School was fun from kindergarten to the second grade. In those classes grades really didn’t hold weight. They were mostly full of projects and crafts focused on basic skills that were intended to help us move up to the next grade. Then came third grade. It was a whole new world. My teacher, Mr. Ashworth, was a tall thin man with slick black hair and a beatnik goatee. He treated us like we were really responsible to get all of our work done on time and be ready for tests. It was a change of gear for me. I thought I knew what school was like up until now. The real shock came when Mr. Ashworth announced our first report card day. He set up a partition in front of his desk so that our scores were hidden. Then he’d call us up one at a time to show us our grades. Without a sound he’d show a student the score, nod, and the student would go back and do whatever he or she was doing. I remember when it was my turn. He called me up and I walked behind the partition to his desk. He unfolded a small piece of paper with a bluish side on the bottom and an upper side with writing. The writing side had a line of straight A’s next to the words Math, Science, Social Studies, and others.

I really didn’t know what it meant at first. I knew it had to be good, so I felt I had done okay. The ceremonial nod from my teacher gave me no idea how great it was. I told my mom later on and she was so excited. She told me what straight A’s meant and I felt excited. I wanted to get more and never get less. It galvanized me into a young sense of high self expectation. I found a desire to focus on always achieving my best.
Reflections: The First Time

To read a book for the first time is to make the acquaintance of a new friend; to read it a second time is to meet an old one.

— Selwyn Champion

... to paint with oil paints for the first time ... is like trying to make something exquisitely accurate and microscopically clear out of mud pies with boxing gloves on.

— Brenda Ueland

Experience is a hard teacher. She gives the test first, the lesson afterwards.

— Anonymous

The first time I see a jogger smiling, I'll consider it.

— Joan Rivers

(On debut at Carnegie Hall) It was like the first time I ever made love. Terrifying to contemplate, wonderful when it happened and all too brief. And something I'll never forget.

— Gamble Rogers

Do not say, “It is morning,” and dismiss it with a name of yesterday. See it for the first time as a new-born child that has no name.

— Rabindranath Tagore

Minor things can become moments of great revelation when encountered for the first time.

— Margot Fonteyn

People think it's a terrible tragedy when somebody has Alzheimer's. But in my mother's case, it's different. My mother has been unhappy all her life...For the first time in her life, she's happy.”

— Amy Tan

For the first time, the weird and the stupid and the coarse are becoming our cultural norms, even our cultural ideal.

— Carl Bernstein
Each human is like a new symphony heard for the first time. It can’t be understood or fully appreciated until after the final cadence.

—Unknown

The advantage of a bad memory is that one enjoys several times the same good things for the first time.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

No one can possibly know what is about to happen: it is happening, each time, for the first time, for the only time.

—James Arthur Baldwin

We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started... and know the place for the first time.

—T.S. Eliot

The decision to kiss for the first time is most crucial in any love story. It changes the relationship of two people much more strongly than even the final surrender; because the kiss already has within that surrender.

—Emil Ludwig

Americans who travel abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that, despite all the progress that has been made in the last thirty years, many foreign people still speak in foreign languages.”

—Dave Barry
**Jon Albaugh** is a storyteller. He tells stories through his creative non-fiction, photography, and his life. He is a film major at Cosumnes River College, and he will be transferring to a four-year university in the fall. His most recent accomplishment is winning the screenplay competition at the Hawaii Writers’ Conference for a story he crafted at CRC.

**Viola Allo** grew up in the Republic of Cameroon. For many years, she enjoyed studying the social sciences. The more she learned, the more she realized she missed her childhood home. She began writing about Cameroon and discovered her passion for poetry. She dreams of becoming a Cameroonian poet.

**Ryan Bodas** was born in 1984 in California, and is currently a student at CRC. Between drawing and painting, he dabbles in music and writing as other creative interests. He is classified somewhere between tree-hugging hippy and artsy beatnik, and enjoys stealing spending time with his cat, Yonk, who enjoys Ryan’s paintbrushes. Despite having enrolled in college later than most, he is happy to take life one step at a time.

**Al’zaia Callow-Bottini** is from Seattle, WA and has worked in the health care field for six years. Currently a student at Cosumnes River College, she will transfer to California State University-Sacramento to obtain a BSN and continue on to obtain a Master’s Degree as a Nurse-Midwife.


**Victoria Dalkey**’s poems have appeared in *Abrazas, Bakunin, Cimarron Review, Napa Review, Tale Review* and other small press publications. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Twenty Nine Poems* (Red Wing Press) and *In the Absence of Silver* (Rattlesnake Press). Since 1976 she has written reviews, interviews and feature articles about art for *The Sacramento Bee*.

**Crystal Devlin** is an ECE major at Cosumnes River College. She currently holds a Master Teacher Permit, which she earned through her studies at CRC, and is working towards earning an Associate’s Degree in Early Childhood Education. Crystal is the proud mother of three children, has been a Family Childcare Provider for twelve years, and is an ECE Mentor Teacher for the Los Rios Community College District.

**Quinton Duval** has been writing and teaching in the Sacramento area for thirty years. His book, *Joe’s Rain*, came out in 2005 (Cedar House Books) and his chapbook, *Among Summer Pines* (Rattlesnake Press), came out last spring. His work has been published in many magazines including *Ohio Review Gettysburg Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*. He is the publisher of Red Wing Press.

**Brandon Lawrence Ellis** has a Bachelor’s degree in English from Humboldt State University. He played basketball in college, but has since resigned himself to the quieter pursuit of mediocrity in golf. He lives in Sacramento in a house with his two lovely, precious dogs who love him but drive him crazy.

**Joseph Finkleman** has both a BFA and a MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. He has been exhibiting his art for forty years. Additionally he and his wife Susan Finkleman perform two-voice poetry throughout Northern California. They have a chapbook published by Rattlesnake Press and two CDs of their performed work.

**Catherine French** has published poems in many journals, including *The Nation, Gettysburg Review, Zyzzyva, Poetry Northwest* and others. Her book of poems, *Sideshow*, is available from University of Nevada Press. She lives in Sacramento.

**On September 22, 1989, Jessica Fuentes** was born in Covina, California. In her spare time, she enjoys shopping and spending time with her friends and family. In school, writing is her favorite subject. This is her first semester at CRC and the first time her work has been published.
Trevor Gossett is twenty-two years old and currently resides on a ranch in Herald. He works as a horseshoer in the Sacramento region. His hobbies are welding, steer wrestling, fishing and bull fighting. His favorite band is Van Halen and his favorite author is Louis Lamour.

Bob Jensen’s photography has been a creative avocation for forty years. He is drawn to a wide range of subjects, with an enduring interest in black-and-white images. His photographs have been exhibited locally at venues including the Sacramento Fine Arts Center and California State University, to name a few.

Frank Dixon Graham is the editor of Poetry Now and a board member of the Sacramento Poetry Center. He has assisted in judging poetry contests and is also published in: Harvard University Scriptorium, Hawaii Pacific Review Brevities, Syncopated City, Susurrus, Because People Matter, Rattlesnake Review, Medusa’s Kitchen, Convergence and Poets Against War online, among others and has studied under Richard Moore and Daniel Bosch.

Beth Le is a photo enthusiast with a great passion for photography. She loves the individualistic aspect of photography and purely appreciates the fine details and beauty around her. Beth is a Biological Sciences major who loves science as well as art.

Sarah Harden is a recreational photographer who enjoys documenting time spent with her wife and son on film. This is her first published piece of art. Her poetry has been featured in the Anthology of Poetry by Young Americans. She dedicates this work to the memory of her mother, Carol Harden.

Vickie Le immigrated to the States at the age of three. She came from a fairly big and poverty-stricken family. She started working at a young age to help with her family. She is currently attending Cosumnes River College part-time, working full-time at a computer firm, and trying to juggle family life all at the same time.

John Hesselbein has studied literature at both American River College and Cosumnes River College and considers himself a student of life. When not writing, he enjoys reading to his daughter Isabella, who is an inspiration without equal. He is also a fanatic believer in the power of language.

Felicia R. Martinez was born in San Diego and has since migrated all over California. Her writing has appeared in two anthologies—Cantos al Sexto Sol and The Poetry of Peace—as well as in literary reviews such as Rio Grande Review and BorderSenses magazine. Felicia holds an MFA from Mills College in Oakland, CA. She resides on-line at www.rockeras-sin-fronteras.blogspot.com.

Chanthalee V. Insixiengmay was the child of two immigrants. His mother was from the dry deserts of Mexico and his father from the deep forests of Laos. Left to be raised by his mother at a young age, he often day imagined the life his father had. He progressed his writing style under the tutelage of Professor Jamie Nye and Heather Hutcheson of Cosumnes River College.

Theresa McCourt is a transplant from Manchester, England. In 2008, she won the Albert and Elaine Borchard Award from the creative writing program of UC Davis (though she’s not a student of UC). Her work has appeared in many journals, and she has two poems in the upcoming anthology from Squaw Valley Review.
**Marlo McClurg** was raised in Montana and educated at a community college and the University of Montana before moving to San Francisco. She earned her MA in TESOL from San Francisco State University and has been teaching ESL since 1974. She photographs to capture moments in the evanescence of life.

**J.V. Monasterio** is a returning student and English major at CRC. She has found her time at CRC, especially time spent in Literature and Creative Writing classes, is providing a creative outlet and life balance she had forgotten she missed.

**Dan Morin** was born in Santa Rosa California in 1987 and moved to Hillsboro Oregon when he was four where he lived until his high school graduation in 2006, then relocated to Sacramento to attend College.

**Harrison Murray** was born in Sacramento and is the second of five boys, raised by a single mom. Thanks to the support of his family he received straight As till graduating high school in 2005, and his other honors including having a poem published at age twelve in the Anthology of Poetry by Young Americans: 2000 Edition.

**Destiny Robbins** is a full time student, and as of February a full time mother to her son Terrance. Destiny began writing in the sixth grade. Poetry has strengthened her during times of adversity, so she uses it to inspire others.

**Miranda Saake** is a Professor of Composition and Literature at Cosumnes River College. She also teaches writing to middle school and high school children, conducting summer seminars out of her home for fledgling poets and storytellers. In between, she takes photographs and writes poems.

**Nita Scott** has returned to college, after a twenty-six year break, and is working towards a degree in accounting. This is her second semester at Cosumnes River College. Nita is married, has three grown children, and five grandchildren. She enjoys wood crafting, camping and reading. Her goals are to earn her accounting degree before she is too old to put it to good use and to publish a book.

**J.V. Monasterio** is a returning student and English major at CRC. She has found her time at CRC, especially time spent in Literature and Creative Writing classes, is providing a creative outlet and life balance she had forgotten she missed.

Formally an instructor in the Behavioral Sciences at American River College, **Jeanine Stevens** also taught Women’s Studies and Anthropology at Cosumnes River College. She now spends her time Balkan folk dancing and practicing Tai Chi when she isn’t writing. Her poems have appeared in The Sacramento Anthology—100 Poems, Talk Review, Poetry Now, and Sacramento News and Review, among others.

**Ashley Underwood** is currently studying to be an English major at Cosumnes River College and plans on transferring to UC Davis. She enjoys photography, writing, but above all, reading. Her hope is to make her way through the English world and hopefully land in the field of journalism or novel-writing.

**Kelly Webb** is a student at Cosumnes River College. Her artistic mediums of preference are photography and writing. Currently she lives in Sacramento. She recommends that any tattoos you might obtain NOT be administered by a significant other.