

The Traveler
Literary Arts

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THE Traveler is a student creative arts magazine produced annually by the English and Art Departments of Glendale Community College. *Those responsible for this publication believe in artistic freedom of expression. Therefore, we have not censored the contents of The Traveler. We realize, however, it is important that the readers of The Traveler be aware that it contains some content of an adult nature.*



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Fiction

*“His head feels like
it has detached,
floating off like a
child’s lost balloon.”*

The lawn is immaculate, but he continues to mow it regardless. Back and forth, back and forth, he gets lost in the routine. The grass is so short that the blades of the lawnmower aren’t even cutting anything anymore. He pauses and scans over the garden, the empty driveway, down the block. His mind races through several lines of thought, but he can’t concentrate on any one of them for very long. Lost in his thoughts, his movements are strange, invisible strings attached to his limbs make awkward, jerky motions. His head feels like it has detached, floating off like a child’s lost balloon.

She didn’t come home last night. It’s not the first time, not by a long shot, but it seems to happen with greater frequency now, and she’s stopped offering excuses for her disappearances. No more talk of late nights at the office, or suddenly being whisked away to take care of a problem in this or that location. However unbelievable the excuse was, he would take it, and, somehow, things would be okay. None of that now, though. Excuses denote a feeling of guilt. Their absence means that she doesn’t care anymore.

These days, the car rolls into the driveway and she sits inside it for long stretches. Eventually, she gets out, slams the door, bursts into the house, slams the door, stomps up the stairs, goes in the bathroom, slams the door, and turns on the shower. He follows her through the house with his head bowed, like a scolded puppy, even into the bathroom, which she never locks. He stands there and watches the water run over her body, the steam fill the room, but he always leaves and closes the door behind him just before she gets out. He sits on the edge of the bed, waits for her to come out, watches her move across the room to their closet where she puts herself together. She walks past him, never making eye contact, walks back through the house, gets in her car, and drives off.

Today, though, it’s mid afternoon, and she still hasn’t come home. Tonight they have friends coming over for dinner. Hell, he thinks, she has friends coming over for dinner. His role in these events is to get the house ready, make the food, and sit next to her while she regales her friends with tales of his shortcomings and failures.

A kid on a bicycle rolls across the lawn leaving a deep gash in the otherwise pristine front yard. The man walks over to the side of the house, turns the knob that controls the sprinkler, goes to the center of the yard, sits down, and lets the water wash over him. From his point of view, the light captures the drops of water and fills them with color. It is through this beaded curtain that he sees his wife finally pull into the driveway and get out of her car.

"Jesus, Neil," she says in a cold, detached tone as she passes him to go in the house. On her way she pauses only to turn off the water. He continues to sit there, drenched, remembering a time when her seeing him wet on the lawn would have ended differently. As he stares into what seems like someone else's life, the sun begins to dry him out, and he feels a slight burn on his cheek. He rises slowly and walks over to her car, the wrong sort of smile tugging at a corner of his mouth. Jangling the keys in his pocket, an idea pushes its way to the fore and begs for attention, but he pushes it back, the smile fades, and he turns back to the house.

Inside he hears the sound of the shower, but he can't bring himself to climb the stairs this time. Instead he goes to the laundry room, gets the vacuum and busies himself cleaning up the house for the evening's guests. He prepares the dinner, selects several bottles of wine, sets out appetizers, sets the dining room table, puts on background music, and passes his wife as he goes up the stairs to change. There is nothing between them; not a word, not a glance. He goes into the bedroom, changes into a pair of clean jeans and a new shirt. He is down the stairs and in place to answer the door for the first guest that arrives.

"Neil! Thanks for having us over tonight!" Neil looks through this person, not at all convinced that he's ever even met this person before tonight. Without a word, he brushes roughly past the guest and walks out the door.

On the street he moves on instinct. This carries him down one street, across another, around a corner, and down, down, down. He watches with interest as his hand reaches to open the door of a bar, one that he hasn't been to in nearly nine years. He feels his body move up to the bar and up onto a stool, and he rests his arms on the sticky varnish.

A voice that sounds very much like his own orders a shot of whiskey, then another one, then a beer, then he loses track.

"His role in these events is to get the house ready, make the food, and sit next to her while she regales her friends with tales of his shortcomings and failures."

A woman takes the stool next to his. Though she came in alone, she is clearly dressed with designs on leaving in a different fashion. Their eyes meet, and he thinks of more than a few things that they might do, but he is surprised by the same hand that pushed open the door. It's the hand that wears his wedding ring. It moves up between them, momentarily obscuring his line of vision, and then moves back down to his drink. She gives his thigh the briefest of pats, looks past him, further down the bar, spies a suitable candidate, and relocates. He continues to drink, comparing and contrasting his moral compass with that of his wife.

He turns to watch the woman who moved further down the bar and the man that she chose to sit next to, and thinks back to a simpler time. He frustrates himself doing this, because he can't put his finger on one. Time does nothing better than pass for him, and the drinks continue to flow. He doesn't know when or how he ends up back on their lawn. All he knows is that he is knocking on the front

window, shouting, unzipping his pants, and then pissing in front of all his wife's guests. He is absolutely certain that one of the men sitting in his living room is his wife's lover, and he imagines himself peeing on the guy's face.

All spent, he tucks himself back in and zips up. The act throws off his balance, and he falls backwards onto the grass. He coughs in surprise, turns his head, and throws up. The lids of his eyes fall shut, and he blesses the darkness.

He is aware of voices passing over him, though he cannot make out any of what is being said. He closes his eyes and does his best to block out the waves of sound crashing against the shores of his consciousness. There is an ache at the back of his head that he knows will only take root and flourish with the passage of time.

Eventually, the last of the voices passes over him, and, after a brief pause, is replaced by a dark, concerted silence.

“He closes his eyes and does his best to block out the waves of sound crashing against the shores of his consciousness.”

He can feel the presence of his wife, though he refuses to open his eyes and look at her. Why subject himself to the look he knows she'll wear a mixture of pity, disgust, exasperation, and distance? He's seen the look before, although on other occasions he has felt less deserving of it. The presence moves closer and closer, he imagines her bending, then crouching over him. Then he feels the weight of her on his chest. A rush of air escapes his lungs, his eyes fly open. He chokes down the bile rising in his throat. She smirks briefly, as fleeting a display of emotion as anyone could manage, but he catches it and knows that she derives some small amount of pleasure from his discomfort.

She sighs, slaps her thighs, and raises herself slowly off of him. His eyes close again, and he concentrates on breathing slowly in and out of his nostrils. She kicks at something on the lawn.

"Jesus, Neil," she says for the second time that day. He can't help but notice it's the most he's heard her say his name in recent memory.

She kicks again at the grass, most likely nothing more than something to fill the silence. She turns away, kneels down, pulls at a blade of grass, rises, and twirls it between her fingers. Finally, she turns back to him, flicks the blade in the direction of his face, kicks at the grass again, and then him. She kicks him again, then again, and then loses conviction. She wanders off into the house and slams the door.

"He can feel the presence of his wife, though he refuses to open his eyes and look at her."

Neil's eyes open once more, and he looks *up* into the night sky.

Fiction 2nd Place

Wearing Memories

by Ryan Barrette

10
Fiction

October 16, 2008 — 9:14 am

I'm waiting for the light to shift green. You may proceed forward, now. That's what I think it'll tell me but I'm hesitating. I'm starting to feel conflicted. I wish I knew when to proceed forward sooner. My knuckles grip the wheel as I recall words, 'You're such a pussy'.

I'm shoving pieces of memory into the pocket of my ratty jeans. Jeans in need of washing, of cleansing, of sewing frayed knees back together from falling. Jeans in need of snipping dragging threads, threads from struggling feet. They're dragging the pieces of my soul like heavy steel chains. I need to bleach out the stains and patch over the burnt cigarette holes.

Sometimes when I look in the mirror I think this is how I should see myself. And sometimes when I look into the mirror, I don't want to let myself go. I don't want to put myself on tumble dry low, or spin wash delicate. I don't know what spin cycle would make the pain go away.

I don't know which washer and dryer can handle me. I don't know if I deserve such a luxury. Maybe someone needs to hand wash me in wooden pails full to the rim with good old fashion spring water—pure with every bubble. I don't know if I need to be hung out to dry, or twisted like licorice till every drop of water melts the tears away.

I don't know how much longer I should wear memories.

August 5, 2008 — 3:18 pm

"I wonder if I detached myself from gravity would I fall into the sky?" Isaac's voice faded and his eyes squinted towards the sun. He already sounded detached from reality.

"If you smoke anymore of that shit, you're going to think you are." I'm fighting with a Led Zeppelin patch that won't lay flat on my denim jacket.

"You little fucker!" The coiled smoke filled my nostrils.

"Chillax." He grabbed my shoulder and pressed his fingers through my tense muscle with affection. I allowed the patch be victorious this time. He handed over his joint.

"I can't smoke that shit." I pushed his arm away, reluctantly. He shrugged. "Pity."

"They're dragging the pieces of my soul like heavy steel chains."

"Fuck."

I pulled the joint away from his lips and pressed it against my own. I thought I was man enough to handle it this time. Just like I thought I was last time.

I lassoed my breath around the toxins and smoke. It raced over my taste buds and snaked into the cave of my lungs. I tried to keep it there like I'm covering the blowhole of a whale. My eyes watered up first and he's holding back his laughter like he always did.

My stomach twisted itself into a knot. My diaphragm punched into my lungs. The smoke tripped over my lips and the tears shook out my eyes. I felt like I swallowed wasabi, and when I stand, all the while coughing and tried keep my lungs intact, I heard him laughing.

I'm started to think he does it on purpose. He doesn't forget what his poison does to me. I tell myself this is the last time But I know that's a lie. He says, "You're such a pussy!" He's holding his gut from laughter, and I'm struggling to hold mine in place.

I struggled into the Diner nearby, our typical hang out spot. The aroma of beef swirled with grease from the fryer in the back. I heard the faint clanging of plates and glass mugs and somewhere in there was Isaac's laughter. What the hell was in that smoke? I never understood why he had to experiment with different chemicals like he was going to be some superstar of a drug dealer one day. I had become exhibit A for his trial run.

Ten minutes later, I'm puking out my life. I think this time, for sure, I'll die here with my face halfway down the toilet of a burger place in the middle of nowhere.

Flush. I watch my misery spiral away. My arm rests on the toilet lid for a moment and I feel my face struggling to cool down. I press my palm against the stall for support. I feel something crusty. I'm hoping for a graffiti engraving and not an unfortunate surprise. When I squint my eyes to clarity, I look at my hand and then the stall.

At first I'm relieved to see words. Until I feel like I'm being attacked by a different kind of poison. A poison that I can't inject. I can't inhale. I can't digest. I can't regurgitate it back up. I can't even shit it out of my system. Sometimes I wish I can cut it out with a blade sharp enough to enjoy it. But I don't know where to begin.

"I pulled the joint away from his lips and pressed it against my own. I thought I was man enough to handle it this time. Just like I thought I was last time."

Another ten minutes pass. I've washed my face, my hands, rinsed out my poisoned mouth, and managed to get my natural skin color back. When I return to the diner, he's trying to convince me to buy an ice cream cone, thinking that'll make my stomach feel better.

The ice cream cone is the reason we come here every Sunday afternoon. We get high—well he gets high—behind Fat Boy Joe's Burger Place after his work shift. There's a little patch of grass hidden by crops and rolling hills. It's like a little piece of sanctuary. After his smoke, we emerge from our sanctuary and head to Fat Boy Joe's. There, I buy the both of us an ice cream cone and talk about life in an abstract manner. Well, he talks and I listen most of the time. That's been our tradition. So it's no surprise that he's staring up at me with boyish eyes yearning and expecting that ice cream cone. He's bringing me in, I can feel it. He's like a little child pleading to satisfy his sweet tooth and, like a child, he's always somehow broke.

"Buy your own damn ice cream. You're the one with the fucking job, not me."

His eyes shatter. That's enough to crush me whole.

I hear a snicker behind us, "Hey look, the faggots must have their baby dicks in a bunch from too much ass humping."

Rip.

I didn't realize my hand fighting the Led Zeppelin patch till I tore it clean off. It was like the sudden blast from a gun in cowboy showdowns.

The stillness was broken.

My friend looks up at me with eyes I've never seen before. Shielding eyes of mocha irises—eyes that drown in their own sockets. Eyes waiting and speechless. He's reading into me, I can tell. I don't know what he's looking for, but then he pulls his eyes away and exits out the door. But I don't follow.

I hear them snickering saying something but I can't catch what. I don't need to. I grab a squeezable ketchup bottle and turn on them with it. Their plaid red-neck shirts become ketchup stained. Their John Deer ball caps are swirled in red.

I'm out numbered four to one. The manager threatens to call the cops. But it doesn't register. I feel like I'm losing myself, and I'm not putting my temper in its place.

"He's like a little child pleading to satisfy his sweet tooth and, like a child, he's always somehow broke."

I'm laughing. I'm fighting my own tears. I'm fighting my anguish. I'm blaring out profanities and dodging fists and leather boots. I'm blocking out faggot remarks and avoiding glass beer mugs. I'm picking up bar stools and wanting nothing more than to beat the shit out of them. They duck and the bar stool morphs its way through the glass window. They're rolling up their sleeves, they're picking up their own bar stools. They're cracking their knuckles and rolling back their shoulders. And then one of them pulls out the gun.

He repeats what's written on the bathroom stall.

"Cock sucking faggots should die."

He aims death at me and fires.

July 16, 2008 - 4:23 pm

"I'm laughing. I'm fighting my own tears. I'm fighting my anguish."

The car window is rolled down and I don't have a care in the world. Even though humidity is drowning the car and wind is scraping my hair wild, it all seems natural. He turns to me and says, "Have you ever thought about a road trip?"

My hand is loose on the steering wheel. I laugh.

"You don't have a car."

"Well, I know I don't have a car."

His voice is nervous and hesitant.

"Guess you're shit outa luck."

I glance over at him. I recognize this pleading look he's giving me. "You mean my car?"

He nods, unsure of himself.

"Shit, Isaac, what the fuck for?"

"Forget I said it. I know it's stupid."

"Why do you want to leave?"

He shrugs. "I like sightseeing."

I've only known Isaac a few months. Hardly long enough to go across country together. Maybe he has something

else up his sleeve. Maybe he wants to abandon me somewhere in Kansas after I take a piss on the side of the road. Maybe he has somewhere he needs to be. He never says much about anything or anyone. It's always in a hypothetical form generic, never enough to reveal much.

I inhale a summer breeze, but I wish it filled me with oxygen and not frustration. I steal a glance at Isaac. He comes from nowhere, is no one, has no last name to give me, and, as far as I know, has no family. He's just Isaac who likes weed, ice cream, and now sightseeing. He works just enough to keep that rundown shack of his, to get food at least once a day, and to afford two pairs of clothes.

I guess I pity him because, unlike him, I'd say I'm well off. I have a car, hand me down from my older brother. It's still in good condition. My parents give me money because rather than having a real job, I work on the ranch taking care of the livestock and the stray cats. Then, somewhere between all the animals, I try to keep things in order from mowing, trimming, and the upkeep of the barn, then, of course, my mother's garden. We tried to hire Isaac but he wasn't having any of that. I guess he figured he'd be expected to reveal a thing or two about himself.

I let the seat swallow me. I want to hide for some reason. I don't know what I'm doing or what I'm trying to pull out of him. Even though we set out to drive for no reason, it's starting to feel pointless and aggravating. I just want to drop him off and forget about him. But I know that won't happen.

"I don't know anything about you."

"I'm Isaac."

"And I'm Superman." I glare at him.

"Your name tells me nothing. Who the fuck are you?"

He glances over at me there's that smirk of his, the all knowing smirk.

"You're Derek and I'm Isaac." He shrugs.

"We're just a couple guys, what does it matter?"

"What the fuck?"

"Derek, you know me better than you think you do. When you finally figure it out, it'll be too late."

He leans back and looks out his window.

"Why do you have to question it?"

I hit the brake hard. He jolts forward. The red light stares back at us.

"Normal dudes don't go up to each other and say shit like, 'Lets go on a fucking road trip.'"

He doesn't say anything, and he probably isn't going to. I feel like I'm stretching my hand into empty air and the carrot is just beyond my reach.

"Normal dudes don't go up to each other and say shit like, 'Lets go on a fucking road trip'."

August 12, 2008 – 9:16 pm

I've worn the same clothes with every reason to remove them. Yet, they cling to my body. They shield me.

Like Isaac had done. Sometimes the realization doesn't come until it's too late to grasp the opportunity. Sometimes love isn't about the kissing or the sex or bullshit like that. Love doesn't have to be strong or stare us in the face for us to breathe it in. Sometimes love just can't be explained.

But I wish I knew that's what Isaac was trying to pull out of me.

I still can't get the memory out of my head. I can see it on my left temple. There's a bruise the size of a grapefruit marking me and my shame. I can't stare into the mirror much longer.

I can't bare the look my parents give me. They're trying to dig me out of my grief. I've been working overtime, for a little extra money.

I apologized to the owner and manager of Fat Boy Joe's Burger Place and I helped replace their windows. I worked overtime, for free. I worked more than I was asked to. I didn't want to leave even though the memory hurt too much to stay. But I can't help it when the memory replays itself.

I didn't care to know what would be made out of them. The men from the Diner.

I realized that when Isaac walked out of the Diner that was him telling me to not care about them. But Isaac must have looked behind him and noticed I didn't follow that day. He must have heard the bar stool crash through the window and knew I started something. He must have been smart enough to sneak around the back, to pop out of nowhere, and push me away before death pierced its venom into me.

My head slammed into the table and I thought that was it. I thought I would die here at the burger place in the middle of nowhere. My vision blurred first and I only caught bits and pieces of sound. I was certain I fell over from the gunshot wound.

Then I saw him, lying beside me, his hand clutched his chest and the crimson blood snaked over his arm. He was choking his insides out and straining to hold onto oxygen. Onto life. For a moment I was too stuned to move. Things were too surreal between blurred black spotted vision and choppy sound.

He turned his head like a dying child and pierced through me. The tears were coming

"He must have been smart enough to sneak around the back, to pop out of nowhere, and push me away before death pierced its venom into me."

at that point, and I wasn't able to roll them back in.
"Isaac," I said.

I reached my arm beneath his upper back. My denim jacket made contact with his blood—the first stain of memory. I propped him up hoping the sirens would come to take him away before his last breath would. Isaac smiled up at me between chokes and stutters. He tried to say something, but his breath was too short for words.

"Everything will be alright,"

I said. But I knew that was a lie.

I won't forget what he did next or how it made me feel. I won't forget how it ripped me apart and how it slithered light through my shame. He struggled to do it. He pointed to his eye, he covered his chest wound, and, as his stained crimson hand reached up, he pointed his finger to me. He smiled while his eyes said goodbye. His face became blank. I waited for his delicate smirk. I waited for him to laugh. Even after I shook him, nothing happened.

September 21, 2008 – 2:56 pm

I created a list of things I wanted to do today, on his behalf. First I bought a generic pack of cigarettes and smoked a couple at our sanctuary. I was never good at flicking the ash off and it burnt through my jeans.

I went through the motions after that and headed for Fat Boy Joe's Burger Place. I bought two ice cream cones, leaving one to sit on the opposite side of the table. I know the manager was looking at me, but I didn't care. After watching his ice cream melt over the cone, I went to the bathroom. I reread the words written on the stall—I listened to the words the gunman spoke to me. This label the stall would forever wear. It would wear the memory like I have been. I didn't want someone else to feel the poison I felt that day. My solution was simple. I pulled out the sharpie I prepared for this moment and finished the statement to reading, Cock sucking faggots should die a noble death and never be forgotten.

“He smiled while his eyes said goodbye. His face became blank. I waited for his delicate smirk. I waited for him to laugh. Even after I shook him, nothing happened.”

October 16, 2008 — 9:15 am

We cremated Isaac and the urn sat beside me.

I fumbled with the map again waiting for the light to shift green. My eyes traced the freeway down Illinois. I didn't know where I was heading, but I figured that was the point. Then I noticed my ratty jeans again.

There were burnt holes and flicks of blood. I know it sounds morbid to be wearing his blood like this and for this long. But for some reason or another I felt the road trip was priority number one.

A car horn jolts me to reality.

I fumble with the map and set it by Isaac. He'll help get me where I need to go. He wanted to sightsee, after all.

The light is blaring down green, and this time, without the confictions, I proceed forward. I'm starting to know what Isaac was all about.

Fiction 3rd Place
Radio Waves
by Diayn Day

8
Fiction

Nate

Nate Burke had the look of a straight shooter, an upright, square jawed churchgoer. But appearances were dead wrong. Nate Burke was a scoundrel with only two loves in his life: the little gal he married and a good scam.

If both those loves ran neck and neck at the track, it was anybody's guess which one he'd root for. Nate was a dick—that's gumshoe to any non-dick not up on the lingo. Nate was a big, self satisfied guy who didn't fade into the woodwork. He hid out in plain sight. Nate stepped through his front door after a day of sleuthing.

"MADELINE! I'm home! I'm starvin' and I'm lookin' for red meat. WIFE! Where are you? Where's dinner?"

Madeline didn't run to him with a welcoming kiss the way she usually did. She sat beside the stereo.

"Madds? I've never seen you with your head inside the radio before.

What's Luciano cawing now?"

"Be quiet, Nate. Something's wrong."

"Songbird hit a sour note? Carve him up and serve him with stuffing. Food, wife! Your man's ravenous!"

"I'm serious, Nate. Bring your private eye over here and tell me what this is."

"You mean that first-class example of advanced electronics you're hunched in front of? That superior, high priced"

"NATE!"

"Yes, dear."

He covered the distance in three seconds flat.

"What am I listening to?"

"You'll hear it in a second."

"Adjust the dial, sweetie. You're between stations."

"It doesn't matter. It's everywhere."

"If I listen, can I have a cookie?"

"It's there! Did you hear it?"

"Nate Burke was a scoundrel with only two loves in his life: the little gal he married and a good scam."

"I hear static, adored one, commonly known as noise. What do you hear?"

"Her voice, of course. Don't be dense."

"Madeline, precious. Nobody's speaking. Nobody's singing. We're fawning over what pros in the biz call—"

"It's a woman, Nate. It's faint, but she's there."

"It's faint because you're between stations. It's a stray transmission."

"No, she's real. She's saying, 'help me.'"

"Find a station, Madeline."

"She's on all the stations. You don't hear anything? Really?"

"Nothing, babe."

"Here, sit closer. It's drawn-out sound, kind of sad. 'He e lp me e e.' Like that. I hear it."

"Sweetheart, you're crazed with hunger. Personally, I could demolish a T Rex and the family Toyota. Accompany me, my love, and I will demonstrate a hitherto unexplored technique of defrosting that'll knock your socks off."

He escorted Madeline to the kitchen.

Madeline

Madeline Burke was a delicate girl, fifteen years Nate's junior and prone to anxiety attacks since the bad thing nobody talked about happened to her folks. Friends overlooked Madeline's mental twitches. She was simply known as Nate's sensitive little wife. Next morning, Nate found her sitting in the same chair as the night before.

"Madds, baby, where'd you put my neon tie? You haven't made another donation to the dumpster, have you? We need to have a serious discussion about aesthetics. Madds? Why aren't you dressing? Madeline?"

"Oh, Nate, I don't know what to do. She sounded so desperate. I thought she'd tell me how to find her if I concentrated extra hard this morning."

"Madeline, listen. There's no voice in the static. No woman is calling you. No woman needs you. It's that damned necklace. You're obsessed with it. Let me get rid of it. Please baby. It's a piece of junk. God knows—"

"My radio was on yesterday and she was speaking to me everywhere, even between stations."

"NO! It's all I have left of mama. Besides, you said it's an investment. You said I was extraordinarily lucky to get it back. Remember?"

He sat on the edge of the chair and hugged her lightly. "Take it easy, angel. I know it means a lot. But the value may not—"

"Mama's necklace has nothing to do with it. My radio was on yesterday and she was speaking to me everywhere, even between stations. I moved all over the dial and she was just...everywhere. Nate, what's happening?"

"You heard this voice yesterday and didn't tell me?"

"I'm sorry. It's just so...surreal. Oh, god, I am crazy, I must be. Would you still love me if I went over the edge? Nate?"

"I'll chuck you in the loony bin myself if you don't shut up."

He pulled her closer. "Does it sound like your mother's voice?"

"I'm not insane. I don't know who it is. Only that she needs help."

"We'll help her, baby. We will. Right now I'll call your office and say you're down with something contagious and drippy. Then I'll have Simone come over. Old gal's had a storage fixation since the age of five. She'll jump at the chance to snoop in my closet."

Madeline's lips stretched.

"That's what I love, a smile on my best girl.

It'll be fine, hon. We'll figure it out. Promise."

"Okay."

"Meantime, you'll stay away from radios, TV's, DVD's and all other miscellaneous appliances until I get home, okay?"

"Sure."

"You'll stay in bed till Simone comes?"

"Yes, Nate. My office number's on the desk."

Nathan punched it in and connected with the supervisor.

"Yeah, it was a bit sudden, but Madeline should be okay in a couple of days. All right. Goodbye."

He slammed the phone.

Maddie's super was top bitch in an inventory of office hacks he had nothing but contempt for.

"Madeline was fine yesterday and we're soooo understaffed. Can't she come in and work a little overtime?" Hag.

If Nate had his way— He dialed another number.

"Maddie's super was top bitch in an inventory of office hacks he had nothing but contempt for."

“He’d sell it, double the agency, and they’d both be on easy street. Women. None of ‘em knew what was good for ‘em.”

“Simone? Need a favor. Maddie’s got a bug and I can’t get her to the doc’s till I overhaul my schedule. Can you come? No, Simone, you won’t catch anything. Those shrinks haven’t helped you much, have they? Okay, I’ll shut up. Just make it snappy. And stay out of my drawers!”

Nate grinned. She wasn’t a bad old girl. She was even useful now and then. The phone rang.

“Simone...? Why not? Thirty seconds ago— No, she isn’t that sick, but— When can you be here? Fine, Simone. Just don’t park your ass in some bar.”

Unreliable dame. You’d think after all he’d done for her— He stabbed at the dial pad.

“Hank? Burke. Get Stan. Now! I don’t give a damn if he’s scrubbing the crapper with a toothpick. Get him! Stan? Job’s off. That’s right, off, until further orders. Madeline’s home, you idiot. I can’t take the chance. What? Well, get your ass in gear and find him. I won’t be crossed by some half-witted

ex-con you dig up and lose. If you can’t find him, call me. Spit it out and get off the line. Stan? If you want to see your brat’s next birthday—find him.”

He slammed the phone shut. Assholes. The whole damn world was packed with assholes and they all worked for him. It was a joke. He wouldn’t have this much trouble if Maddie’d just give him the damned necklace. Piece of crap was driving her nuts. He’d sell it, double the agency, and they’d both be on easy street. Women. None of ‘em knew what was good for ‘em. Every damned one of ‘em had to be dragged kicking and “Madeline? Baby? Simone can’t be here for a couple of hours. Stay in bed till she comes. Okay? Call me at the office if you need me. Love you. Bye.”

Simone

Simone Burke was older than Nate by several years, with a few divorces under her belt and no illusions about men. She hadn’t been surprised when Nate married Madeline. He needed someone docile he could mold to that absurd ideal of womanhood he lugged around. Simone worried that Madeline might be too submissive, too trusting, but you can’t say anything to a girl in love and expect to be heard. Simone knocked at Nate’s door early that afternoon. “Maddie? Angel? It’s Simone. Door’s locked. Can you open it for me?”

Madeline pulled herself out of the chair.

"Maddie! My God! What's wrong? Nate said you were in the dumps, but you look like a dead cat. Sit. I'll make us some tea."

"Please... Simone. Just talk to me, would you? I need to hear a real voice."

"What's the scoop, babe?"

"Nothing really. I'm just going crazy. I'm hearing voices on the radio. In the static. Oh, God, I don't know what I mean. Nate says it's nothing. Would you mind...listening for a minute?"

"Sure, sweetie. What kind of voices?"

"Anything. Just tell me if anything sounds different."

Simone listened. "I'm sorry, doll. Static's all I hear, ordinary radio racket. Truly."

"Then what's wrong with me? What is it?"

"Darlin', nothing's wrong with you." She put her arm around Madeline.

"Not one doggone thing. Stress, maybe. Nerves, you know? Ol' man stress can be a son of a bitch, but he's not fatal. Anyway, only the best and brightest catch him, so you can feel superior. It means you're in the groove or the loop or whatever the cool phrase is nowadays. I wouldn't worry about it."

Madeline slumped in the chair with her face in her hands. "I don't know what to do, Simone. She keeps saying help me, help me. I just don't know—"

"I've got a great idea, sweetie. I'll take Mack's rattletrap to Denny's and get us some eats. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, I'll clean out the whole place. We'll make hogs of ourselves and get in some good old-fashioned gal talk. Bash every S.O.B. we ever knew. Deal?"

"Okay. If you think that'll help."

"You bet. Maddie, I gotta tell you, driving that beat-up old junker's better than five years on the couch. I ram the brake straight into the floor and say, take that, you snake. You know what? I think Mack can feel it, wherever the sucker's shackled up these days. I'll let you take it out real soon, baby. It'll do wonders for you."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Everything'll be fine, doll. I promise. But, until I get back, I want you to sit tight and not move a single muscle, not even to see me out. Just close those eyes and count to a hundred. By the time you reach ninety-nine, I'll be standing right here with a giant bucketful of fabulous eats. Okay, sweetie?"

"Sure." "Madeline? I want those eyes closed now, young lady."

"We'll make hogs of ourselves and get in some good old fashioned gal talk. Bash every S.O.B. we ever knew."

The Man

The scrawny little man was a thug, no different from any other grimacing, gray, belly-crawler stinking up a prison yard. Cheap jobs for cheap pay, that was his deal—and keeping his ass out of the joint. He'd never make it to the big leagues and he knew it. It was their fault, the bastards, kicking him around, stealing his breaks. Nate was the worst. Five years the little man busted his ass for him, but did Nate take him into the agency? Let him strut his stuff? Hell, no. Shit work. That's all he was good for. He turned the knob, surprised to find Nathan's door unlocked, more surprised to find somebody slumped in the chair. "Hey! Lady! Shouldn't leave your door unlocked, y'know? Never tell who'll be droppin' by."

Madeline dragged her mind back from the latest dream.

"What—? Who's there? Did Nate send you? What do you want?" She moved to the edge of the chair and concentrated. "Well now, cupcake. I guess you could say Natey sent me. He just left out one itty bitty detail."

The little man looked Madeline up and down.

"But that's hunky dory with me. Makes it more fun. Gotta say I'm kinda disappointed.

Figured Nate had better taste from all them airs he puts on. You look like something the cat drug in, Ma de line.

See? Know your name."

She stood up slowly. "I want you to leave. My sister-in-law and my...Nate—I'm expecting them any second. They were just here and they're coming back. Any second."

"More the merrier, lady. Siddown so I can get what I come for and get the hell out."

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

"Now...let's see how good I remember. A necklace. Yeah, that's it. Gold, right? A cat eye sapphire smack-dab in the middle an' a whole bunch of diamonds all 'round the outside just t'make it purty. Waitin' all comfy and cozy in the safe for me t'rescue it. How'd I do, Maddie gal? Ring any bells? Natey gives a good description, don't he?"

"What are you talking about? That's my mother's! That necklace...what do you mean, Nate gives—? You're crazy. You're insane! I'm

Fiction 23

"Figured Nate had better taste from all them airs he puts on. You look like something the cat drug in."

calling Nate right now. You can't just take mama's necklace. I won't let you."

"Hey, lady, don't you hear good? It was Natey set up this deal. Natey told me t'drop by on my way home from church and borrow mommy's treasure. He even gimme a quarter for bus fare. Outta my way."

"You're a liar. Nate wouldn't— Nate would never— You're lying!"

"Girly, don't you know your own fella yet?

You been hitched, what...two years? An' you ain't figured out Natey's just a plain, everyday crook? My-oh-my. To think it's gotta be me bustin' up your pretty bubble.

I'm gonna cry. Your big, tough hubby's a crook, doll face. Like me, only more high-class maybe. Leastwise he thinks so. Not by much. No sirree."

"Liar! LIAR!"

"You're makin' me lose my patience, lady. Also, you're makin' me miss my bus. But hell, in for a penny in for a pound. You ever think how Natey left that hole in the wall dump and set up his own agency so easy?"

"It was...an inheritance."

"Yeah. Yours. Tell me, Miss Mighty High, how'd darlin' Natey meet you anyways?

Offered t'help on your daddy's case. Right? Help the cops look into the big robbery?

That big society dust-up? Mommy an' daddy get iced an' all of a sudden here comes good lookin' Natey gallopin' to the rescue. Wraps his meaty arms around the little orphan gal an' carries her off to the altar. Wasn't that the choice story of all them bleached blondes on the news?"

"No. NO! It wasn't—"

"Guess who the big cheese was on that little set-up?"

"No."

"Guess who dumped the stuff? All them baubles mommy liked to wear at some rich dame's fancy ball."

"Shut up!"

"Who set up the job, little gal? WHO SET UP THE HIT?"

"SHUT UP! LIAR. I'll kill you."

*"You're makin' me lose my patience, lady
Also, you're makin' me miss my bus."*

Madeline ran at him.

The little man sidestepped her.

"Don't worry, cookie. He never got his hands dirty. Know what I mean? He had a guy I know do it. That's it. A guy I know."

"Nathan will tear you apart when I tell him. He'll tear you apart."

"Don't I just know it? That's why you gotta keep this little meetin' of ours secret and promise never t'tell. He wouldn't like it if he found out I busted up his wifey's pretty little dreams. No, he sure wouldn't and that's a fact."

"Oh, Nate. Please. It isn't true. It can't be."

Madeline dropped into the chair and rocked back and forth.

"It's true, girly. But now I got me a big problem. I know you're a true-blue gal an' once you make a promise you keep it. That's how I know you won't tell Natey what went on here. But see, I always been a terrible bad liar. Even when I was a kid, my old lady saw right through me. You tellin' the truth, sonny? Sure, ma, yeah. No, you ain't, sonny. An'...POW. It's the same kinda thing today. If Nate looked me in the eye an' said, did

you tell my little wife about me? I'd just have to say, yeah, Natey, gee whiz, it sorta slipped out. He wouldn't like that. No sir, he wouldn't. He ain't gonna like what I gotta do now either. But a guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do."

He moved toward Madeline. She covered her face with her hands.

"You don't gotta worry about me, you sure don't. I got ways and means and now I got me a sparkly necklace. I'll head down Mexico way, just me an' mommy's doodad.

"He wouldn't like it if he found out I busted up his wifey's pretty little dreams."

What d'you think?"

He moved closer and slipped his hand into his pocket.

"Just one teensey matter needs cleanin' up. Maddie? Stand up for me, there's a good little girly."

Madeline stood up, confused.

"Oh...Nate...is that you? Oh, darling. It's so horrible—"

"Sure, sure, girly. I'm anybody you want. You want Natey? I'm Natey...just for doll face."

The little man jerked his hand out of his pocket, raised his arm and struck her. She fell against the stereo and knocked it to the floor.

Madeline whispered, "It isn't true. Oh...Nate. It can't be true.

Someone...please...help...me..."

End.

Fiction Honorable Mention

The Reluctant Traveler

by Michael Weaver

I must have pissed off someone mighty high up in the food chain to get handed this assignment.

Since being put on standby two days ago, I've been asking myself who it could have been. Was it the boss? His boss? I have no idea. All I do know is, after twelve years on the force, I've been relegated to capturing an escaped zoo exhibit.

Am I angry? Of course I'm angry. I've solved cases that had been on the books for years. I single handedly captured a group of murderers who had been terrorizing a neighborhood for weeks. I pulled an entire family from a burning home, then went back in for the family pet. I graduated top of my class, have three medals of valor, four meritorious service medals, eight certificates of appreciation, and three officer-of-the-year awards. In the past eight years alone, I've accomplished more than most lifers have in their entire careers.

But some mid-level bureaucrat gets a wild hair up his ass, and now I am being sent on an animal roundup? Fuck my life.

I walk to the garage and get my patrol vehicle. The only available unit has a billion miles on it, no fuel, and windows that don't work well but, hey, at least the keyless entry works. At the fueling station, I twirl my keys as the pump dings away. The gauge finally registers full, but I've run out of gas on a "full" tank before, so I tap the fuel reservoir and check it for leaks, just to be sure. Finished with that, I punch the coordinates of the creature's last sighting into the navigation system and head out.

I must have nodded off, because I'm someplace I don't recognize and nowhere close to where I started. It's dumb luck I didn't crash or go off course. I keep telling myself this mission won't be so bad. I'm almost convinced.

"I pulled an entire family from a burning home, then went back in for the family pet."

The nav system shows I'm only a few kilometers from Oasis Park. I switch off the cruise control and run a systems check.
> "Station 1, 4 Echo 22. I'm about five minutes out. Running communications and MDT check now."

The dispatcher tells me the radio and mobile data terminal are working fine.

"Thank you, ma'am. Show me out on the call."

I pull into the park and shut off my cruiser. Aside from a large grassy area and small lake, it's as featureless the sand dunes that surround it. Oasis Park? Who named this rest facility?

Barely a wide-spot on this desert highway, it sticks out like a mold spot on white cheese.

I sit there a moment and survey the area. There's a child, about four or five years old, sitting on a bench. She's staring out into the distance, but I don't see what she's looking at. I unbuckle my safety harness, pop the door and walk over to her. Except for the two of us, there's not a soul around.

"Hello, little lady. Are you by yourself?"

She starts, looking up at me with big, yellow eyes. She drops her gaze to my duty belt and stares at my side-arm. The pink ribbons in her dark hair flutter like little flags in the slight breeze. She starts to tremble.

"No, no, sweetheart, it's okay, I'm a policeman. I'm here to help you,"

I reach out to soothe her, but she pulls back. I slowly move my arm away.

She continues staring at my gun, but at least she's stopped shuddering.

"Do you have a name?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is it? I'm not a mind reader, you know."

I laugh.

"Mommy told me don't talk to strangers," she blurts out.

"She's very smart. Did she tell you folks like me are your friends, and can help you if you're lost or hurt?"

She nods yes, never taking her eyes off my gun.

"Okay, we'll skip your name for now. Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head.

"What are you doing, then?"

"Waiting for my mommy."

"Is she around?"

Nod. "Where is she? Where is everyone else? Are you the only one here?"

She shakes her head, then raises her arm. "Over there."

Following her finger, my eyes arrive at the small lake in the middle of the park. It's about twenty meters across and fifty

meters long. About one-third of the way from each end, two streams of water shoot into the air, falling back down onto the lake like a rain shower. It's the only sound I hear; even the breeze is silent.

"I don't see anyone, honey. Are you sure?"

"Uh huh."

"Let's see if we can find them."

"No."

"It's okay, I'll be right there with you."

"NO!"

I kneel down. Her eyes speak volumes. I've seen those eyes before. Vacant. Haunted. Hard. Much too hard for a girl so young. Last time I saw eyes like that was a

couple of years ago, from the lone survivor of the gang attack that killed everyone in his neighborhood. Everyone but him.

He wound up in a padded room instead of a coffin. Same thing, to me. This isn't a good sign.

"Okay, then," I say as I smile.

"You stay here and watch my car. Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah."

"Good girl. If you get scared, just yell and I'll come running back, fast as I can, okay?"

The lake isn't too far, about 150 meters from the bench.

"Okay. But go fast," she says.

"I'll be right back. Promise."

She has never taken her eyes off my gun.

"Her eyes speak volumes. I've seen those eyes before. Vacant. Haunted. Hard. Much too hard for a girl so young."

"My hand is on my gun, more to make me feel better than anything else."

I trot toward the water, occasionally looking back, letting the girl know I am watching out for her. I smile and wave, hoping she'll return the gesture. Nope.

As I near the pond, I glance back at the girl. She's still there, watching. I turn back as I arrive at the water's edge.

She was right. They're all here.

Mostly. From the various pieces, parts and heads bobbing in the muck, I can't actually tell how many are in the water. A dozen? Two dozen? Big arms. Little arms. A leg. Pulled apart like a roasted bird at dinnertime. A child's doll floats by, or at least that's what I'm convincing myself it is.

This really isn't a good sign.

I make a quick scan to see if anyone, or anything, is still around. Nothing. I look back to make sure the girl is okay.

She's gone.

Ignoring the floating carnage, I sprint across the grass, tripping on a sprinkler, tumbling tail over head. I get up and run-limp back to the bench. My ankle hurts like hell, but I don't think it's broken.

My hand is on my gun, more to make me feel better than anything else.

A lone shoe lies about two meters from the bench, about the size she'd wear. Was it already there?

No, I couldn't have overlooked it. It's hers.

Vanished, like a whisper.

I head over to the parking lot, nursing my ankle as I hobble the hundred meters to my cruiser. I peer under it, over it, around it, inside it. No girl. I hit the button on the keyless to open the boot. The back is filled with road flares, a yellow safety jumper and a rain jacket. I close the lid; the latch clicks shut with the finality of a casket. I get a chill.

I look around. There are no trees, no shrubs and no buildings nearby. Just my cruiser. And a refuse container. Oh, no. Please, no.

I go over, not wanting to find what I know I will find. On the ground next to it, a bloodied pink ribbon flutters in the slight breeze, still tied around a hunk of hair. I spy a small arm peering out through the canister's opening. Next to it, a leg wearing the other shoe. I don't check for vitals. Trust me, it's not necessary.

I thought I'd seen it all before. I haven't seen anything. That's why they gave me this job. Nobody else would do it. Nobody else could do it.

"I thought I'd seen it all before. I haven't seen anything. That's why they gave me this job. Nobody else would do it. Nobody else could do it."

Fiction?

The cute little girl with the hard yellow eyes that saw things even combat veterans shouldn't see. Dead. At least she's in a better place. Her mom, too.

I return to my cruiser, punch in my report, hit send on the mobile data terminal. I need to clear my head, figure out my next move. The MDT beeps requesting a secure connection. I enter my authentication code.

> Verify findings. Confirm fatalities, including children?

Affirmative

> Approximate number?

Unknown. Victims not intact.

> Understood. Will you need assistance?

Affirmative. Send cleanup crews to the lake and the trash receptacle in the parking lot. Child inside was lone survivor to original incident. Treat with extra care, please. She deserves that much.

> Understood. Crews en route.

Send backup ASAP. This is going to get ugly.

> It's not already? 4 Charlie 32 is nearby.

Big Ben is on standby status if you two can't capture this thing.

Are you sure this is a zoo escape?

> Affirmative. Moving to priority one status, Zoo personnel did not advise it was the "special exhibit". Someone's head will roll for this. Advise if you need more.

"Special Exhibit"? Now they tell us. Go

ahead and start 4 Charlie and Big Ben. I'll cancel if successful.

> Roger. 4 Charlie will meet you there. Big Ben should arrive within thirty minutes unless you cancel. Out. "Special Exhibit"? How did that get loose? And I thought my life was screwed.

The radio sounds the Emergency Traffic tone, indicating priority status and reserving the radio for my communications only.

> "All units. Priority One Status in place. Hold all traffic until further notice."

"The cute little girl with the hard yellow eyes that saw things even combat veterans shouldn't see. Dead."

She pauses for a moment.

> "4 Echo 22, Station One."

"Go ahead."

> "Advise we have a sighting at a roadside store. Unknown injuries, call was disconnected and no answer on re-contact. Sending details via MDT."

> "4 Echo 22, 10-4. En route."

The MDT pings. The store is about 20 kilometers west of the park. 4 Charlie will meet me at the coordinates being loaded into my nav system. How the hell did it get there so quickly? I didn't think they were that fast. Following the nav system's target heading, I speed out of the parking lot, barely missing the trash receptacle. I drive fast-fast-fast, ignoring department pursuit protocols; it's getting dark and I really don't want to face this thing after the sun goes down.

I switch off my lights and siren a kilometer from the store. I slow down to avoid the smashed vehicles in the roadway. I cut the engine and coast the remaining fifty meters, approaching the store from a blind spot. As the vehicle creeps to a halt, I undo my safety harness and ease open the door. Gravel crunches underfoot as I maneuver toward the store. It got dark faster than I wanted.

4 Charlie's emergency flashers reflect off the fuel pumps and awning. His vehicle must be on the other side of the building.

I switch on my hand radio, punch in 4 Charlie's secure code and whisper into the mic.

"I draw my gun and edge toward the front windows. I kneel at a corner and take a quick peek inside, but I can't see shit."

Nothing. I try again. Still nothing.

I draw my gun and edge toward the front windows. I kneel at a corner and take a quick peek inside, but I can't see shit; there's too much merchandise piled up and too many adverts plastered to the windows to see inside.

I retreat around the corner and squat next to the building. I try 4 Charlie again. I can hear myself inside the store. That dumbass went in on his own. I call again. The radio keys back. A terrible howl emanates from the speaker. My head slumps back against the side of the building.

“Charlie went in alone, is likely dead. If I don't make it, regards to everyone. Fuck my life.”

4 Charlie is dead. I'm certain. I creep back to my cruiser and radio HQ, advising them an officer is down, situation uncontained. Send backup. Send Big Ben. NOW.

Dispatch tells me help is on the way. The MDT beeps a moment later; I enter my authentication for a secure connection.

> Big Ben en route. Approx 15 out. Confirm request for additional backup.

Confirm. Supplemental Authentication Alpha-Delta-Four-Seven.

> Confirmed. You know when Ben gets there, you won't get this arrest on your record, right?

Yes. 4 Charlie went in alone, is likely dead. If I don't make it, regards to everyone. Fuck my life.

> If you make it, you're docked a week's pay for swearing on the terminal. Good luck.

Report if you can. Out.

If I want to have any chance of capturing this thing, I have to act now.

Once Ben arrives, my part's done.

I put in the radio earpiece and am about to take off when the howl breaks radio silence, nearly busting my eardrum. I punch a command into the MDT and 4 Charlie's radio goes dead. Like the girl. Like 4 Charlie. I have to kill it, before it kills more.

Deep breath. Gun out. I'm off. Wish me luck.

Glass grinds under my boots as I enter into the harsh fluorescent lighting. The door buzzer sounds. I crouch to one side to avoid being outlined in the doorway; habit, it's dark outside.

Fruit pies underfoot. The hiss of the soda fountain's CO₂ supply leaking. Burnt frankfurters rolling listlessly on the cooker, severed desiccated fingers from an ancient tomb. The wind has kicked up, peppering sand against the glass.

This isn't the Fastmart I remember.

I reach down and shut off the hissing soda tank. I can hear a radio playing oldies in the back office.

A ceiling sign sways slowly, a monotonous pendulum from Death's grandfather clock.

A door to the beverage cooler is shattered. Something is moving inside. I nearly slip on some red slushy on the floor. Odd. It's in the health and beauty aisle, two rows from the machine. I smell pennies. Oh, it's not slushy after all.

A shoe peeks around the end of the aisle. A woman's pump, dark blue, maybe black. The foot is still partially inside it, causing the front of the shoe to rest on the floor, with the heel suspended in mid-air, about two inches above the now-crimson tile.

The rest of the leg comes into view as I circle around the aisle.

Ankle. Calf. Knee. That's it. A partial leg.

This just keeps getting better and better.

The radio whispers in my ear. Big Ben, my backup, is 8 minutes out. Rural call-outs suck.

A hand. Male? Female?. Wedding band. Probably male.

Noise from the microwave. Scratching, clawing. I pop the door and out tumbles a small, white puppy? What the hell? It leaps off the counter and lands in my kids into the leg. A small growl and he picks up a stick.

"No, boy, no playing now," I whisper.

He drops the stick. I look down at it.

Oh, a finger.

He looks up at me, wags his tail and runs

off. Into the cooler. Where something is still moving inside.

What's that smell? Like...soiled underwear.

Backup is 3 minutes out.

Did I mention that rural call-outs suck?

A yelp of a small animal being...never

mind. Then silence.

Down the next aisle is the woman's other leg. Maybe. Missing the shoe and the foot that goes inside it. Pretty sure it's from the same woman. Shapely calves as far as partial legs go.

A large paper grocery sack is in the middle

of the aisle. More slushie oozes from the

"A ceiling sign sways slowly, a monotonous pendulum from Death's grandfather clock."

bottom. I don't bother looking.

End of the aisle. I am even with the cooler door. Something is definitely moving inside. A loud, wet splat against a different cooler door. It pops open a few centimeters, then closes with a dull thud. Something red and white slides down the glass. Sorry, mate.

> Backup is 1 minute out.

The cigarettes are there, but the chewing tobacco is gone. The jerky is gone, too. All of it. Good God, tobacco and jerky, together? That's one of the most disgusting things I've ever seen.

The front door swings open, my gun and body pivot toward the noise, like the turret of a tank. A hot dusty furnace mixes with cool air and stale blood. Just the wind.

I glance to the right. A uniformed leg peeks out from the broken cooler door.

Department-issued boot. 4 Charlie.

Wait. Nothing is moving inside. Shit. Where'd it go?

The sound of snack chips underfoot.

Feet...not...mine.

Silver flash, something bumps my arm. A hand flops to the floor; scaly, green, hairy. Holding a gun whose blue energy crystal pulsates along the top-strap. Familiar hand. Familiar gun. Familiar slushie. All mine. Pain.

Oh, this really is not a good sign.

Another noise and bump, from behind.

A silver flash sticking out from my chest.

More slushie. More pain.

Are the lights still on? What a pretty color.

I crash to my knees. The footsteps approach.

The creature comes into view, the howl

"The front door swings open, my gun and body pivot toward the noise, like the turret of a tank."

“Something bumps my arm. A hand flops to the floor; scaly, green, hairy. Holding a gun whose blue energy crystal pulsates along the top-strap. Familiar hand. Familiar gun. Familiar slushie. All mine.”

coming from its mouth as it tries to talk. Taller than I thought, half-again as tall as I am, if I could stand. Its blue eyes and gold mane give it an evil appearance. Tan, hideous skin. No, a uniform.

Something on its chest. I'm fading. Hard to see. Gold star. Six points. Words.

“Deputy Sheriff. Chaves County, New Mexico.”

I knew we should have never gone to Earth. And damn sure never brought anything back.

My radio whispers that backup has arrived. Big Ben's nuclear explosion turns the darkness into day.

As the heat of a thousand suns envelopes me, the little girl with peaceful yellow eyes reaches out of the light and helps me off the floor and, together, we go meet her mother.

Fuck my life?

Fiction 3



Nonfiction
NON
FICTION
NONFICTION
Nonfiction

Non Fiction

Non-Fiction 1st Place
I was a Teenage Wage Slave
by Michael Garcia

In retail, pallets play a pivotal role in the transportation and storage of merchandise.

They don't last long. I know: I have extensive experience in retail. I've worked at Toys R Us, Bashes', Party City, the 99 Cent Megastore, Savers, and Family Dollar. I've seen the level of abuse pallets suffer, and have even contributed to it. Sometimes, after a shipment has been unloaded, we use them if we want to move a score of shelves from the floor to the back. But when the pallets break, we throw them out back by the dumpsters and they become someone else's problem. They pile up until they've rotted away into termite feed. But what's a pallet to do? It's nailed together, and only in death can its pinions dissolve. In life, on the job, they bow under the weight of their loads. Even if the boards don't snap, management replaces the pallet without a second thought as soon as a new load comes in.

“It was like watching Twist ask the Master for more gruel.”

38
Non-Fiction

Employers treat their employees with similar regard. You can't hack the work? Okay, good bye. But think about what you're missing! \$6.75 an hour! Four hour work week! Flexible schedules! No experience necessary! Opportunities for advancement! (This means becoming a shift leader for an additional twenty cents after six months of service, and it comes with full managerial responsibilities.) “I quit,” the newbie says after a particularly disheartening first day, dropping his smock at his supervisor's feet. “Fine,” the manager says, “starve.” So the newbie's stuck, like the tragic, noble pallet, in an unenviable condition. He's a tool now, he realizes, an insignificant apparatus his superior will discard when he finally snaps. Or goes postal.

“I get no respect,” Rodney Dangerfield lamented. Oh, boo-hoo, Rod, cry me a river. I get no respect. We get no respect. Ian, a friend of mine at Toys R Us, was told to shovel human feces deposited behind the store like it was coal on Christmas morning. Ian, who'd applied for and was hired as a

“Within ten minutes the customer got a refund and I got written up for agitating the guy.”

Utility Clerk (stock boy), was incensed. He went to our store manager, Walter, and told him shoveling shit wasn't in the job description. When questioned as to why he wouldn't seize the opportunity to go above and beyond his duties, Ian replied, "In this case, I'd prefer not to." He paused, and then added, "I'll do it if I get a bonus on my next paycheck." Walter snorted.

"That ain't happening, man."

It was like watching Twist ask the Master for more gruel. Ian insisted, and the manager retaliated by giving him the rest of the day off. And the day after that. And the rest of the week, too. "We have no more hours for you," Walter said. In fact, since you pitched a fit, we got new hires, he failed to add. When I tell 'em jump, they say, "How high?" If you'd "prefer not to," then fuck off, Bartleby. And indeed, my friend called in two weeks later to check his schedule, only to find management had gotten rid of him. "Uh," said the new girl fielding calls at Guest Services. She rifled through the schedule. "You're not on the payroll. What was your name again?"

Discarded! Tossed out! You're 86'd, Ian. Yesterday's news. Historical. "If thine employee offends thee," goes the Manager's Bible, "pluck him out."

The discourtesy didn't just come from within. Discourtesy came from customers, too. Take the one week I worked the Guest Service desk at Kmart. A customer came in one fine morning with a portable George Foreman grill. His face was pockmarked, his skin hung loosely on his bones, his clothes were in tatters. His life sucked. You could see that a mile away. And much like a mutt will turn vicious after lifelong ill-treatment, so this guest, to whom life obviously dealt a bad hand, was disagreeable with me.

"His life sucked.
You could see that a mile away"

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"The meat comes out hard," he screamed by way of salutation. "If I'd wanted a fucking a chew toy I would have gone to Petsmart!"

"Do you have a receipt?"

"No."

I requested his phone number and address (intel Kmart takes during transactions so that the store can send flyers to the unsuspecting customer's mailbox every weekend).

The guest just glared at me and admitted that, in a fit of paranoia, he'd neglected to relinquish his info. I told him, somewhat gleefully, that company policy stipulated we retain the information for situations like his, and

he flipped. Eventually, the manager passed by, hands in pockets, whistling "Skip to My Lou" as lackadaisically as if he was in frocking Mayberry, and asked what seemed to be the

problem.

"Well, see, what happened was..." I began, before the guest interrupted me. Within ten minutes the customer got a refund and I got written up for agitating the guy.

For fun that evening, and to end the day on a light note, I went to an online forum devoted to similar, true horror stories of the service sector. It just depressed me, though, because I realized my story was the same story all over America: Managers play favoritism.

Unexpected layoffs are implemented to make way for new hires who'll work for less money. Customers disregard return policies.

We put up with it because we have to pay rent, pay tuition, feed our pets, feed our children, feed ourselves, save for the future,

*"The only way to achieve that, I suppose, is to **shut up** and work."*

“I have to wonder if there's a better evil.”

save up for the vacation, pay medical insurance, car insurance, life insurance. We have to pay off bank loans, student loans, pay for Mother's funeral, pay for the wedding, buy new clothes, buy gasoline, buy time. We have to get the oil changed, fix that broken window, keep the water running, the electricity on, and tax collector at bay. If we could leave for higher ground, we would. But with no skills, possibilities, opportunities, or time how can we?

In contrast, what's our incentive for staying in a particular job at a particular store? It ain't the people we work for. Nor the people we serve. In retail, you aren't special. You aren't unique. We're expendable, Iain Levison wrote in *A Working Stiff's Manifesto*: “*One human is as good as the next. Loyalty and effort*

are not rewarded.” It's dehumanizing. What's the point, if we're expendable?

In *Candide*, Voltaire tells us to “cultivate our garden.” Be practical in your goals, expectations, and outlook—ours isn't the best of all possible worlds. Focus only on what's important. The work is backbreaking but at least you're content because you have all that you need. The only way to achieve that, I suppose, is to shut up and work. Is that the point, then? Because we have to, we put up with it? What the hell kind of life is that? What choice do I have, anyway? If I got another job, I'd just be going from pillar to post. Better the devil you know, right? But when I'm wearing my uniform and a customer has called me an asshole⁴; when I'm working the register and two gypsies are trying a change run on me; when my manager tells us to pick up poo before deferring to the maintenance team; when all that and more is going on all around me, I have to wonder if there's a better evil. I could go on and on about this, but right now I have to set my pen down, and clock back in.

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Non-Fiction 2nd Place
Final Notice of Eviction
by Kasey Hannan

Take Notice, that this is the end of the line for you. Call yourself shadow, call yourself my dark-side, call yourself the strong one; take whatever name you like, as long as it's not Kasey. You are undeniably a part of me; some twisted, demented, hateful and angry section of myself that I let loose on the naïve and unsuspecting world.

You fought your way into the drivers' seat. You clawed and scratched and ripped my hands from the steering wheel and forced me into the passenger position. You were fury and rage that I had bottled up and set on a dusty shelf in the back of my mind. You, my sad shadow, were my copping mechanism for all those years—through the sexual abuse, the hidden vodka bottles, the nights I wished I were old enough to know how to die. *You* were the place I put all the hate I

felt for Mommy and all the desperation I clung to to keep my sister safe from creating within herself another version of you, the monster in the dark.

No invisible or physical friends necessary; I had you. For years you protected me with your hate, it was a shield against the need to die and all the sights and smells of what it was like to be abused. More and more, I would let you make the decisions in my life until soon I realized that it was becoming our life. You were around so much more than necessary, even when Mommy had stopped **drinking**, that's when I thought for sure you would leave, but you only grew **stronger**.

I knew then that I had bartered my control for my survival. I was strapped into the passenger seat and I could only watch as you crashed ^{crashed} my life into every available obstacle. You cheated on men; you lied through your teeth—for the sake of spite or hate or sheer love of deception. You exploded at everyone, lusting at the moments of watching people cry beneath your tyranny. You didn't love me, and you didn't care to protect me any longer.

"I was the shadow, just the whisper in the dark"

"No invisible or physical friends necessary; I had you."

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You were mad

with desire for attention, and gluttony became your constant companion.

Soon, I was the shadow, just the whisper in the dark, the tears rolling down our face when you screamed and yelled. You tried so hard to suffocate me, every chance presented to you. You had your claws locked around my neck, your nails digging into the flesh. It became harder and harder to breathe beneath your hate, with your constant need to remind me of what it was like to be painfully vulnerable, and your unquenchable thirst to hate everyone who ever cared for me.

At some point, I let you win and gave in to your forcefulness. I let you ruin me and you taught me in turn to hate myself more than anyone in the world ever could. You, whom I trusted, whom I created, whom I needed as I needed air—you are no longer welcome. I woke up from you, the nightmare I introduced to my reality, and I am ready to finally be free of you. I am my own enabler, and I will no longer be brought down by the burden of having to carry you with me in the hopes that you won't surface again, after all the work it took to force you down.

You are required to vacate my head, my shadow, the footsteps that follow behind me and any shred of myself that you may cling to. The decision has been made that your presence is no more than a poisonous fingerprint that I am no longer willing to bear. Take your memories, your poor attitude and your need to bring myself and everyone around me down, with you as you leave.

Failure to comply will inevitably result in your forceful removal from the premises. I no longer live in the fear that I can't make it through the day without being as spiteful and cynical as you would love me to be. Your presence is no more wanted than it is needed, and I am tired of cleaning up the messes you scatter about my life. In writing this I hope you finally understand how completely unwanted and unnecessary you are to my life. I hate you for what you have done to me and the people I love, and I will live the rest of my life working endlessly to heal from all the damage you have done.

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“You, whom I trusted, whom I created, whom I needed as I needed air—you are no longer welcome.”

Non-Fiction 3rd Place
Conde
by David Martinez

The last time I go to Conde's house, I can hear Milton Nascimento songs coming from somebody's loud stereo. It's before noon and Milton sings gypsy songs as I meander down the street. The street is like a corridor with the walls on both sides covered with Conde's paintings. His paintings stare down at me with sad eyes.

Conde lives in Educondario, a run down neighborhood in São Paulo. He paints the walls in front of the local school—for the kids. The walls have the faces of Princess Diana, Nelson Mandela, Pelé, Brazilian poet Antônio Frederico de Castro Alves, Bob Marley, and Conde himself.

Conde looks like an older Bob Marley. His long, graying dread locks cover most of his dark, paint spotted face. Passers by can sometimes see him painting on this side of the street, in an artistic fever. When he's like this, his eyes narrow, his brush sweeps across the spot of wall in front of him. He attacks the wall as if he were fencing with it. He attacks, then stands back,

sword-brush in hand in front of his face, in fencing position. He's a professional. He repeats this process throughout the day. He's never been to art school but the faces of Nelson Mandela and Princess Diana are perfect.

On the other side of the street from the school, behind Conde's other wall of paintings, is a gymnasium. It's missing most the aluminum panels from the roof. People climb up and steal the panels, so that they can sell them. I always wonder if anyone's ever fallen from the top, to the cold concrete gymnasium floor. The songs on the street change. They go from Milton Nascimento to Zeca Pagodinho to Dire Straights to Raul Seixas. People here love to dance, and they love music. A great Brazilian poet once wrote, "Good samba is a form of prayer."

I met Conde when I was 20, while walking back from a basic-English class I taught to the neighborhood kids. I remember my head aching from the verb “to be.” I was admiring his beautiful wall when I saw him painting. I had to talk to him. I have no idea how our conversation started but half an hour later we were talking about Salvador Dali, Jack Kerouac, and Vinicius de Moraes. We became quick friends—I showed him my surreal, little drawings.

Conde lives in the poorest part of Educondario, in a *favela*. A *favela* is an illegal neighborhood with illegal electricity, illegal water (if there is running water), and illegal inhabitants. The red brick, or street sign and milk carton houses grow overnight, like mold, on the hills. They erupt from the government apartments in the bottom of a small valley. Sometimes, I walk through the apartments to get to Conde’s house. The bullet holes that run up and down the apartment staircases always remind me of where I am. Today though, like most of the time, I take the front entrance—the stairs.

Most people who live in the favelas of São Paulo come from the northeastern region of Brazil. They come looking for work. They jump out of a frying pan into a blazing furnace fire. Most people who come, never find what they’re looking for. They become stuck a thousand miles away from home, without money, and without a ticket back. They become part of a grey and faceless mass.

Balloon Street is littered with sharp, fractured, concrete chunks that used to be ramshackle houses the police tore down. The name “Balloon Street” makes me think of clowns. It’s the only street in this favela with a name. It’s the only

thing that can be called a street. Conde lives here. The front entrance is a crooked set of stairs that fall down the hill, and open onto the broken street.

The woman who comes to Conde's door refers to herself as his baby's mother. She lives downstairs. He lives upstairs.

Like always, she lets me in with a smile. She is a short, fat, black woman. She always dresses in white. She is a

macumbeira from Salvador, Bahia.

Conde, like most artists, falls into a trance while working on something. He's like an ancient shaman, calling dead spirits—ancient African orixás. He summons the orixá of broken hearts. He summons the orixá of fear. He summons the orixá of love, hate, and lust—sweaty raw emotion. He is possessed with the orixá of inspiration. When he's deep in his work the orixás make him sweat and shake.

Conde's floor, veranda, walls, and stairway are covered with paintings, sculptures, lithographs, and (of course) paint. Sometimes he trades his paintings for food. On top of a waist high bookshelf sits a can with a candle underneath, which he uses to cook. Every nook is cluttered with books and papers. He always has a half burnt roach in his ashtray on a nightstand by his bed. His windows stay open.

The smell of smoke hits before I get all the way upstairs. Besides the cigarette smoke, and the weed, is incense and paint.

It's not as bad as it sounds. Conde's room smells like art.

It smells like life. It smells real and unreal. There is samba coming from his stereo. Vinicus de Moraes sings.

He shows me his newest painting of two little kids as adults—a little boy and a little girl. They have little kid faces, with hard eyes. They have small bodies, both with small practical mustaches. It's more haunting than it is funny. They are the little kids down the street.

Conde is happy as always to have a guest. He loves to sit and talk about Chico Buarque, Degas, Van Gogh, and Paulinho da Viola. He always has a story. He always has a lesson.

"Massa. Amei, cara. I love it." I say.

Breaking my gaze from the hypnotic painting, I say, *"Hey...this is my last day here. I came to say goodbye."*

Conde keeps smiling, but it's different now. He looks back to his painting on the wall.

"I was wondering when you were going to go. Going back to the U.S. already?"

"No. No, I'm going to Grajaú. I'm going to work there."

"Hold on, um minuto."

Conde rummages through a drawer next to his bed. He sways and his dreads bob.

"Here." He says.

He hands me five crisp bills. They're brown, but other than that they look like dollars. They're out of circulation and are no longer worth anything.

"I got those bills," he says, *"from a thief. He was an old friend of mine. I used to hide things he stole here in my house, como William Burroughs."* He laughs. *"He stole this money from a rich family, while they were sleeping. When he discovered they were useless and couldn't be traded for anything, he gave them to me—I have a collection."*

The music has changed.

The Doors are playing "The End" now. His room is saturated with the smells of paint and pot. The faces of his family smile from pictures on his bed-stand. He reminds me of my cousin in Fortaleza. It's his dreads. Seven years ago, as a thirteen-year-old boy, I wanted dreads like that, too. He stands up, smiling, and walks to his ever-open window. In the light of his window he could be a marooned pirate. He has the pirate gait.

"He died right there." From his window, Conde points to a spot of ground a few feet away from the end of the stairs.

"He walked with bad people and made them angry one day. They went after him. He ran down those steps and looked up at my house—at me. He could have run in and gone out the other way. Man...I wish he had. He could have escaped, but they would have killed me, probably. He was shot, right there, in the back, twelve times. I saw it."

I can see the dead man at the foot of the stairs. His blood waters the broken-street, and Conde's house.

We stare at the ground outside.

"How long will you be in Grajaú?" He asks.

"I don't know."

"Will you come back this way?"

"I don't know."

"Tenho mais uma coisa pra tu. I have one more thing for you."

He shuffles through some paintings leaning against the wall on the floor. The second present he gives me is one of those orixá-possessed paintings. The paint is so thick; it's more like a relief sculpture than a painting. It's the size of a normal sheet of paper, only it's on wood. A yellow, green, and blue face scream—surrounded by heavy red lines. The mouth of the screaming man makes a perfect "O." His eyes are black. It's signed Ronaldo—this is before he was Conde. "The man in that painting is an Indian who was burned alive,"

Conde says. That man was an Indian from the Pataxó tribe. His name was Galdino Jesus dos Santos. He was in Brasília to fight for his people's land that was being taken away by a group of farmers. He was poor. He had no place to stay, he didn't know anybody in the capital. He fell asleep at a bus stop because he was locked out of his hotel.

Five rich kids, the children of kings, watched him sleep. They had time to kill so walked to a nearby store and bought two liters of alcohol. They decided to play a prank on the homeless man sleeping on the street. Laughing, they poured the alcohol on Galdino, and lit him up. Maybe they thought of the toys they melted as kids. Galdino screamed in agony.

Lookers on chased the boys away and put Galdino out. His eyes had boiled. The strangers led the blind Galdino to the hospital. He died at 2am that morning, in the dark.

"I wonder if those boys laughed?" Conde says. "Do you know what their excuse was?"

"No." I say.

"They said they thought he was just a homeless man. Maybe four of them laughed and the fifth one, shocked by what he had done started to cry. Não importa, it doesn't matter. Someone's father, husband, brother, grandfather and friend was burned to death. Galdino Jesus dos Santos was burned to death, and do you know what happened to those five boys?"

"What?" I say.

"Nothing. They are the sons of the rich. They're the sons of kings, filhos de reis. Their fathers are senators and governors, or judges. Their sons never served more than four months time."

Neil Young sings "Helpless" on Conde's stereo, and through the smoke in his room, beams of light shimmer and float. His eyes are wet. Maybe there's too much smoke in here.

The last glimpse I catch of Conde is from his second story window as I walk up the favela steps. *This is not the image I will always see.*

I will see Conde painting the walls in front of the school. This scene passes by with a Buffalo Springfield soundtrack. *"There you stood on the edge of your feather, expecting to fly. While I laughed I wondered weather you could wave goodbye."* No one will ever know who he is. Most people will never see what he's trying to show. The paint on the school walls will wash away in the rain. The kids will put a mustache on Princess Diana. They have already made Bob Marley's eyes bloodshot, but that's ok. Tomorrow he'll have more.

Nonfiction Co

Non-Fiction Honorable Mention

Filbert Street

by Margaret Brittingham

When my parents moved into the flat on Filbert Street in San Francisco, from their honeymoon apartment in an old fisherman's shack on neighboring Telegraph Hill, my mother was pregnant with my older sister Carol. Our landlord Mr. Dito, a white- mustachioed retired Italian immigrant who lived with his diminutive wife in the top flat of our building, bet my mother that Carol would be born in September. He shook his head knowingly at her expanding belly and said, in his succinct English and with the experience of a four-time father, "*September!*" My college-educated mother insisted the doctor had told her October. They bet the respectable sum in 1942 of 50 cents on the month of the birth. Further, Mr. Dito explained that the \$45 monthly rent would be decreased by \$5 when the baby came. Mr. Dito won the bet and reduced the rent as promised.

When I was born two years later, I don't think a change in the rent marked my arrival. I moved into Carol's room. It was large and L-shaped and, as we grew beyond baby furniture, it provided enough space for our twin beds, the matching dark green dressers we painted in the backyard one summer vacation, our small dark green bedside dressers, and two double-shelved dark green bookcases stacked one on the other, sporting deep fuchsia interiors. Our father had replaced the bay window with French doors giving onto four wide redwood steps leading into the backyard.

This southern exposure let sun into our young lives.

The garden centered on a square of grass bordered by lumber, which set up a tightrope walking challenge for Carol and me. A paved walk bordered the grass, and planting beds bordered

the pavement. Mr. Dito had turned this prosaic city yard into a miniature secret garden. He might have been a farmer in Italy, for he had a real feel for plants – which ones would thrive in the foggy evenings of San Francisco, which ones would do well in the shade of the far end of the yard, which ones would like the western afternoon sun. His passion was fuchsias, and he planted some twenty-three varieties. They thrived there – small red and white cabbages, orange firecrackers, miniature red and purple rockets, white and lavender lanterns. They swung gently in the sea breeze afternoons. They had a fresh smell. Their stamens bore honey and would attract the rare hummingbird and the more common inquisitive child. We would pull out the stamens and suck the honey, sometimes arguing with an already dining ant. I learned ants have a sharp taste. By the end of summer these blossoms turned into small pulpy plums, which we liked to stamp into dark purple splotches on the garden walk. These fuchsias graced the planting borders. Ivy shared that space along the west bed and from there crawled up over an “ivy house” at the top of the stairs that led to the side alley that burrowed under our flat to the street. Along the back bed, acanthus and calla lilies flourished among armies of snails in

the deep shade of the massive apartment building half enclosing our back fence. Bending over these shade lovers, their taller branches catching just enough sun to bring on blooms, were the crowning glories of the yard, a yellow flowering lemon-vanilla-scented broom tree and a pink blossoming peach tree, which just managed to present us with fuzzy green walnut-sized fruit each July.

Our father installed a swing set in the grass patch. We played and squabbled in our private garden. One day our neighborhood friends Chela and Jeannie

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“We continued playing, pleased by her approval, and didn’t think about the incident any more.”

helped us pick leaves and weave them into the links of the swing chains. We looked up to Mrs. Dito’s window to see her gently frowning and shaking her head. Responding to her discontent we picked out the leaves, looked up again, and got a smiling nod from her smoothly lined face. We continued playing, pleased by her approval, and didn’t think about the incident any more.

Later, on an afternoon when Carol and I came home from elementary school, threw our books and sweaters on our beds as usual, and glanced out the French doors at our garden, we were startled to see a crew of workmen wrapping branches in large burlap cloths. The garden was bare. *“Your yard got a haircut!”* they laughed. The crew had cut down the broom tree, the peach tree, all the ivy, all the fuchsias. De Sciricco couldn’t have imagined a more desolate nightmare-scape. We ran to the phone to call our mother at work. *“Mommy, they’ve cut down the garden!”* we wailed, to her helpless dismay. She later said she’d never heard us sound so distraught. We hung up the phone to her promises that she’d be home as usual by six and would see what could be done.

Carol and I trudged back to our room, clumping down the ringing steps to inspect our ruined garden. As we looked around, our glances lifted up to the third floor where lovely

We all knew n o t h i n g could be done.

Mrs. Dito, now widowed ten years, nodded and smiled beside her sunny lace curtains. She had always loved a clean garden. Her cabbage roses were in her living room carpets. She was content in her home with her well-considered decision.

Mommy came home and commiserated with us. **The next day**, she varied her Saturday errand route and went out of her way to Sears to spend some unbudgeted money on curtains for our French doors. Our room was now exposed to the windows of the surrounding apartments, and she knew we were no longer young enough to be unconcerned by neighbors' eyes. We all agreed the elaborate set of curtains with large magenta blossoms was not right, so she returned them and put up plain white shears.

The next summer we moved to a much bigger flat on the second floor of a building on Washington Street, where our close friends, the Bartletts, were our new landlords. I entered junior high school that fall and got involved with sports, scouts, art committee. Except for a few times when I read there, I didn't think about going into the new backyard.

That part of my childhood was gone.



poetry
poetry
POETRY
poetry

Poetry

Mí Curandera

by Philip Boddy Jr.

Gurglings dribble into my dreams
While another idyllic REM vignette dissolves.
Her aromatic alarm wraps me so I sniff...and lift my head.
Zorro mews, stretches, then dodges my legs
As I inhale...then flail to sit up.
A new Noir film flickers by in my...mind,

"Caffeine, Again, Prevents Grievous Events in Peoria."

Eggs and grits with bacon bits, Bogie and Bacall.
Essential comforts, couples conjoined.
That twelve-cupper steams for me on our counter.
My healer, my nurse, "¡Mí Curandera!"
Dark, pungent, so urgent,
Discolored dishwasher disgusts me!
No baby piss for me, "¡No, Señora!"
If you can view through the brew, it ain't java.

I pour my first mug as she hiss-pers,
"If you need anything, Baby, just slurp."
I bet Bogie gulped a lot of java.

poetry

A Lonely Era

by Tyler Simons

My life exists as if it were a bubble about to burst.
In this mechanical field of imminent obsolescence
I am like the Bushman, progress not my namesake.
I'm inundated by electron flickers of red, blue, and green screens,
Swimming in Metropolis,
Drowning in the visual noise.
Drowning in the visual garbage.
I flail to grasp abstractism.
My interest as narrow as those a moth's seeking luminescence.
My desires limited by what objects I may move, remove, or obtain,
I see life as a vehicle, everything vehicle and even I a vehicle too.
The corporate creatures, like hollow beasts of technology and efficiency,
have harvested our names.
Era Vulgaris-a time of solitude,
Desolation.
The modern Era burns us all neon.

Electric (Dis)Illusion

by Ryan Barrette

Keystrokes of lust
Digital trust
Dreams displayed over green
Messenger make-ups
Text message breakups
Voices that are only seen
Lonely masturbation
Web-cam consummation
Love behind a computer screen



Red Robin and my French Fried Nightmare

(Oh, and, Don't forget the Ranch Too)

by Tyler Simons

Bring us some Fries. Don't forget the Ranch.

I smile. I nod, not a problem I say.

My tables are full of Pillsbury dough boys bursting like muffined top cinnamon rolls
Desperately trying to escape the inadequate confines of a tube.

So ravenous they drink Ranch and diet-coke by the gallons.

It makes me vomit. Brings racking and twisting in my bowels.

Another table flags me down.

Family of eight, this time brown.

Hastily scribbling a drink order, escape quick

Before the inevitable request. Too late. Too slow.

Of course I will folks (Oh, and, don't forget the Ranch).

I look around the restaurant, behold what I see

An obese eight year old boy, stuffing his face with glee.

Poor little bastard, never stood a chance.

Just look at your parents, it takes two chairs each to hold up their ass.

I find myself contemplating if flight attendants have such similar frustrations

In regards of course to seating arrangements.

Should that balloon of a man purchase two seats?

I'm sure like me, they wish they could say-sir you're too damn large.

Build your own damn plane! With extra wide-seats, one that fits a double sized anvil to say the least!

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poetry

Instead I smile. I nod, just the flight attendant my answer-Not a problem at all sir!

But Bottomless Fry-fills follow me everywhere (and I get it already, don't forget the Ranch).

As children I imagine we are all enamored with Fries,

The hope and dream of getting those deep-fried Spuds out at dinner.

Now, their long thin shapes plague my reality. I see them in pens at school. See them dancing 'round my bedroom; the little-light switches morph into fried Potato doom. See them raining from the opulent sky, I swear to my wife the hail is nothing than but kibbles-n-bits, -those tiny extra crispy Fries we are forbidden to give, (they have always been my favorite)-tasting of bittersweet salt. I see Bottomless Fries all day, and dream of searing red oval baskets bursting with salty death.

Slowly I have been drowning in the gluttony of this place,

So are their stomachs...

Of course sometimes I do remember,

This job is not forever.

Years from now I'll be my own professor.

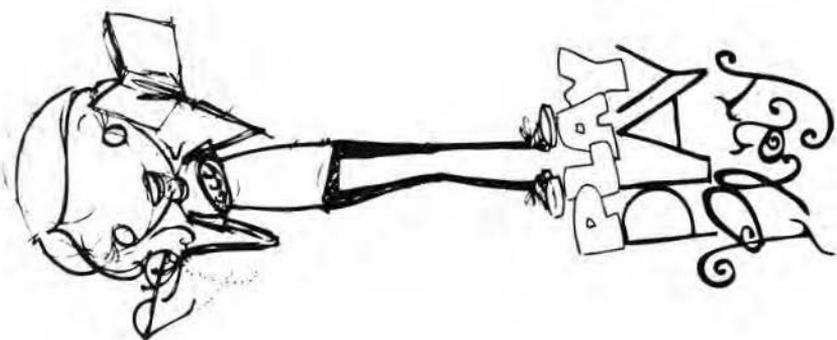
I'll teach saturation on the history of Fries, Salt, and Obesity.

Lecture on the origins of infinity.

Bottomless,
Bottomless,
Bottomless

Bottomless.

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poetry



Play

Of Man
by Diayn Day

Characters

Ted Gilmore, university professor of biological prehistory, middle-aged, energetic, impatient, insensitive.

Herb Berringer, university professor of cultural prehistory, middle-aged, looks exhausted, discouraged, haunted.

He recently experienced an overwhelming loss.

Time

Present, early spring.

Place

Outdoors, rough terrain.

Setting

The ground is covered in ice. Bags, backpacks, pads of paper, and digging tools are scattered on the ground.

Gilmore and Berringer wear cold-weather clothing.

At Rise

Gilmore and Berringer work at a large, deep pit. At rise, both men stand at the edge and look down at an object they've uncovered. The top of a ladder is visible.

Berringer

The preservation is exceptional, Gilmore, absolutely flawless. The skin appears pliable, fully fleshed. I can even distinguish individual hairs. He looks like he's down for a nap. It's truly extraordinary, Ted.

Gilmore

Medial facial prognathism, cranial capacity sixteen hundred. Extraordinary? BERRINGER! It's beyond extraordinary. This creature has no chin! No forehead! Look at the nose! Great god! It's a ship's prow! And the brow ridge! You could store canned good on that brow ridge! Herb! Do you realize this popsicle's the prototype for every history-of-man exhibit on the face of the entire damned planet? And he's ours! Every wart, every nose hair, every centimeter of crap—

Berringer

Gilmore, control yourself.

Gilmore

—belongs to us!

Berringer

It's painfully clear why you relate so well to your student. Am I imagining it or is there a shadow near the left shoulder? It looks like... I don't know, I can't tell. It may be a bundle of some kind. Hand me the pick, would you?

(Climbs into the pit. Begins to work the ice)

Gilmore

Approximately five feet tall, barrel-chested, occipital swelling—

Berringer

GILMORE!

Gilmore

(Looks into the pit)

It isn't possible. Christ...it isn't possible.

Berringer

Can it be genuine?

Gilmore

Of course not. It's a freak, a mutation,
a practical joke. It must be.

3
PRAY

64
BERRY

Berringer

Maybe not. Could something like this fall within normal variation?

Gilmore

No one knows what normal variation is for Neanderthal.

Every fossil we have is nearly identical. There is no variation.

Rounded forehead, developed chin, no mandibular recession—

Berringer

Larger than average nose.

Gilmore

No bigger than we see in modern Mediterranean peoples. The brow overhangs, but less so than in the common Neanderthal.

Berringer

Torso appears primitive.

Gilmore

But, Berringer, note the slender limbs.

Berringer

(Recoils as if struck)

What?

Gilmore

I said look closely. The limbs appear more gracile than the typical Neanderthal. Do you see it?

Berringer

They look distorted. I mean the limbs...appear...twisted. Do they look...odd to you?

The limbs, I mean? (Pause)

How old would you say?

Ten...twelve? A boy of ten...perhaps? Or...twelve?

Gilmore
What? Ten? That'd be my guess. God in heaven, Berringer! Do you realize what this is? It's a damn revolution.

It'll set the world on its evolutionary ear. Not just Anthropology, but the whole damn planet. The world's been picking the bones of Neanderthal for one hundred and fifty years freakin' years. What happened to him? Did he go extinct? Was he absorbed by modern populations? Was he a separate species? A race? A branch? An ancestor? And now we know, Berringer. NEANDERTHAL IS US!

Berringer

(Long pause)

Father...and...son. Do you think?

Gilmore

What? What's that? Father and son? Sure, why the hell not? On a hunting trip, sudden blizzard, no shelter. They wait fifty thousand years to be found and we've got 'em! Oh, man, have we got 'em. I'd give both my legs to find Mom.

Berringer

She...wouldn't have hunted with them, you know. She's long gone.

Dust. Like...Marian. Is Marian dust now, Ted?

Gilmore

What? What the hell are you talking about? Pay attention, man! From the look of the smaller figure, if it truly is the offspring, the mom had to be Cro-Magnon. A modern woman. Think about it, Herb! She was probably no different in appearance from one of our own college girls. Ugh, can you imagine one of our coeds bedding down with that misshapen, thinless hulk?

PLAYS

Berringer

Yes, Gilmore. Today they're called football players. Remember your scientific detachment, Professor. Try to recover some.

Gilmore

Detachment! Berringer! For the love of God, wake up. Don't you understand the significance of this yet? We're rich! We're going to be filthy, stinking rich.

Berringer

We're anthropologists. We're not in it for the—

Gilmore

We'll be stinking rich anthropologists. Wrap your mind around this, Herb...THE BOOK! Co-written by us! Scientifically valid and popular world-wide. Hollywood will make a movie about us. There's always a movie. We'll do talk shows! We'll be in science textbooks for a hundred years, two hundred years. Hell, we'll be in the Encyclopedia Britannica! I have phone calls to make. CNN, Fox, Associated Press. I'll wake up the entire damn planet if I have to.

Berringer

You're being ridiculous, Gilmore. We don't even know if they're valid specimens. We have to ascertain—

Gilmore

Ascertain my ass. They're real. I can see it and so can you. Tell me, Herb. You joke about my relating to the students, but think about this. Do you honestly want to spend the rest of your life punching facts into the skulls of mush-brained brats whose intellectual speculation never travels beyond their next fuck? Do you think I want to suffocate for the next twenty or thirty years in a toilet stall donated by our benevolent administration?

GG
BERRY

Berringer

That doesn't sound bad to me, Ted. In fact, it sounds pretty damn good. Especially... Especially... Oh, nuts! What the hell do you want, Gilmore, a room with a view?

Gilmore

I WANT FREEDOM!

I want independence enough to pursue my own theories. I want the time to write my books without being chained to a stinking lecture hall. And these leather-skinned time-travelers are just what the doctor ordered. This doctor.

Berringer

No! I can't...let...you...do this. It isn't—

Gilmore

You can't let me—

YOU CAN'T LET ME?

Are you crazy? You can't let me do what? Make an earth-shattering contribution to science?

Make us both famous?

Berringer

I can't let you treat these beings like your personal ticket to stardom.

This boy...can't you see the resemblance? He looks like... Philip.

Gilmore

Boy? Philip? Berringer, come to your senses! These are bugs in amber!

PRAY

Berringer

They're human beings, Ted. You said it yourself. They're us.
Let them be. Philip...must— I mean let this boy...rest. Please.

Gilmore

Let...who? What? Herb!

SNAP OUT OF THIS! RIGHT NOW!
Honest to God, Berringer. I've known you for twenty years and
only now do I realize what an incorrigible lunatic you are.

Berringer

Gilmore, listen to me. Please! Neanderthal was the first being to treat
death with respect. They buried their dead with care and sensitivity.
They scattered flowers over the bodies—

Gilmore

I'm aware of that, Herb. Putting it bluntly, I don't give a damn if they blew fairy dust up their asses. Culture's your field, not mine. May I
remind you that every other Neanderthal ever uncovered is skeletal? *B o n e s , m y f r i e n d , b o n e s .* And here, through righteous
living or some trick of the gods, we've stumbled onto a specimen fully preserved right down to the fingernails. Not only one specimen—NO!
We have proof! Solid! Indisputable! Three-dimensional PROOF in the form of a semi-chinless kid that Neanderthal interbred with Cro-
Magnon. We have a family here, Herb. We have answers to questions argued for a century and a half and you want me to let them rest?

Berringer

(Sadly)

He'll be torn apart. Mutilated. You know he will be.



Gilmore

He? Both of them, both...of...them, will be professionally examined and preserved.

They'll be treated with respect. The public will love them.

My god, we've found the real cave men, not some idiotic commercial joke.

Berringer

Body parts...passed around like...hors d'oeuvres.

Gilmore

What the hell have you turned into, Berringer, some bleeding-heart social worker? What are you playing at? You know the routine. You know they'll be protected. Okay, all right. I may have been carried away for a moment. We lead our lives gazing backward and sometimes it warps the perspective. But, dammit, Berringer, if you're not interested in your own future, at least consider the science we've devoted our entire damn lives to. Think of the future of Anthropology.

Berringer

Did I hear you correctly? Do you have the unmitigated presumption to tell me to think of...Anthropology? Is that what you just said? What else do I have to think about in my life besides a pointless discipline I've squandered my wretched life on? Can you think of something else offhand?

Gilmore

Berringer! STOP IT! This is not the time and most certainly not the place, to rehash all of that. You assured me, you assured me, that you were well enough to go on this dig. You promised me and I believed you. Apparently we were both off the mark. FOCUS, dammit. This is not sacred ground. This is not some hallowed churchyard. These are fossils!

PRAY

Berringer

This isn't the time or place for what, Ted? Do I inconvenience you, you fanatical bastard? Have you forgotten that I am nothing without those mush-brained college brats you have such unbridled contempt for? Explain something, Ted. Why did you refer to these...dead things in an ice-age plot...as a family? Why use that particular sociological term? Could your admirable lexicon vomit up nothing more than the word "family"? Why not "grouping," "species," "pair?" "Why not duet?" Maybe they sang together, Gilmore. Who knows? Why "family"?

Gilmore

A careless expression, nothing more. I need another pen. I'm going back to the tent.

Berringer

Don't go just yet, Ted. Look at the second fossil. Look closely. I believe the clinical term you employed was "popsicle." Look closely at the popsicle you plan to chop up to make us rich. Why don't we call him Junior for the sake of expediency? Does Junior look familiar?

Gilmore

I'm putting up with this no more, Berringer. Who the hell do you think you are? Everyone dies. Understand? You, me, those popsicles down there.

EVERYONE! DIES!

All right, Herb. Let's walk back to camp and I'll make an out-call.

The crew can be here in ten minutes. They'll take you down—

Berringer

Does the popsicle's offspring look like someone you might have known?

Note, Gilmore, the slender limbs.



Gilmore

Berringer, for God's sake! These are ARTIFACTS. Spare parts! Both of them!

They... are... NO... RELATION... TO... YOU.

These objects are fifty thousand years old. You're taking it too damn personally. This is our job.

Nothing more.

Nothing more!

Berringer

Since my job is all I have left, Ted, I take it very personally indeed. Note the distortion of the smaller popsicle's slender arm. See how it bends at an odd angle above the body. Note, Gilmore, the uneven level of the ribcage. Profound trauma, do you think? Crushed diaphragm, perhaps?

Gilmore

It was the weight of the ice on the body. Okay, that's it. I've been indulgent enough. It's late and I'm on my way back to the tent. You can come with me or stay here. I don't give a damn.

Berringer

NOT YET! Observe, Gilmore, observe the beckoning position of the other arm as the ice holds it suspended. Who could he be reaching for, Gilmore? His father? We did agree that they were father and son, did we not?

71
Y
E
T

Gilmore

The arm froze in that position. The arm...froze...in that position. It isn't reaching for anyone. It's merely the way the arm froze, Herb.

Berringer

Merely the way the arm froze.

Gilmore

Yes! I'm saying—

Berringer

The way the arm froze. I'm not deaf. Is Marian down there?

Gilmore

Make sense, Herb.

You know Marian isn't there.

Berringer

I know that. I know! Did I say she was dust? Did I call my own wife dust? Is that what I said to you?

Gilmore

You weren't talking about Marian. Herb? I'd like you to step back. Just take one step back from the pit, please. I'm going to walk over to you and then we're both going back to camp. Do you understand? It's time to go now.

Keep your eyes on me, Herb.

Berringer

I wasn't there, Ted. Did you know that? When they went over. I wasn't there. After they were found...I was. But...you remember, don't you, Ted? But not when they went over.

Gilmore

You were out of town. No one blames you for not being with them.

Berringer

Philip's arm was wedged. It was pointing. It was pointing at me when I saw them.

Gilmore

Be quiet, Herb.

Don't say anything else. Just stay there. Stay right where you are.

Berringer

Do you see why I can't let you move this family, Ted?

I can't lose Philip twice. I can't fail him. Not again. I can't. HE'S MY SON!

Gilmore

How often do I have to tell you? That relic is not your son. PHILIP-IS-NOT-HERE!
Okay, Herb. Okay. We won't move them. No one will ever move them.

Ever.

You have my word.

Berringer

Thank you, Ted. I knew you'd come to understand.

73
PLAY

Gilmore

(Reaches Berringer)

I'm standing next to you, Herb. It's Ted Gilmore. Do you see me? We're going back to the tent now. Let me take your arm.

Berringer

Thank you, but I'm not ready to leave yet. I want to stay with Philip and Marian a while longer.

Gilmore

They're not here, Herb. Please believe me. They're far away...you crazy bastard. They're home. They're in Greenwood, remember? They're safe—

Berringer

You're my friend and colleague, Ted. But you're wrong. Philip is waving at me. Don't you see? Marian is with him. Look closer, dammit. Make an effort! Don't you see them? She's smiling at you, Ted. She always liked you. You were the one who found them, remember? You found them. Why did you find them instead of me?

Gilmore

The helicopter found them. I got a call because everyone thought you were still out of town. Try to remember. I arrived at the scene only thirty minutes before you got there. Try to clear your mind, Herb. Think.

Berringer

The car was on end in the snow. It was standing straight up. Isn't that right, Ted? Where was I when they went over? I can't quite—No, wait... I was coming back from a... conference. Is that even possible? A conference on empiricism, wasn't it? Versus...something...theory. What was that asinine conference on?

(Long pause)

TED! I SEE THE CAR! It's there beyond the snow bank! The lights are still on. I SEE IT! HURRY, TED!

Gilmore

HERB! STOP IT! Nothing is there!

Berringer

Let go of me! It isn't too late. We can still save them if we hurry. Let me go, damn you. It's Marian. I see her. I have to go to her. Marian! I'm here! I'm coming. Philip? IT'S DADDY! I'M HERE. IT'S ALL RIGHT, SON.

Gilmore

Herb! You're hallucinating. BERRINGER!

(Suddenly horrified)

Berringer

YOU! IT WAS YOU! DAMN YOU TO HELL! IT WAS YOUR FAULT! ALL OF IT! YOUR FAULT! I went to that bloody conference because of YOU! IN YOUR PLACE! THAT'S WHY THEY DIED! Philip died because of YOU. YOU KILLED THEM. You stinking son of—

(They struggle. Gilmore loses his balance and falls into the pit. He isn't seen again. Berringer becomes tranquil and motionless. After a long pause, he speaks as if just waking up)

Ted? You know...Ted...this is odd, isn't it? I'm a little ashamed to admit it, but I think you may be right. It must have been a reflection on the snow or...or perhaps I was hallucinating. That can certainly happen if I miss a meal, and it's been...oh my god, Ted, do you remember that ridiculous archaeology symposium three years ago? I had nothing to eat for eight hours straight. I nearly passed out. Ted? Where are you? We need to finish up and get back to camp. I swear to God I'm frostbitten. I can't feel my toes. Ted? TED! Where the hell did you go?

(Berringer looks around for Gilmore, walks to a backpack and pulls out a pad of paper and a pen. Returns to the edge of the pit, looks down, and begins writing. Speaks mechanically)

Medial facial prognathism, not exceptional for contemporary Mediterranean peoples. Note, Gilmore, the slender limbs—

END



Play

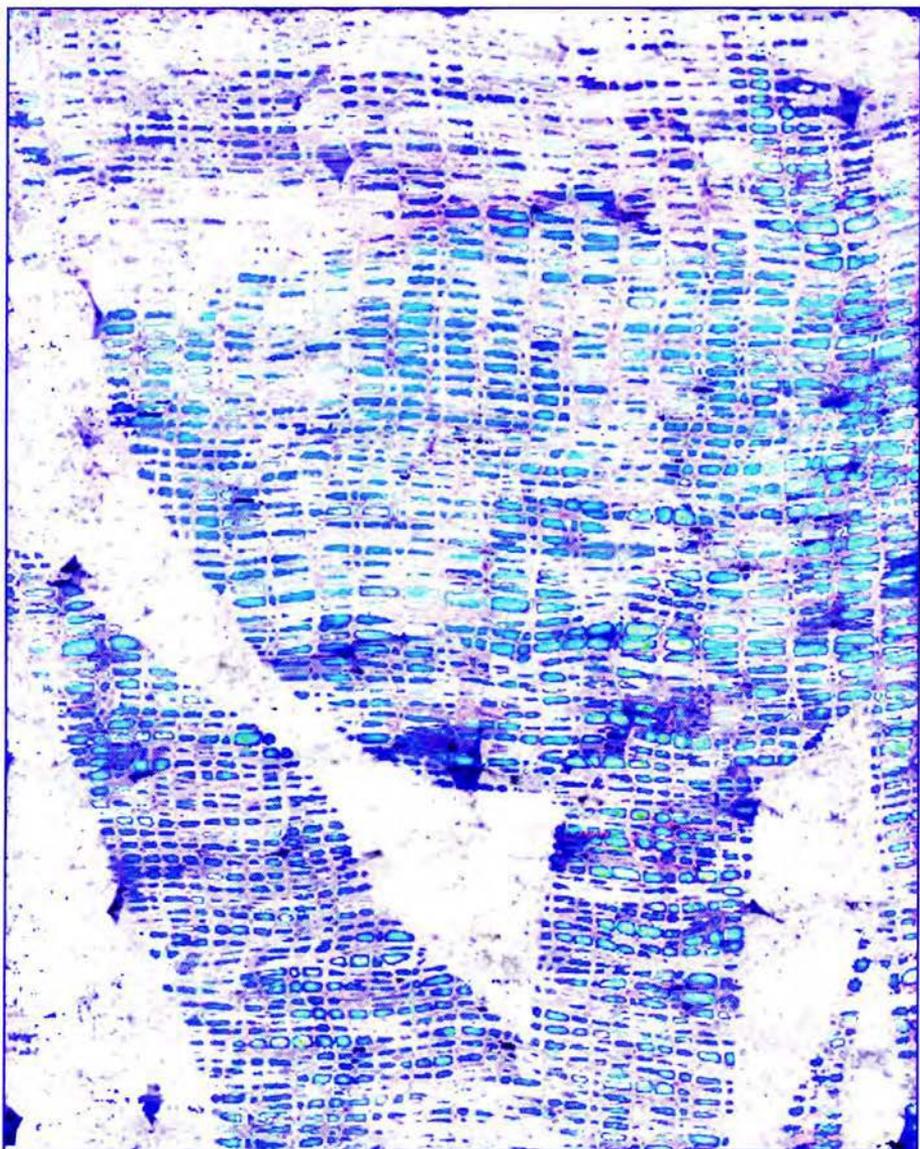
Art



Computer Art 2nd Place

Gauze

Laura Fraedrich



Media: Computer Art

Computer Art 1st Place

Untitled Bird Photo #I

ody Harris



Media: **Computer Art**

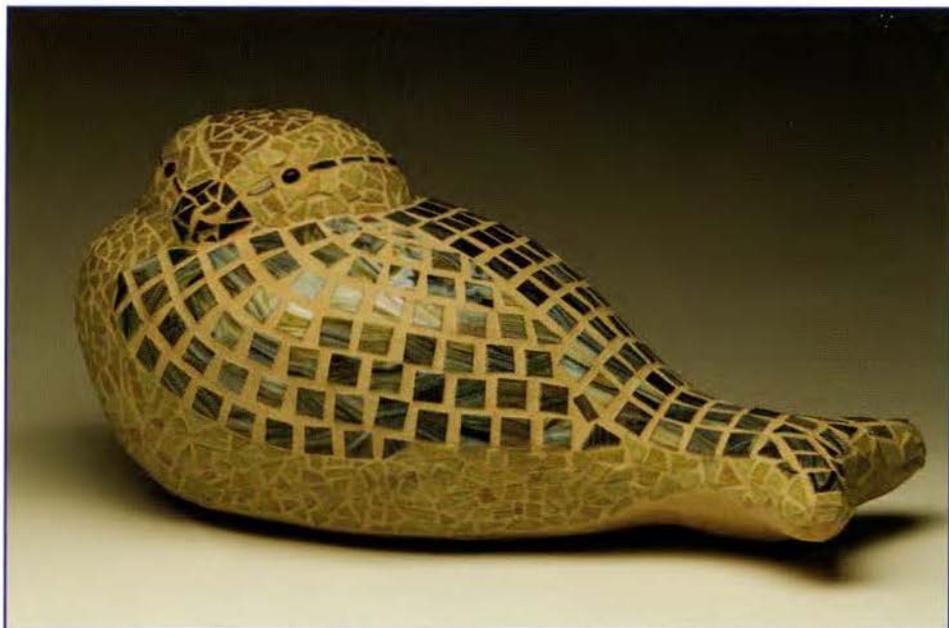


35
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Sculpture Honorable Mention

Moby

Kelly Eubank



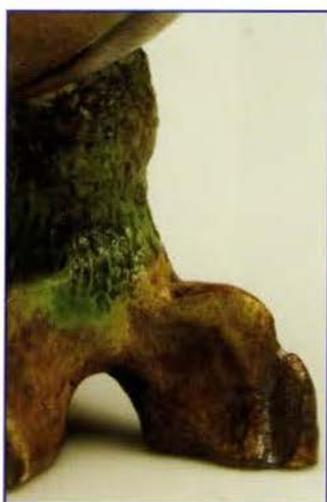
Media: Sculpture



Sculpture Honorable Mention

The Project Formerly Known as Clyde

William Solan



Media: Sculpture



Sculpture Honorable Mention

Our Lady: Pray for Protection of the Innocent from Politics

Sandra Marie Whyman



Media: Sculpture



3
2
A
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Sculpture 3rd Place
Princess with Throne
Laura Fraedrich

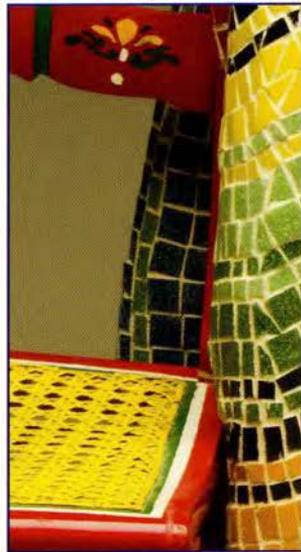


Media: Sculpture



31
A
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Sculpture 2nd Place
Cinco de Mayo
Billie Spencer



Media: Sculpture

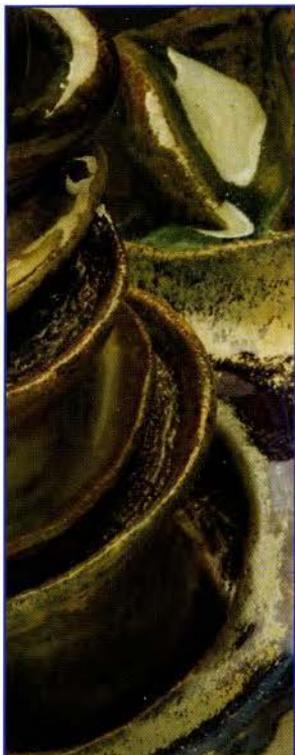


30
A
T

Sculpture 1st Place
Untitled
William Solan



Media: Sculpture



29
ART

Ceramics
Untitled

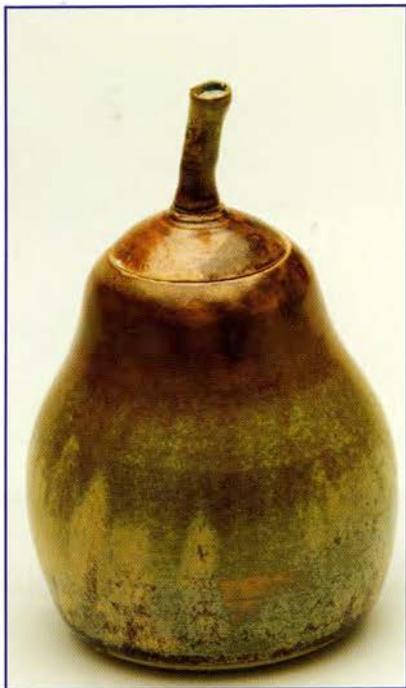
Alexandra Silvas



Media: Ceramics

Ceramics
Pear

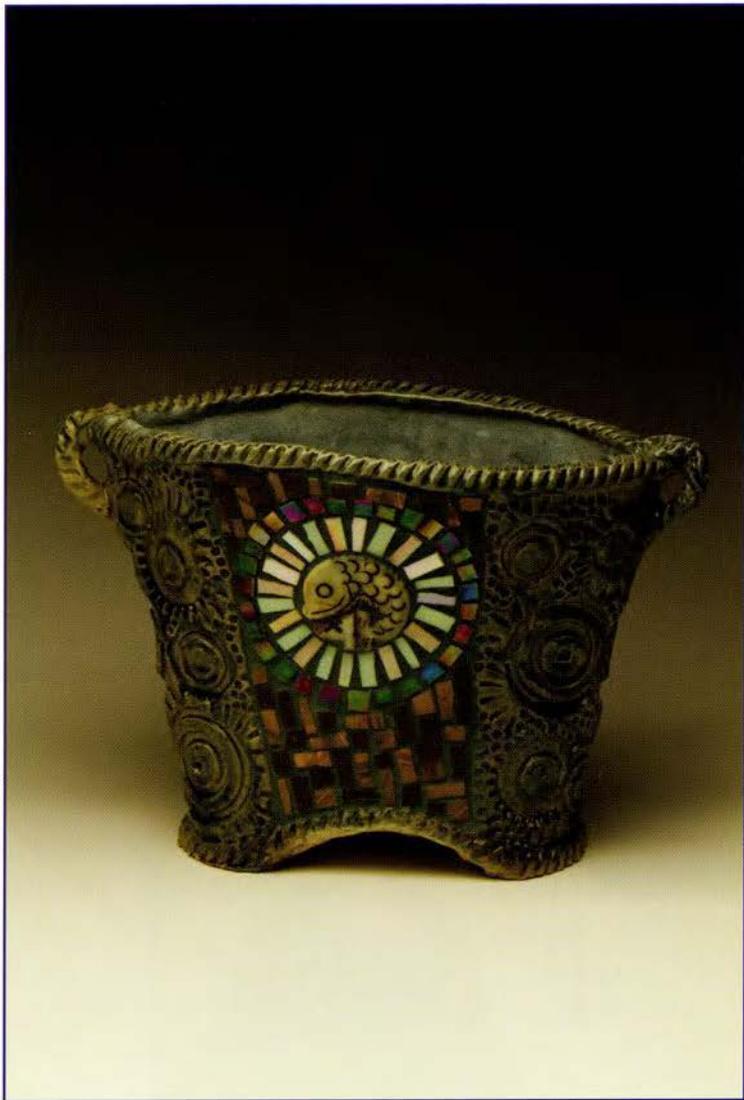
Martine Cloud



Media: Ceramics

28
A
T

Ceramics Honorable Mention
Untitled Mosaic 2
Laura Fraedrich



27
ART

Media: Ceramics

Ceramics Honorable Mention
Echoing Heart
April Watt



26
AR
T

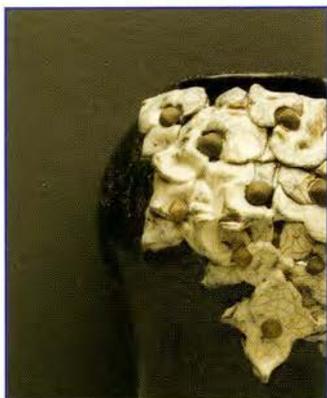
Media: Ceramics



Ceramics 3rd Place
Hydrangeas
Nannette White



25
ART



Media: Ceramics



Ceramics 2nd Place
Hollow Tree
Joaquin Alfonso N. Guiang



Media: Ceramics

2
A
T

Ceramics 1st Place
Incense Burner

Martine Cloud



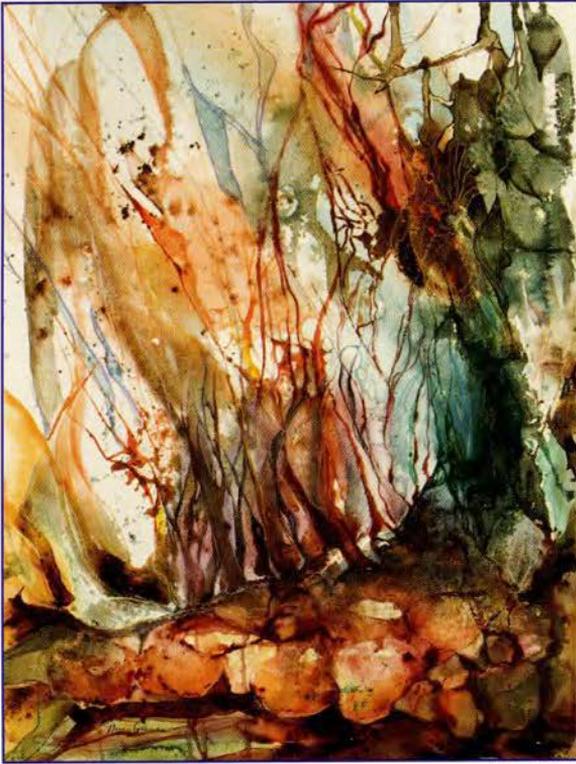
23
A
T

Media: Ceramics



Painting
Deep Speaks to Deep

Nancy Gunn



Media: Watercolor

Painting
Wildfire

Regina Moritz



Media: Watercolor

22
A
T

Painting
Attack of the Giant Squid

Adriann Gardner



21
A
T

Painting
Ephemeral

Janet Cini



Media: Watercolor

Media: Watercolor

Painting Honorable Mention
Zombie Portrait of Jacob
Shirley Louise Elsass



20
A
T

Media: Acrylic



Painting 3rd Place

Welcome Home, Son

Shirley Louise Elsass



191
A
T



Media: Painting

Painting 2nd Place

Orchids

Laura "Liz" Rosen



18
A
T



Media: Watercolor

Painting 1st Place

Frida's Boudoir II

Pamela Bleakney



Media: Watercolor



Drawing
Untitled
Stephanie Bejar

Media: **Charcoal**



16
A

Drawing
Familia Madrigal
Larry Valencia

Media: **Charcoal**



Media: **Pen and Ink**



Drawing
L
Mike Chhay

Drawing Honorable Mention

Urban Icon

Adrianna Long

Media: Paint and Mixed Media



Drawing Honorable Mention
**Through the
Looking Glass**

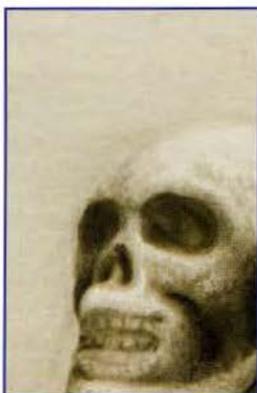
Adrianna Long



Media: Ink

Drawing 3rd Place
Saraloni's Portrait
Janet Cini

14
A
T

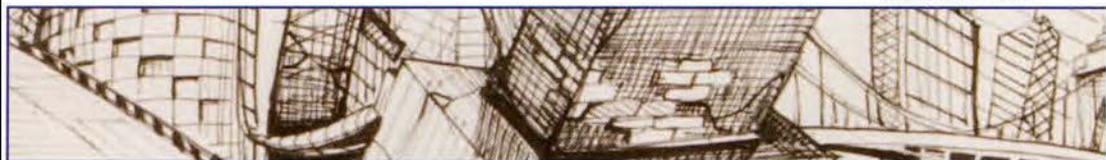


Media: Charcoal

Drawing 2nd Place
City of Bridges
Larry Valencia



Media: Ink



12
A

Drawing 1st Place
Race-ism
Miguel Monzón



Media: Oil Pastel and Colored Pencil

Photography
Untitled

Laura Fraedrich

Media: Color Photo



Photography
**All for the Love
of Her Art**

Laura Fraedrich



Media: Photo

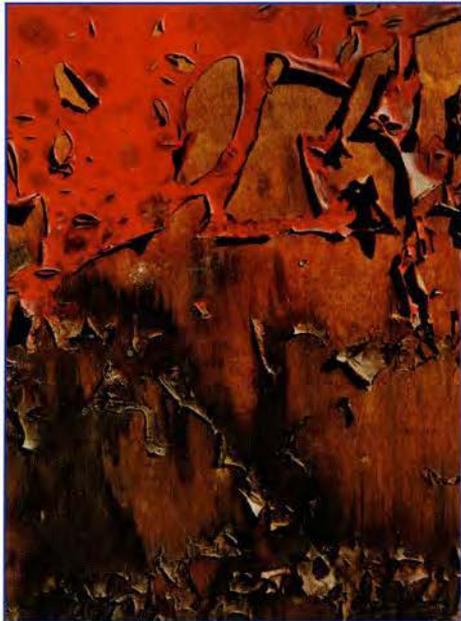


Photography
The Clothesline
Laura Fraedrich



Media: Color Photo

Media: Color Photo



Photography
Peeled Paint
Laura Fraedrich

Photography Honorable Mention
Untitled Triptych #3
Cody Harris



Media: Color Photo





Photography 3rd place

Two People Somewhere Doing Something #3

Miles Nitz



Media: Van Dyke Blue



7
A
T

Photography 2nd Place
Mike Lean
Ulises Lara

Media: Silver Gelatin





Photography 1st Place

Mud Man

Kaitlyn McGill



Media: Silver Gelatin

Art



Ceramics

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