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The editors sincerely appreciate Louie Cortez's invaluable assistance in the publication of this journal.

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Poetry

Where the heart is

Jennifer Bliss

There was once upon a time
Where home was a castle
Built up with coarse stone
Painted sweet, candy coated
Held echoes of laughter in every room

When seasons changed
And buds of every flower bloomed
War found its way home
It bowed like a ship at sea
Where waters decimated
Walls made of spider webs
Walls made of mirrors

Home was the last leaf of fall
Breaking from the tree
Cascading through worlds of dimensions
With a compass that gave no direction
Every new vision that rocked the foundation
Like a child's fist, pounding on the floors

But homes adapt to the pacing of feet
And to the constant tick of the wrist watch
Calloused hands have smoothed rocks
Into pebbles, into sand
And souvenirs of memories adorn the halls of time

I have heard that some homes are a city
And some are volcanoes
But my home became a history
As strong as a thousand different men
As soft as a mother's touch

[ILL]-DEFINED

Melody R. Meija

an·i·e·ty
aNG'zīədē/
mother

: a phase; the act of being spoiled

Example: “You are just being chiflada. It’s nothing, you do not have anxiety.”

synonyms:	<i>chiflasones, phase, denial</i>
antonyms:	<i>comforting, understanding</i>

She and I were best friends before we ever met,
but my anxiety has rattled our friendship.
She claims that right now, she does not know
me
or
it.

an·i·e·ty
aNG'zīədē/
father

: no definition found

Example: no example found

synonyms: *No synonyms found*
antonyms: *supportive, conversational*

His silence joins the conversation,
but my anxiety takes over...

it

screams
much

LOUDER.

anx·i·e·ty
aNG'zīədē/
sister

: not a reason to cry; the act of being annoying or dramatic

Example: “Can you get over it? You’ve been crying for the same reason for days now. Try to stop. Your anxiety is all in your head.”

synonyms:	<i>annoying, emotional, irritable</i>
antonyms:	<i>sensitive, patient</i>

She does not want to understand

it

and as a result, she does not believe

it

is *real*.

anx·i·e·ty
aNG'zīədē/
brother

: the need for mental help

Example: “So if you are dealing with anxiety, should you see a therapist?”

synonyms:	<i>crazy, unstable, unaware</i>
antonyms:	<i>sympathetic, mindful</i>

We are so much alike, but he
does
not
understand

it

and why it has taken
a liking to

me.

Broken Bits of Holiness

Diane Gonzales Bertrand

Going through the dining room drawers,
it's easy enough to toss out old ribbons,
piles of birthday cards, half-empty nail polish,
dried up markers and broken pencils.
The brown envelope wedged in the back
of the bottom drawer feels bulky with small objects.

What to do about the contents
as they spill out onto the tabletop:
pieces of broken rosaries,
a scapular with no string,
a crucifix with only the legs attached,
chipped medals of saints whose image is worn down.

What to do about these religious objects,
so sacred my mother kept them together all these years.
And for what purpose?
A reverent burning? A dignified burial?

What to do with broken bits of holiness?
The one person who could tell me
is not alive
to give me answers.

Gathering up the holy remnants,
my fingers caress each blessed piece
before returning them to the brown envelope.

Close the drawer, and
pray for guidance another day.

Postcard from the Rental Home in Rural Maine

Cyra Dumitru

It is raining so hard upon the tin roof
that I can't hear the tea kettle bluster
when the water boils, and the north wind
just snatched the corner of the loose shutter
and slams it repeatedly against the clapboards;
the slamming settles into a steady clatter
audible above the downpour; a man had been
kneeling before a wide black tombstone
in the cemetery across the street when
the deluge began, his yellow bicycle leaning
against the stone fence. I stood on the porch
and waved him over with a red bandana
to take shelter. From the look in his eyes,
I don't expect it to clear any time soon.

In Vino Veritas

Krisztopher Banales

Some people find their answers in
a book about crosses,
prophesies and lost sons.
Some men find their answers in
the stars, the way
planets and comets rush across the sky.
Some people find their answers in
the lab, under flickering lights
through the lenses of a microscope.
Others find answers in
art, how colors are strewn together,
to show beauty upon that barren canvas.
Why am I wrong then to try,
and try, to find my answers—
At the bottom of a bottle.

Why was my child taken from me?
Never to see the light of day—
never to hear the sweet laugh of their mother...
I have no answer.
Why do good men, honest men, suffer while
bad men, evil men, become powerful men?
I have no answer.
Rain falls on the just and unjust alike, or so they say.
but I have no answer.

But I'll have one soon enough, just you see
for there are more bottles
than books.
And look, how easy, and how simple!
pick up the bottle—
easier than charting stars.
The bottle frees minds, stirs
hearts, loosens tongues, and makes for dancing.

Yes. Dancing!

I see it now. Do you? They're all
connected—

Dancing.

Stars gently waltz across the sky,

letters and words conga across the page.

Paint mixes and weaves, doing the tango on
the canvas.

And the cells do the salsa
under the microscope!

Aren't answers just truths?

Can't we all benefit
from the bottle?

In vino veritas.

A toast, brothers and sisters:

May truth be found with bottle in hand, and a foot on the dance
floor.

Have you always had anxiety? A response to a friend

Melody R. Mejia

I am six years old. I dream of spoonfuls of sugar and heart attacks. I wake my mom in the middle of the night with my worries. What does azúcar mean? Can kids have heart attacks?

I stare at her. She mumbles words lost to my dad's snoring, she suggests I say a prayer and go back to bed, but that doesn't help. I don't want to go back to my room. I don't remember how to pray.

I hold my breath. I try to move.

The dark hallway is my bedroom refuge. I hold back tears and stare at the night light.

My eyelids outweigh my thoughts and everything slows down. The next morning, my brother is my alarm clock, tripping over me: I'm blocking the bathroom door again.

I am twenty-six years old. I fear long-distance drives fueled by too much sugar and caffeine.

I avoid drinking vodka tonics and staying out late. I want to call my mother in the middle of the night with my worries, but she won't understand. She will only humor me, half-awake.

Tell me to pray. I try to pray. I mumble an Our Father then fall asleep crying a tongue-twisted Hail Mary.

I can barely breathe. I can barely move.

I am static. Everything is delayed. My stomach sinks. My body goes numb.

The next morning, my boyfriend is my alarm clock: I'm blocking the bathroom door again.

Brownsville

Tamara Garcia

My childhood home is a ten minute drive from Mexico:
my tongue split evenly down the middle,
my coronary artery pumps enough blood for two hearts,
and my entire life is built upon doubled dirt.

Que manera de vivir dividido por un río.

Where do Poets find Food?

Diane Gonzales Bertrand

Inside fortune cookies

where words become dessert and conversation.

While deciphering a menu in a foreign country,

helped by a waiter

who speaks two languages.

When choosing a rainbow of vegetables

from the roadside stand

to paint the tongue with metaphors.

And when tired

from deconstructing mysteries,

the poet conjures up

Mama's chunky banana pudding,

Granny's winter hot cocoa,

so thick with marshmallow swirls

a spoon feels dizzy with anticipation.

Watching

Stacy Fowler

The wind brings me
My brother's laugh
My daughter's song
A loving tribute in the sand
I see the lives I touched
As I watch from the sky

The breeze carries
My mother's cries
On a poignant line
A song speaking truth about
The twisting turns and rocky roads
That were my life

It's true I'm gone, but I am remembered
For my satire and my song
Loving right but living wrong
Life ran out, but I live on
As I watch from the sky

Our hearts still beat together
As you carry on your lives,
I watch over from the sky

Composition Conference: What Hands Know

Cyra Dumitru

Not once does she look down to check what her hands are doing, so practiced is she at this sequence of minute movements. Her eyes hold mine the entire time that she speaks the backstory about her narrative: her father, his distance and infidelity. The secret of his that she discovered accidentally, one which calls affections and years into question. What she knows now that her mother does not. Her story is so heartfelt and entrusting that I do not want to break our connection by glancing away from her intent face, from the thick lock of black hair that veils her right eye; although, I am vaguely aware that her fingers are unstill. Their movements are contained, restless in a purposeful, flowing way. When her talking is done, when my comments on her essay are explored, when her spoken story begins its long slide into my hands, she stands up and walks toward my office door. She stops at the doorway, turns, and opens her hand asking, “Would you like these?” Two tiny paper cranes, intricate and crisply formed, repose in the palm of her hand. “When did you make them?” “While we were talking. I had torn the paper during Biology.” Such precision in her fingertips! Her articulate fingers have a mind of their own—know just how far to bend the corners of the strip, when to flip the thin paper over and fold again, again until tiny wings extend in perfect symmetry and a long, slender neck emerge—all by feel. “They are exquisite,” I say as I receive the pair of cranes. As she disappears down the long hallway, I place the delicate creatures upon two polished stones on my windowsill: one stone carved with the word create, the other with joy. Surely, I think, if she keeps practicing the verb, some version of the noun can take hold in the life of this young woman with the nimble and deeply discerning fingers.

Because of Them

Camille Stecker

Waking up on a brisk winter's morning,
to find oranges in her stocking.
Joy overcame her as she realized
she would have its sweetness
long before the summer months arrived.

Heavy clouds of smoke enveloped him
as he sat in the crowded tavern
with the bass shaking his beer on the table.
He never thought more than the life of
sitting in this small town.

They always went without so she would never have to.

The heart aching news
allowed all of her dreams
to crumble before her.
She had lost the man that loved her the most.
Her college education was done.

He worked as a paper distributor just
as his father and brother did before him, but
at nights, he was sitting in the local
community college's classrooms.
He would leave everything he knew.

They always went without so she would never have to.

After the divorce,

She worked two jobs to send her children to
Catholic school and have a roof over their heads.
He lost his job only to find another open door
that led to everything that he ever wanted.

They always went without so she would never have to.

My Little Christmas Tree

Luis Cortez

Last year, I was in my old house packing boxes for the move to a new house the following week. Wrapping plates in newspaper, games stacked by size, papers by importance, I filled each box and taped it shut. I moved haphazardly from room to room. I've only moved about a dozen times before so one would think I had it down but alas, no. Organization has never been my strongest suit. So as I tackled each room with the vigor of the Looney Tunes' Tasmanian Devil, I came across the hall closet and decided that was next on the list. I pulled open the door to reveal several shelves each with different contents, toiletries, tools, medicines, and the top shelf: everything else. What a mess! At that point, the best I could do was simply put my arm in one corner and sweepingly, push everything into one box. Pliers, Tylenol, and toilet paper all got swept in together and I laughed at the idea that moving makes strange bedfellows when it comes time to packing. Then I reached the top shelf. I stopped, suddenly realizing that looming over me in the depths of the shadows was an artificial miniature Christmas tree in a clay pot. Its ribbon and hot-glued ornaments wrapped in colored foil paper captured fragments of the light in the hallway and reflected back like tiny stars. Taking it out, I held it firmly in my grasp. Dust and webbing diminished the vibrant colors I remembered. It was given to me by my parents. At first, I didn't know what to do with it. It was just a little thing back then. Don't get me wrong, it didn't grow or anything, it's just that over the years I added more to it. I put on different things and took other things off but the tree was always the same. It was something passed on to me from my parents. Sean didn't think it was so important. He laughed at it, said it looked stupid. Frankly, he just ignored it. So many others did the same. I decided to put it away for a while and leave it there. Then I met Andrew. He was so different and I was so trusting. He took my parents' gift and, for a while, cherished it. But then something happened—perhaps he became bored with it and what I thought was a rearrangement of my tree was really a slow dismantling of it to leave it bare. I salvaged what I could from it but what he didn't destroy Eddie came along and finished the rest. I still recall the broken clay pot and the bent frame of the tree. I remember thinking perhaps I should just throw it away but my parents'

gift could not be discarded so easily and I set about repairing it. It took me a while but there it was now in my hands and ready for me to try again. Maybe this time it would be different. That was nine months ago—seems longer—and I'm in my new house now. Though I've since tried twice to share this gift handed down to me from my parents, it has been refuted time and time again. Sorry little Christmas tree. It seems you are fated to me and to me alone. Back into the closet you go. No more regrets from you. No more embarrassments. No more pain. Though I bury you now in my closet, I will bury you once more with my parents.

Father Time

Melody R. Mejia
(for my grandmother)

My little brother wanted me to define de·men·tia for him.
The word didn't fit well in his Kindergarten vocabulary,
but he wanted to know why de·men·tia makes Mom
cry after visits with Grandma.

I tell him:

It's Father Time's fault.
His tired hands,
force Grandma
back and forth
through her memories.

Some days, she will slip through her

past
(like the day you were born or when I chipped my tooth on a milk glass)

and

present,

Grandma tries not to let go of his hand,

but most times,
Father Time,
losses grip and

can't
stay by

her side.

And that is why Mom cries.

My Mother the Submarine

Amanda Bustos

My mother is the blue explorer of the seven seas. She has travelled to the bottom of the ocean and seen the creatures that scientists still cannot name. My mother makes appearances on TV after midnight on the Discovery documentaries. She is an expert on fish and she knows their favorite food. She is so often underwater, I hardly ever see her. I hardly hear her stories, so when Jimmy from gym says my mother is not the hero of the oceans, I repeat the same three or four stories about the whale with the three eyes, but he says I'm a bluffer. My mother really is Queen of the Sunless World but Jimmy from gym says my mother would drown in a three-foot pool. I know my mother dives into the deepest end and does, not one, not two, but three flips in two seconds. For Career Day, I asked her to bring seashells to my class and tell Jimmy she was a "Marine Biologist," as it says on this Encyclopedia, but she said, "Not today, honey. I'm so tired." I did not cry or roll on the floor a thousand times, because I know she must be so busy (all day swimming must be exhausting).

My mother cares about the environment even more than my teacher does. I know this because the dishes overflow in our kitchen; she never says it, but I know she protects water as if it is my sibling. She truly is from another planet. I have yet to see the antennas, but I have seen the galaxies on her arms.

My mother could replace Mr. Clean from the commercials. Last Sunday morning she cleaned until the walls were squeaky white and empty. Our walls were time machines that remembered my two-month-old face, but now I never see those portraits in the living room. On the main hall stood proudly a woman and a man whom I cannot fully recognize, but the woman had a white dress and the man stood sharply in a tux, paralyzed in time, immune from the wrinkles on my mother's fallen smile. I have seen these two strangers more recently, hidden in the basement. I go there sometimes to try on my mother's old clothes and my daddy's old suits. Last Saturday night, daddy's breath made me dizzy. His cologne usually resembles the stench of the empty cans crushed in the backyard. When he

hugs me I pinch my nose tightly, but I have not had to pinch my nose since Saturday night.

My mother, the award-winning submarine, holds her breath for thirty minutes. I have not seen it but I sometimes hear her from her bedroom gasping for air. I constantly wait outside her door, listening to the noises she makes. Last Sunday morning I had a sleepover outside her room and I asked her from the other side, “Mamma do you want to make pancakes?” She said, “Not today, honey. Momma’s so tired.” She opened the door and I fell, but she passed right by, got more water, and locked herself in again. She carried water in her eyes, but those are side effects of being a fish. By now, I could be a mermaid expert when I grow up because I know what mermaids, like my mom, are like. I know that sometimes when we are alone in the park, watching a movie, or before she goes to bed, her little eyes spit rivers of water and she gasps and gasps and practices her breathing.

My mother swims in her bed, she buries herself under her blankets and finds a world unknown to me. A world bigger than our white-walled house and soundless, empty rooms. Every weekend when my daddy leaves, she goes in for a quick two-day swim, but on Monday night she tells me the story about the three-eyed whale whose eyes do not shed salty water from the deep, deep seas.

Small Potato

Cyra Dumitru

There is dignity in the small potato, the red ones with their smooth roundness that fit inside the hand like a rock taken from the river and carried home secretly. They are patient; they know how to last and be valuable even when overlooked in favor of rice or asparagus. A few small potatoes are easily smuggled from the pantry. When thrown with some conviction, a small potato can manage some harm—break a window, knock a small unsuspecting bird from a fence or bruise an eye. A small potato too has eyes and is far-sighted, coming as it does from the ground and growing as it does toward the sun, moon, the galaxies. When the telescope crashes, look through the eye of a small potato into the nursery of stars. Forever is within sight of the small potato. When hunger bites, less water is required for boiling the small potato, scarce resources are protected. Let the Idaho carry the burden of fame and grandeur in its earth-colored skin. Let the small potato ride in a pocket secretly until finally scrubbed, softened and presented—well-oiled, slightly-salted, sprinkled-with-dill—as the companion of tilapia topped with crabmeat and steaming upon a gold-rimmed plate.

Fiction

Should've Just Stuck with the Doritos

Alex Z. Salinas

The strangest thing anyone's ever told me was that I reminded her of a Ruffles sour cream and onion potato chip. That's right, a Ruffles sour cream and onion potato chip.

It happened my third year of college. A classmate—her name was Myra, and I'd had her in a few classes here and there—walked up to me after Ancient Religions and told me, with a smirk on her face, “You know, you kinda remind me of a Ruffles sour cream and onion potato chip.” Just like that.

Though I hardly knew Myra—an attractive girl who liked wearing loose-fitting stonewashed jeans and flower-print blouses—she never struck me as the type of person who said weird things just to say them. So basically, I was flabbergasted.

“Is that right?” I said, amused.

“Yep,” she said cheerfully, and then strutted away, like it was no big deal telling me that I reminded her of a Ruffles sour cream and onion potato chip.

I must've stood in Myra's wake for a good while, trying to digest her words.

Days flew by and I couldn't stop thinking about what she'd said to me. In between walking to class, sitting in the cafeteria, goofing off on my laptop, shooting hoops at the gym, and doing Lord knows what in my dorm room, her comment buzzed around in my head like a housefly. Wherever I went, it followed. I decided I had to get to the bottom of it.

After a few days of hard thinking, I finally came up with a theory.

Myra was trying to tell me I was salty! After all, I wasn't a typical party guy you find in college. I didn't go drinking or clubbing with my friends on the weekend. Even just to go out and eat, I had to be bribed. I was a tightwad with my money in those days. But there was a critical problem with my theory, and it was this: Myra wouldn't have known these particulars about me. We weren't close; we didn't hang out in the same circles. Now, it was certainly possible that she could've figured out I was a boring person by analyzing my face. The face gives away a lot of information when you get right down to it. Other than a conversation-starting scar interestingly located above my left eyebrow, my face is

pretty plain. My nickname in middle school was Easter Island. I was often told I looked too serious. So perhaps Myra was trying to tell me smile more, to straighten out my rough Ruffles ridges, so to speak. That must've been it.

But why the hell a *sour cream and onion chip*, of all flavors? I didn't have halitosis. I didn't smell like sour cream or onions to my knowledge. Heck, I didn't even like sour cream and onion potato chips all that much.

It's been six years now that I've been out of college. I never mustered the courage to ask Myra to clarify her statement. To do so now would require work. I'd have to look her up on Facebook and send her a friend request. If she were to accept my request, I would then have to message her. *Hey Myra, long time no see!! Remember me from college? Ancient Religions, Early American Government, Causes of War? How's life treating you? Hey, on a totally random note ... Remember that time you told me I reminded you of a Ruffles sour cream and onion potato chip? What did you mean by that exactly?* Yep, there's no good way to go about it. If you ask me, that ship has sailed.

I got in trouble fairly recently.

One night a couple of months ago, I told my girlfriend over dinner about Myra and her weird comment. We were at my apartment exchanging funny college stories when, at some point, I thought it'd be a good idea to mention the incident. When I finished telling my girlfriend the whole story, her response was, "Weird." She said it stone-faced, like an Easter Island head.

"Everything okay?" I inquired.

"So do you still talk to Myra?"

"No. I haven't seen her in six years."

"Hmm," she mumbled.

We finished our spaghetti in silence. After dinner, instead of cuddling with me on my couch like usual, my girlfriend said she was tired, and that her stomach was hurting. She said she was going to go home. Instead of asking her what was really wrong, I just let her leave.

A few days later, while I was at the grocery store, I strolled through the chip aisle and stopped in my tracks when I saw a family-sized bag of Ruffles sour cream and onion chips. They were on sale: fifty cents off. Now, I didn't normally buy Ruffles; I'm a Doritos guy. Cool Ranch, if you want to know. But for whatever reason, Ruffles seemed like a good choice that day. They were on sale, after all. Fifty cents off is fifty cents off. Plus, it's good to mix up your chips every so often.

The next day, my girlfriend was over watching TV with me on my sofa. During a commercial break, she got up and walked to my pantry to

look for something to munch on. The next thing I knew, she was standing by my front door, slipping on her sandals.

“Where’re you going?” I asked her.

“Home.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she answered, stone-faced.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she snapped.

I could’ve pressed the issued, but didn’t. I just let her leave. She didn’t slam the door, but she closed it hard enough.

A few minutes after she left, I got up and walked to my pantry.

I flicked on the light switch and the first thing I noticed, smack-dab in the middle of the center shelf, was the family-size bag of Ruffles sour cream and onion potato chips.

Then it hit me.

I should’ve just stuck with the damn Doritos.

Trouble

Benjamin Schweers

Mrs. Babineaux's fifth grade class sat silently at their desks during the Tuesday afternoon science quiz. Only the drone of the window unit air-conditioner could be heard as the students answered questions about the states of matter. As each student finished the quiz, they put their yellow No. 2 pencils down on their desks, held up their white pieces of notebook paper, for Sheryl to come around and collect, and then laid their heads on their desks. Bright afternoon sun shone through the large, west-facing windows along one wall of the classroom, and the quiet, quiz-taking calm complemented the long and drowsy afternoon lull.

Sheryl walked around the desk clumps and collected the last of the 26 quizzes. The hum of whispered voices filled the room and ended the peaceful calm as students compared their answers to the quiz. Sheryl placed the neat stack of papers on the corner of her teacher's desk.

"Thanks, Sheryl," Mrs. Babineaux said without looking away from her computer. She sat hunched forward in her chair and stared into the screen.

"Yes ma'am," Sheryl replied. She turned and walked back to her desk and sat down.

Mrs. Babineaux looked up from her computer and squinted at the clock above the blackboard on the opposite side of the room.

"What time is it?" she asked the class.

The room went quiet except for the air-conditioner.

"1:55," called one of the students.

"You have five minutes until history," the teacher announced as she looked back at her computer screen. "Get your books out."

The volume of student discussion immediately rose, accompanied by the banging of books against the metal desks as students reached into the storage cubbies beneath their seats, rooted around for, located, and then pulled out their history textbooks and history folders.

Darnell reached under his seat and felt for his history book in the stack of textbooks. He knew each book by touch—by the thickness of the spine. The math book was on top, he could tell by how big it was. Next came his science book—a thin set of pages that easily fit between his thumb and pointer finger. Underneath that he felt a couple He sat straight

up in his chair and started out the window. Where was his history book? He couldn't remember. Had anyone noticed? He wanted to check his backpack, but he would have to get up and risk coming back to his desk empty-handed. Mrs. Babineaux would notice. Then he'd be in trouble. He looked at Rick, who sat next to him.

"Where's your book?" Rick asked.

"Shhh!" Darnell snapped.

"What?" Rick asked.

"I forgot it," said Darnell in a hushed voice.

"Where?" said Rick.

"Dunno," Darnell said with a shrug.

"Mrs. Babineaux is gonna' kill you," Rick said.

"Maybe..." replied Darnell. "Maybe I..."

"Quiet, now!" Mrs. Babineaux's voice cut through the sounds of the room—the little conversations at each desk clump—and rose above the loudest of groups. Everyone got quiet. She clicked her computer mouse a couple of times then rose from her leather desk chair.

"Let's start where we left off yesterday," she declared. She walked to the front of the class. "After the Compromise of 1850. As we discussed, Congress had to decide which states would be Free states and which states would be slave states after the Mexican War," she said as she maneuvered around the desks to her stool at the front of the class.

A couple of students nodded along to the historical recap as everyone flipped to the pre-Civil War chapter of their textbooks.

Darnell looked down at his history folder. His desk looked empty compared to Rick's, covered completely by his folder and his book. Mrs. Babineaux would notice for sure. His desk clump was in the middle of the room. How could she not?

Positioned in front of the blackboard, Mrs. Babineaux sat on the stool, crossed her legs, and opened her teacher's textbook to the corresponding chapter.

"Okay. Who would like to begin reading? Top of page 256." she asked.

No one raised a hand. Everyone stared down at the open books in front of them.

Darnell leaned forward in his seat and put his arms up on his desk to try and conceal the missing textbook.

"Go ahead, Cristal," said Mrs. Babineaux.

Darnell felt relieved.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Babineaux, but I can't find my book," Cristal confessed.

Mrs. Babineaux looked up from her book at Cristal. She brought a hand up to her face and placed her index finger on her bottom lip. The bright red fingernail matched the bright red lips. She sat silently and stared at Cristal.

Cristal lowered her head.

“You can’t find it? Or you don’t have it?” asked Mrs. Babineaux.

“I don’t have it.” Cristal clarified.

The group of students in the back corner of the classroom began the chorus of “oohs” that rose in pitch and grew louder as more joined in. Everyone looked at Cristal.

“Hush up,” Mrs. Babineaux snapped. She glanced briefly at the back corner group before she focused back on Cristal.

Some of the other kids giggled.

“It’s at home because I was doing homework last night and I forgot to put it in my backpack,” Cristal explained. “I think because I also was working on science homework and I studied . . .”

“Alright, alright. Okay, honey,” Mrs. Babineaux interrupted.

She pursed her bright red lips—still seated upright on her stool in front of the blackboard. She exhaled. Then she looked at Bobby, who sat next to Cristal.

“Read along with Bobby, then,” she said to Cristal. She looked back down at her book. “Let’s go.”

Bobby jumped up and shifted his desk next to Cristal, but his book fell off the desk and landed on the tile with a smack.

“Sorry,” he said aloud.

Darnell couldn’t believe his luck. His arms were still wrapped around his folder, in the hopes of concealing his forgotten book, and he’d placed his chin on his hands while waiting for Cristal to read. He watched Bobby struggle with the desk.

Bobby picked up his book and sat down. He positioned the book between himself and Cristal, so that each could read the text. Then he looked up at his teacher.

“Sorry, miss...uh, what page are we on?” Bobby asked.

“Jesus Christ, child!” she yelled.

Some kids giggled again.

Darnell could have taken a nap.

“Hush!” she snapped. “Ain’t nothin’ funny here!”

The room went silent again.

“Never mind. Moving on!” she proclaimed. “Darnell. Page 256. Thank you.”

“Uhh...” Darnell’s jaw dropped. He looked at Rick. An empty face

stared back with a shrug. Darnell looked up at his teacher, who sat on her stool.

“I can’t ma’am,” he said.

“What?” Mrs. Babineaux asked. She snapped her head up to look at Darnell.

“I don’t have my book,” he replied.

“Where’s your book, boy?” she demanded.

“I forgot it at home,” he said softly.

“Why’d you leave your book at home, Darnell?” she asked.

“Well, this morning, I was...” but before he could finish, she interrupted.

“I don’t wanna hear your excuses, son,” she interrupted. “Don’t bother. No use wasting my time.”

Maggie, one of the other students in Darnell’s clump, handed her history book to Darnell.

“He doesn’t need your book Maggie,” Mrs. Babineaux barked. “He’s got his own book. Somewhere!”

“Yes ma’am,” Maggie said. She put her book back down.

The air-conditioner sputtered as it clicked off. The room fell silent. No one moved. The afternoon sun shone through the windows and the stillness of the room thickened the air with tension. Everyone watched Mrs. Babineaux. No one looked at Darnell.

“Where’s your book, Darnell?” she asked again loudly, her chin lowered, red lips pursed, wide eyes affixed to Darnell, and her thin dark eyebrows raised.

Darnell kept his head down and shrugged.

“What does that mean?” she asked, shaking her head. “Do you have your book Darnell?”

“Nope,” Darnell muttered.

“Don’t you start with me,” she said. “Boy, how are you going to read if you don’t know where your book is?” she asked.

“I told you, I forgot it” he replied. Darnell cast his eyes up at his teacher.

“Excuse me,” she asked.

“I said...I forgot it,” Darnell exclaimed.

Mrs. Babineaux slammed her book shut, uncrossed her legs, and got up off her stool. Without looking at Darnell, she took a couple steps towards the classroom door then stopped next to the intercom and turned. She stood underneath the American flag, close to the door, with one hand on her hip. She scanned the room.

“Get up Darnell,” she commanded, still clutching her book under her

her other arm.

“What for?” Darnell asked.

“Uh-uh. Uh-uh. Uh-uh,” Mrs. Babineaux repeated in rapid succession. “I know you aren’t back talking me, son. Cause’ I will get your grandmamma on the phone so fast your head will spin. You hear me, Darnell?”

Darnell sat back in his desk and stared straight again out the window. He didn’t move.

“I can sure call her up right quick, and I know she won’t like to hear about you causin’ trouble, back-talkin’ in school, and forgetting your books at home,” continued Mrs. Babineaux.

Darnell slowly slid out of his desk and stood up.

“Go next door. Get to Mrs. Johnson’s room, and tell her you need to sit and write an essay about why you forgot your book,” she said and pointed at the door.

Darnell picked up his pencil, took the folder from his desk, and started for the door.

“Who else forgot their book today?” Mrs. Babineaux asked as she intently watched Darnell cross the room.

No one said a word.

Darnell walked passed Mrs. Babineaux with his head down, to avoid eye contact.

“Your grandmamma raised you better than that. Didn’t she?” asked Mrs. Babineaux.

Darnell looked up but said nothing.

“And!” she shouted. She made sure Darnell was looking at her. “If I hear you’re causing trouble over in Mrs. Johnson’s room, it’s gonna’ Mr. Vidor’s paddle. You understand?”

“Whatever,” Darnell said.

The heavy metal door to the classroom squeaked when Darnell pushed it open.

“I think maybe I’ll go ahead and give Mr. Vidor a heads-up. Forget about Mrs. Johnson’s room,” she yelled just before Darnell moved out of sight.

The metal door slammed shut.

The room fell silent again. Mrs. Babineaux walked back to her podium. She resumed her spot atop her stool: legs crossed, back straight, looking down at the book in her lap. She flipped open her text book then ran her hands across the open pages to flatten out the book. She took a deep breath, exhaled, looked up, and scanned her classroom.

“Now, who’s going to read for us?”

Last Will and Testament of Timothy McBurnett

Alex Z. Salinas

I, Timothy V. McBurnett, of 23 Palace Drive, Plano, Texas, being of sound mind and memory, declare this my last will and testament.

I am married to Lola M. McBurnett.

I have two living adult children, Lyle T. McBurnett and Leah L. McBurnett.

To my wife, Lola, I give my automobile, household goods, clothing and all independent monetary assets and savings.

To my son, Lyle, I give my comic book collection, recently appraised at \$7,543.62, as well as my tools and signed Dirk Nowitzki jersey.

To my daughter, Leah, I give all the jewelry that belonged to my mother, which is unappraised but presently labeled.

Any of my estate not mentioned here I bequest to my wife.

For the remainder of this will, I shall explain my passing for my family's peace of mind.

By reading this, you have been informed of my death at Mount Everest. This may come as a shock to you.

Since childhood, I have had an intense—practically spiritual—interest in the mountain, for reasons only God understands. I was never the same after my parents took me to the top of Pike's Peak when I was a kid. I remember staring into the Colorado wilderness. I remember thinking what the world would look like if only I was higher. That's when I started dreaming about Mount Everest. Since then, I've dreamt countless dreams of climbing it, reaching its summit, and touching the ceiling of Earth, for Everest's peak is the closest thing we have to Heaven. This I have not disclosed to anyone except to a college roommate many years ago.

For most of my life, I've been burdened with a powerful urge to hike Everest, not for ego or sport, but because, odd as it may sound, it is the place where I must go to.

Until now, it has been impossible to travel to Nepal to climb Everest, considering my obligations to my family and career. However, with your recent trip to visit your parents in California, Lola, I was allowed time to arrange travel and condition my body as well as I could. With the kids off living their lives, this was an opportunity for me to finally take the

dive—or, more accurately, the climb.

Family, please understand that my trip was not a planned suicide. On the contrary, it was the fulfillment of my lifelong dream. My death, however tragic, was unintentional.

Now, this may also come as a shock to you, but my body will remain on Mount Everest. This means that I've likely reached the Death Zone—the area above 26,000 feet. In the Death Zone, oxygen is practically nonexistent. The wind is icy and turbulent. With every passing minute spent in the Death Zone, the body shuts down. Simply put, it is too dangerous to retrieve the dead there.

So family, I urge you not to risk your lives by trying to come and get me. As unfortunate as my fate is, please accept it. The last thing I want is to put any of you in danger.

If anything, you must understand that I am honored to join the hundreds of souls that Everest has claimed—people who, just like me, once dreamed of climbing the great mountain night after night.

My Everest travel guide is a Nepalese Sherpa named Choden Thubten. Mr. Thubten was recommended to me by a man named Thomas Henkley, presently employed at an agency known as Travel House Nepal. In the case of my death, I have instructed Mr. Thubten to inform local police (as is protocol) as well as Mr. Henkley, who I have entrusted to contact you.

Lola—*Lolita, light of my life*—please forgive me. I never intended to betray you and the kids like this. I pray someday, you may understand why I did what I did. I've taken with me a Polaroid copy of us at Chicoma Mountain in New Mexico, summer of 1985. Remember when we were in an open clearing surrounded by trees and the tour guide told us we were standing in the center of the universe, according to the Santa Clara Indians? Remember that? I still remember the look on your face, the look in your eyes, that day. You are the best thing to ever happen to me, and the kids, too. Thank you for everything, Love. I love you so much.

Lyle and Leah, you all have made me the proudest father in the world. It wasn't too long ago when I was helping your mother change your filthy diapers. She fired me from that job pretty quick. I never was too good at taking crap from you all.

Leah, my Princess, with your mother's brains, I know you'll go far in law school. Show them what you're made of. I'm so sorry I won't be able to see you graduate, but I'll always be watching. I love you so much, honey.

Lyle, keep up all the good work on the court, big guy. Before long,

you'll get the head coach job. And who knows, maybe one day, you'll get a call from Don Nelson to go to the League. I love you so much, son. Always be good to that fiancé of yours.

Family, thank you for giving a guy everything he could ever ask for.

Goodbye.

Signed,

Tim McBurnett

P.S. Let's Go Mavs!

In the Dripline

Jesse Durovey

I get the call about Nguyen while I'm driving with my girlfriend to Mom's house. The traffic is backed up for miles, and I can feel the pressure building behind my eyes with each lurching stop of the car. I don't normally pick up the phone when I'm driving, but with the traffic at a stand-still, and the name of Nguyen's wife Liza appearing on the caller ID, I knew something must have happened.

After I hang up, I can still hear Liza's voice, and my ear feels like it's been slapped. I rest my head on the steering wheel, the smell of ozone and vulcanized rubber thick in my nostrils.

April looks over asks me "what's wrong?"

I say, "Nguyen is dead. He killed himself."

Nguyen is the guy who pulled me to cover after a sniper took out my left kneecap in the Korengal Valley. After I left the army, he did another tour in Afghanistan. Now his ex-wife is calling me and telling me how he hadn't slept in the house since he's been back. How last night he got drunk, trashed a hotel room, then put a pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

"Liza told me the police found evidence of heroin use."

I feel April's hand on my back. A car honks behind me. I lift my head, ease my foot onto the accelerator, and drive about five feet before the traffic grinds to a halt again. I squeeze the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. I just can't believe he's gone. I'm sure it's some joke—a cosmic fuck-up of epic proportions.

"The whole time I was over there, I never saw any crops. Not unless you count the poppy fields. All those people must eat something besides goat, but I never saw anything coming out of the ground except Soviet mines, IEDs, and poppies," I say.

April's hand continues to stroke my back. "I don't like it when you talk like that, Brian."

"I always wondered if the Soviets poisoned the land to keep anything else from growing. Maybe it was us. After the whole Desert Storm, Agent Orange bullshit, it wouldn't be a stretch to think that the CIA was pumping chemicals into the land. Maybe we were poisoned too," I say.

We slowly pass emergency vehicles. Out the window, I see a foreign

car so crumpled, it looks like it's been through a trash compactor. Nearby, a quad-cab pickup truck with the bumper smashed in rests on the median. Mercifully, the traffic starts to open up. I wonder if this is the democratic, capitalist utopia I gave up 10 years of my life, and my health, to spread across the globe.

I press down on the gas, throttling up to nearly 75 miles-per-hour. For a moment, I forget I'm driving—I can see Nguyen's face upside-down over me, panting to drag me through brambles and to a rock wall. In my vision, I can hear the gunshots, smell the sweat and the blood, and I see my mangled leg bouncing flaccidly along the ground—my trouser leg a deep crimson from thigh to ankle.

I almost miss my turn and have to cut across three lanes of traffic to make it, April pleadingly yelling "Brian!" as my tire's squeal. I don't see the cop until his lights are reflecting off my rearview mirror. I pull into a Wal-Mart and sit there, the engine idling and my hands shaking on the steering wheel.

I roll my window down and get my license and registration ready. I watch the Charlotte cops get out of their late-model Charger. One is a female—cute, in a butch sort of way. The other is an older guy with gray hair at his temples. They split off and the female walks over to April's window, the older guy to mine.

I don't want the officer to see the tears in my eyes, so I keep looking at the road, "Morning, officer."

He takes the license and registration I'm holding out to him and looks them over. "You in a hurry to get someplace, Mr. Greene?"

My throat feels tight and constricted. I have to swallow twice before I can speak. "Sorry ... I almost missed my turn."

I feel my eyes drawn to the cop's sidearm, the Glock pulling me in and doubling my vision like an optical illusion, one which fills my head with visions of soldiers guarding fields of tall poppies.

"Have you been drinking, sir?" The cop says.

"What? No."

"Could you step out of the car, sir?" He says, and I can't help but notice how his hand drifts toward his pistol.

I open the door, my head still buzzing with images of war, and I barely hear April trying to defend me. The cop doesn't step clear in time, and my door hits him the hip. I watch, as if from outside my own body, as he jerks the door open and pulls me out by the arm, smashing my face into parking-lot concrete, my mouth pressed against a wadded-up napkin that smells like battery acid and vomit. I try to roll, my arm flailing out, but the cop's knee is deep in the middle of my back. I don't hear words

anymore, just voices. The cop's voice. April's voice. I hear the blood churning in my ears as the cop cuffs my hands behind my back and starts searching me. When he gets to my legs, he pauses, then jerks my prosthetic leg off with a grunt.

Later, in the holding cell, I'm staring at the stained concrete floor. There's a tightness in my chest like someone wrapped me in a metal band and is twisting the ends tighter and tighter. My prosthetic leg is sitting on the desk of a tubby cop with a horseshoe of hair growing around his bald head.

"Hey, buddy?" I look up to see the desk sergeant staring at me and pointing at my leg. "Afghanistan or Iraq?" He asks.

"Afghanistan. Helmand Province," I say.

"Hooah," he says. "My brother was an MP. Did two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq."

I nod, but I can't take my eyes off the large stain on the concrete floor. Is it piss? Maybe blood?

"You'll be okay, buddy. My brother came back last year. He used to watch combat footage from the war on YouTube for like twelve hours a day. Then he got a job working for a VA and got a girlfriend," he says.

"Already have a girlfriend," I say.

That's when April and my mom walk in. Mom is wearing faded jeans and a dirty collared shirt that used to be my dad's. They post my bond, and I hop over to the door holding the bars in one hand while the sergeant hands Mom my prosthetic leg. When the door opens, Mom and April wrap me in a hug.

I sit down on a metal bench while April helps me get my leg back on. I can feel the eyes of the sergeant and the two drunks in the first cell watching me. My face is blazing with heat, and I just want to get the hell out of this place. We go out to the parking lot, and Mom drives us to her house.

April goes inside the house to get us some sweet tea, and I see where Mom's been digging up the rose bushes underneath the big tree in the front yard. The roses look brown, splotchy, and dry.

"You getting rid of the roses Dad planted for you?"

"Not exactly. Your dad and I had been trying to get something to take under this tree out here for a few years now, but everything keeps dying. Finally, Mrs. Graves from down the street told me that our tree, here, is a Black Walnut, and its sap poisons the soil. It won't let anything flourish in its dripline." she says.

"You ever try poppies?"

"What?" she says, and wrinkles her eyes at me.

“Nothing, Mom. So, what are you going to do?”

“Brian, you and I are going to build some elevated beds with new soil. The support will hopefully keep the flowers safe from the tree’s sap.”

“You ever think about cutting the thing down?” I say.

She looks at the tree for a long while, and water is welling up in her dark brown eyes. “No. This tree’s been here for more years than your dad and I lived in this house together, more years than we were married—more years than your father was alive. We had some of our best years under the branches of this tree. If the flowers don’t take in the raised beds, I’ll just put the damn rosebushes by the house. No reason they need to be over here anyway.”

I nod. I try to see the tree and the yard it occupies as she does. Yes, the tree is lovely to look at. Its trunk is wide and thick and the color of charcoal. Its branches sweep into a high canopy, offering shade to the yard and the flowering dogwood which grows along the fence.

I glance toward the house and see April smiling at me as she walks out the front door and sets a pitcher of tea on the small patio table. Her soft face is framed by curls which catch the light of the afternoon sun and shimmer like a heat mirage. I want to believe that I never journey back to the war, that I never let myself drift into the past. I don’t know if the love of my family can save me from my memories, which are warped by muzzle flashes and the concussive shock of roadside blasts, but I want to believe there’s hope for me.

I think about Nguyen. Leaving Afghanistan didn’t help him, but then again, maybe he never really left at all.

Family Feud

Alex Z. Salinas

This story first appeared on Every Day Fiction.

When the bus dropped me off, I checked the mail for my grandma as I always did. In the stack, there was a letter for me, which felt odd and exciting. Letters don't come often for most sixteen-year-olds.

It was from Harvard.

I brought the envelope close to my face and inspected the logo. The crimson shield was unmistakable. So were the words *Harvard College Office of Admissions* next to it.

I tore open the envelope and read the first paragraph. I was accepted.

After I learned that I'd aced the SAT, the first thing I did was go online and apply to Harvard. It took forever. The fee was \$60 — I had to use my grandma's credit card, but I paid her back with money I'd saved mowing lawns in the summer — but of course, I had the feeling that I'd just wasted my time and money after I submitted the application.

I burst through the screen door to find my grandma on the couch watching Family Feud. She was picking at one of her big-toe nails with her finger. Her eyes were laser-focused on the television.

"Grandma, I got into Harvard! I got a letter from them!"

She kept her eyes on the TV.

"Harvard?" she asked.

"Yeah! Harvard!"

"What do you mean you got in?"

"Well, let's see," I said, sarcastically, "I applied online. They reviewed my application. They accepted me. Then, they informed me of their decision via mail."

My grandma finally looked at me.

"Don't talk to me like that, young man."

"Sorry."

There was a brief silence. I heard John O'Hurley's rich, baritone voice from the TV.

"Why Harvard?" she asked.

"What?"

"Why Harvard? I mean, it's wonderful they accepted you. It really is. And you've always been a helluva kid, but still. Harvard is just so far away. And expensive."

“Grandma, it’s not like I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“I know that, but still. I thought you wanted to stay local?”

I’d never said that.

“Well, now that I can go to Harvard, that’s where I wanna go.”

“I understand, but is that the right choice?”

She must’ve noticed the frustration on my face.

“Look, sweetie, I’m not saying you’re too young to be thinking about college. Not at all. But do you know how much Harvard’ll cost? We don’t have the money to send you to places like Harvard.”

“That’s what scholarships’re for. I’ve gotten some already, remember?”

“So right now, would they even cover your meal plan at Harvard?”

Now I was really upset.

“Bad joke, sweetie, bad joke. I didn’t mean that. Look,” she said, shutting off the TV with the remote, “staying local just makes more sense to me. Harvard isn’t for people like us. Hell, why go over there and pay them an arm and a leg when you can probably get a free education here? *Free.*”

“Are you serious?”

“Listen to me, sweetie. I’m telling you this because I care for you, I love you. No one’ll love you more than me. I want you to consider staying close to home. What if you go to Harvard and it doesn’t work out? You’ll be alone. I’ll be alone. And we’ll be slapped with a huge bill.”

“And if it works out?”

My grandma smiled, as if she’d rehearsed her counterarguments.

“The thing about big ideas, sweetie, is they’re like weeds: Once they start growing, they keep growing until you’re all tangled up in them. Your grandpa had ideas, ‘course you were too young to remember. He wanted to be mayor of this little town. One day, he was convinced God put him here to wear the hat. He told me that just about every morning. He wanted to do something great. He was so obsessed with fulfilling ‘God’s plan,’ he spent most our life savings on the campaign. When he lost, it killed him. All for nothing. That’s big ideas for you.”

She paused. I stayed quiet.

“When I say I’m looking out for you,” my grandma continued, “I mean it. It’s just you and me now, sweetie. Do you understand that?”

I realized the letter was still in my hand. She never even asked to see it.

“Loud and clear, Grandma,” was all I said.

I walked away to my room. I anticipated she’d apologize and call me

back with food.

“Sweetie, I’m sorry. You know your grandma likes to talk too much sometimes. Look, let’s celebrate with your favorite: a chocolate Pop-Tart!”

I shut my bedroom door, dropped my backpack to the ground, and threw the letter on my bed. I got under the covers and stared at the ceiling. There was nothing there I hadn’t seen a million times, so sleep came fast.

I was at the top of a snow-covered mountain. The sky was beautiful and blue. I must’ve been thousands of feet in the air. Below me were clouds. The scene was breathtaking. I took a deep breath of crisp, cool air and exhaled white smoke.

Suddenly, a tangle of black weeds slithered up my body and into my mouth. Where they came from, I had no clue. They gyrated like a sinister octopus’s tentacles. I started to gag.

I tumbled down the mountain with the fury of an avalanche. My view, obscured by the crosshatch of weeds, changed from white to blue countless times.

I woke up with my shirt clinging to my skin.

For a second, I thought the ground was snow, but realized, with relief, it was just the old cream-colored carpet.

I sat up and scanned the bed for my letter. I couldn’t find it.

I wondered how long I was out. It was still daylight. I heard a shrill laugh come through the walls. It was my grandma’s laugh. Was she still watching Family Feud and picking away at her hideous toenail?

I decided to take her up on the chocolate Pop-Tart. They really were my favorite.

I’d look for the letter when I got back.

Non-
Fiction

Yellow Corn

Robin J. Johnson

We parked the truck at the end of the dirt road, walking as light as possible for 50 feet up to the blind. Surrounding us were cacti and trees, whose skinny branches made them look unhealthy. Walking slowly, trying to avoid the noise that each foot made when it put its pressure on the cracked road, made for a meticulous walk.

I climbed up the iron, rusted ladder smelling of bug spray and paint with my face smothered with black and green body paint. The blind is 15 feet straight up in the air.

I paused, drawing in my breath and peered up at my father a few rungs ahead me, who is playing the fateful game of opening the 3-foot by 3-foot door, slowly and cautiously. No raccoons, snakes, or mice sprang out so he slid in, belly first, and spun to reach out his hand to pull me in.

The floor is littered in bees and flies. We had covered the openings as best we could but couldn't keep everything out. My chair is the white one with a cushion, now bug-devoured with its yellow insides spilling out.

He sat in his chair and I in mine as we carefully pulled up the three wooden windows in the front and to the left and right of us and latched them overhead so we could see all around us in the blind I watched him build and paint in our garage.

We waited in silence, our shoulders touching, our breath the only noise. We stared trance-like at the yellow corn the feeder had sprinkled out on the dirt clearing an hour before we crept up. The corn is from the sack my father split open with his knife and is the same corn I ran my hand through over and over again, plunging it into the kernels like I did with all our sacks of corn once they were open, feeling its smooth texture that left a white film on my hand. My hand was the mixer and the corn the cake batter, only these times I don't lick the remains. I had hoisted the sack up to him and he filled the feeder while standing on his truck bed. Afterwards, we ate chili dogs with the fire he made back at our cabin, a metal 15-foot, former artist's trailer.

“Look,” my father said after at least an hour of staring and breathing.

He always spotted everything before me, which is why I let him walk down the road to the blind first.

A javalina poked his head out of the cacti and sticker burr grass. It stepped out, heading towards the yellow corn. His hooves woke the loose dirt into a cloud as it walked, a 150-pounder at least. My father tracked the cloud through his scope. Once completely in the clearing, my father nodded and I covered my ears and he shot. A clean shot, right through the neck.

The pile of fur and mass lay in the dirt for a few minutes before another, much smaller javalina stepped into the clearing and walked straight towards the dead one.

It circled the dead javalina and grunted so loudly we could hear it from above. It finally stopped and lay down next to the javalina.

“I feel bad now,” my father said.

“Me too,” I said.

We spoke in barely audible whispers so we wouldn’t spook any bucks or does that might still be near.

We watched to the two javalinas lay next to each other, one dead and one not. The smaller got up and walked around the lifeless javalina until finally it lay down again. The alive was so close to the dead that their fur, caked with mud and dirt, entangled for perhaps the first, but definitely the last time. We stared at them lying next to one another, watching the dead javalina stay limp and the not-dead javalina breathe.

Then he shot it too.

Patchwork Autobiography

Jamira Richardson

Since the dawn of my years, I've embarked on this seemingly existential crisis of anomaly and ambiguity, caught between the throes of insecurity and uncertainty in the quest to find the utmost truth about myself.

I am veritably a paradox: an intoxicating blend of light and darkness, a dance on the precipice between strength and vulnerability, a fusion of fire and ice. It is I who chooses the destiny for myself, and my destiny is that of a writer. Above all of the facets of passion coursing through my veins—those of transcendentalist photography, thought-provoking films and Broadway plays, and jarring novels—writing is the one that burns through my blood like a brushfire, consuming me in a roar of flames and heat. As an aspiring connoisseur of wordplay—rather than one of disdainfully dangling modifiers and garbled grammar, of course—the pinnacle of my collegiate education will serve as a culmination of the literary conglomeration I've produced throughout the course of my short life.

It took me years to finally embrace who I am, to understand that I am a physical, human representation of what diversity means and how integration can bring about beauty and change—rather than the impurity we often associate it with. Realistically, the “melting pot” is embodied in the crossroads of my own rich, vibrant culture, reminiscent of the seemingly diverse ideals Americans generally claim as their own. I am a young woman embroiled within the standoff between African-American oppression and white supremacy, but above all, I am swimming in a love triangle between these very cultures and the misery of my Cherokee ancestors who watched their blood-ridden, sweat-soaked, tear-stained lands dissipate before their very eyes. I am a byproduct of a Euro-centric culture that prefers to see the world in black and white rather than gray. Unfortunately, I am the epitome of gray, and I have yet to live in a world where that is considered okay.

Merriam-Webster defines an *autobiography* as a “biography written by the person it is about.” However, an autobiography is, in essence, a piece of oneself—a piece of one's inner being. For this reason, I find it more fitting to mention the facets of my being that pervade the depths of

my own soul, almost as if carved there in indelible ink. Without the knowledge of these facets, you would not understand the most essential aspect of my life. You would never truly grasp the extent of who I am.

That is the sole purpose of an autobiography in itself—to gather the different patches of one’s life and weave them together in a web of haphazard beauty, an intricate network of memories and experiences reminiscent of the patchwork quilt folded at the foot of a childhood bed.

Best Loved Poems

Diane Gonzales Bertrand

The bloated pile of torn books spilled from the grimy boxes like an avalanche. To someone driving down the street, she might assume old encyclopedias needed to be tossed because water leaks and un-air-conditioned storage had damaged them. Not me. I stopped my car on the side of my parents' house when I saw the boxes ready for bulk trash pickup.

I had recognized the literature of my childhood, and my gasp of surprise and disappointment almost strangled me. We moved from the house of my childhood into the house where my teen years had been filled with journal writing, poems about teen struggles, and so many plays, stories, and essays filling up spiral after spiral notebook. Where had these books been hiding? Obviously in a place filled with mice, water leaks and careless packaging because the ruined volumes of literature had been abandoned to the landfill.

Once I staggered closer to the boxes, a survival instinct replaced my horror and grief. I dropped to my knees, and tossed book after book aside in a frantic search for my favorite volume: Best Loved Poems. It wasn't there. A good friend had left me and didn't say good-bye.

In the 1950's and 1960's it was common practice among parents to buy their children encyclopedias from door-to-door salesmen. For a small monthly payment, usually fifty cents, children were introduced to facts and statistics about creatures, cultures, and characters from A to Z. Science, history, biography, and colorful photos and illustrations filled our imaginations and aspirations to become more than we could dream. One purchase came with a bonus: The Children's Hour, a sixteen-volume set of tall scarlet books trimmed in black with gold letters on the spine. Individual titles introduced readers to mysteries, science fiction, fairy tales, animal stories, leaders and heroes, and other varieties of published literature suitable for families to read together. My favorite volume was Number 5 Best Loved Poems, and the illustrated poem on the final page of the book, Sea Fever, by John Masefield was one I read a hundred times.

Sea Fever

*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.*

*I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied.
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.*

*I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted
knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.*

This poem was a classic ode to a sailor's life I only knew from pirate movies and Robert Louis Stevenson stories. For me, it also conveyed the deep need inside a lonely soul who needed only the sea to feel happy and carefree. The beach in Port Aransas was that place for me. No one had to wear shoes or take a bath. We could eat with fingers, pee in the waves, and fill our hands with shells, shrimp and slimy cut bait. So many home rules evaporated like salt foam on the shoreline. The salty sea air crinkled my hair, stung my eyes, and coated my tongue. I tasted beach with every homemade baloney sandwich or cup of Kool-Aid.

I had never been a sailor on a barge, but I knew how to bait a hook and catch a fish—so when I first read the poem and linked it to my feelings about Port Aransas, I claimed a bit of sea fever for myself. *Sea Fever* was the first poem I memorized for a school assignment. The rhythm and the rhyme took me to faraway places, past times in history, and gave me a desire to play with words and sentences in lyrical melodies. I spoke each word and memorized each stanza by talking to myself in the bedroom mirror.

All the free verse poets I read in high school and college, all the workshops where I studied with well-respected poets, and my own investigation into the genre of poetry have improved my skills and ignited my desire to view the world through a poet's notebook; however, the old red volume of *Best Loved Poems* taught me the basic lesson of reaching a reader through the careful selection of words. I have written

many poems about the beach in Port Aransas. Could I hope a reader might find my poem inside a book and feel inspired too?

Under the Spell of a Full Moon

I remember the Port Aransas beach, the night it glowed under the spell of a full moon, in September as I stood alone on the balcony. The spread of sparkling stars filled up the skies where velvet appeared. The amber globe placed gold lace upon the moving waters. Children leapt across glimmering sand and landed in shallow waves sprayed white with salt. Applause echoed from the couple sitting in sagging chairs by a lone car. The sights and sounds left me to wonder if Ahab's whale or the Black Pearl still floated beyond the dark horizon.

Just last week, a friend asked to borrow a couple of classic novels I owned. I hoped to find them in the in the bottom cabinet of our bedroom entertainment center where I stored many of my college textbooks and my husband's old woodshop magazines. As I pushed aside stacks of faded magazines, and lifted a dusty pile of college books, there appeared a thick red spine decorated in gold letters with a large red 5 and the words Best Loved Poems.

How could I have forgotten this favorite book remained safe in the cabinet, albeit a dusty neglected one? How could I get so busy in my life as a young teacher, wife, mother, and daughter I wouldn't remember this book and share it with my own children or current college students?

My best guess? This old book had followed me from my parents' house, probably in a box when I started teaching seventh-grade reading, and at some point, it had been left upstairs under old books and magazines in a moment of forgetful distraction.

Now I dropped the book in my lap with delighted surprise. Using my hands to wipe away the dust on the cover, I felt like I had stumbled upon a childhood friend while I was on vacation at the beach. As I opened the collection of poetry, it seemed obvious one of our rambunctious puppies used the bottom of the spine as a chew toy.

The illustrations inside the front matter of the book were still bright with colorful images of battling knights, flying mice, and a pair of siblings sitting under a tree, reading a book together. On the last page was my favorite poem well preserved since my childhood. The illustrated dark blue ship with patterned white sails and the gray sea gulls with tiny orange beaks still floated effortlessly above the curves of blue-green waves. The image had not lost its power to lift me from my room and into the salty air of a churning sea. I paused to read the poem aloud just to hear the words, I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky...

I found the book just in time. Just in time to share with my college freshmen a tangible symbol of my own poetic journey. Just in time to show them what might inspire a literacy narrative, their first writing assignment for the new semester. Just in time to introduce my best loved poem to the reader of this essay.

*And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.*

White Northerns

Robin J. Johnson

I slid the white beans around my plate carefully, strategically, in fear, eyeing my father and breathing short. I tried to hide them under the meat and veggies, but the sickly maggot beans stood out on the green plate, like a car in an empty lot on a late night.

He made us eat them. I gagged with each attempt, throwing them up back on the plate. We all hated them, but when Dad makes a meal, you eat it.

That night, I was over it, and didn't want to gag anymore. My bean-hiding strategy was going to fail, and did, when my father stormed out the back door to close the grill, or whatever he did out in the yard.

“Eat those fucking beans!” he shouted at me.

The door slammed, and tears dripped onto my plate.

My brother waited until Dad walked past the window, then reached over and shoveled four spoonfuls of maggot beans in his mouth, swallowing them whole.

I stayed with my parents after his passing 20 years later. His co-workers gave us a Honey Baked Ham, as if to commemorate his 31 years of life. We got to the bone, our family of four now.

“I can put this in some White Northerns,” my father said.

The memory of my brother, now “at peace,” as we all said to make people feel less uncomfortable, savagely stuffing those nasty beans into his mouth so they wouldn't be in mine, sunk my chest so low my heart grabbed my shoulders and neck and took them down too.

“Hug Me, Kiss Me, Suck My Juices”: Feminized Erotica and Rejection of Hetero-normativity as Gothic Horror in *Goblin Market* Essay

Rick Saldana

Within the realm of Gothic Horror, elements of transgression, the supernatural, the uncanny, and monstrosity, typically in the form of deviancy, are all prevalent throughout the canon. Gothic Horror seeks to subvert audience expectations by illustrating cultural anxieties and uncertainties in either an aggressive or a subtle manner. “Goblin Market” was born from the Victorian repulsion of femininity and sexuality, along with Rossetti’s own desire to see a redemption element to the damning nature of sexuality in the 19th century. The poem itself is framed as a children’s story, with a song-like rhythm and a transparent lesson shoehorned into the last 25 lines. While it is important to note that in a letter to her publisher Rossetti insists that her poem is not meant for children, the fantastical elements in the beginning and the romantic resolution when Lizzie saves Laura from decay causes the narrative to slip between the space of comedic children’s literature and transgressive gothic horror. Within the narrative Laura is tempted by the fruit of the goblin men, a promise of a Christian hetero-normative life, leading Laura to inevitably succumb to their manipulation. Lizzie uses eroticism and love to save Laura from the oppression and subsequent decay. Only queer love can save Laura.

The imagery of the youthful girls is heavily contrasted with the animal-esque goblins beckoning them to buy their exotic fruits. These goblins insist on luring the girls to their stands, making the element of temptation immediately present to the narrative by way of Faust, offering a plethora of promises from bodily pleasures to spiritual fulfillment in exchange for a seemingly small sacrifice. Laura’s fetishizing of the fruit’s exotic nature stems from the deliberate blurring between sexual gratification and commercial exchange, as the poem “repeats itself in the

frequent rehearsal of the goblins' phrase 'Come Buy,' in which payment for the merchants' goods promises erotic climax" (Mendoza 920). The deliberative use of the words "come" and "buy" are indicative of the duality of the goblin's meaning and intent. Succumbed by the hypnotic promises of a new sense of pleasure, Laura begins to consume the forbidden fruit. The biblical allegory of the fall of man is incredibly overt in this scene, as Laura exchanges a piece of her body, in the form of her hair, and literally consumes forbidden fruit from an Othered entity. Laura, in this instance, unconsciously becomes both an Adam and Eve figure, as she is both cast out from the market the next day and begins to decay, aging at an unnatural rate. Additionally, Laura also falls from her queer standing, since her fall into temptation literally robs her of not only her identity but also her ability to work; she no longer carries any life within her. Her inability to grow a bud from a seed illustrates the degree of how far Laura has decayed. Laura is no longer the person that Lizzie had lived with, the girl that Lizzie had slept with "cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest" was no longer a reality for her (Rossetti, lines 196 – 97). Lizzie sees the damage caused by the goblins' promise of pleasures and fulfillment. Laura, once shining with life and promise, has been reduced to nothing more than a living husk, grayed with the decay of giving away a piece of herself in exchange for the promise of fulfillment. Laura's relinquishing of her queer identity slowly kills her; her very essence is blocked as she "[decays] as the fair full moon doth turn / to swift decay and burn / her fire away" (278 – 80). Wrought with concern and pity for Laura, Lizzie begins an interpersonal journey for the sexual longing of her sister. Through her resilience and resistance of the goblins' erotic and violent advances, the narrative culminates in Lizzie pulling Laura out of her coerced decay through sexualized exchanges of fluids and seeds to restore her dear sister to health.

The themes of temptation and desire manifest throughout the narrative; the goblins physically tempt Laura into finding unknown pleasures by consuming their fruit while they later aggressively force themselves on Lizzie. Clearly, as Lizzie and Laura passionately desire each other which the narrative cites their queer identity and life together. However, that status quo is disrupted once the male archetype is introduced to this queer gynocentric home. Analogous to hetero-normative promises of a happier and moral life, Laura gives up her queer identity through the exchange of her hair and a piece of her physical body. Lizzie, much like the queer gothic hero, effectively "interrogates the definition of what it is to be normal" by breaking her own rule of

ignoring the goblins and saving Laura by sacrificing herself, putting herself in danger, and, in a blind attempt, trying to find some way to cure Laura (“Queer Gothic”). As Laura became both an Adam and Eve figure, Lizzie becomes a Christ like figure, ironically, approaching the hetero-normative superstructure of their community with the intent to dismantle it and provide life to the queer figure in need of redemption. Through this, Lizzie finds agency through her sexual longing for Laura.

Lizzie, from the very beginning, is incredibly protective of Laura, pleading with her not to wander into the goblins’ market for Lizzie’s sake and by describing the death of Jeanie, another girl that was seduced by the goblins’ promises which led to her quick decay. Lizzie describes the dangers of queer women stepping outside of their identity in the search for fulfillment and pleasures in an androcentric world; however, this very notion will ultimately lead to their death and decay, plunging them back into the closet. Illustrated by Jeanie, the real danger presented by the poem is “that of the failing at the traditional signs of feminine achievement” by way of achieving control of their own identity only to cast it aside for assimilation into a society that does not want them (Heineken 128). By the very act of giving up a piece of their identity, something seemingly insignificant such as hair, these women are killing themselves to conform to a society that has transgressed against them. Yet, by Lizzie’s tapping into her queer identity and actively fighting against the goblins, she is granted the gift to once more hold Laura and kiss Laura as Lizzie is overjoyed when Laura “kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth”, signifying that Laura has finally come to terms with her queer identity through Lizzie’s longing for her (492). Through the eroticism and sexualizing nature of the juices that are exchanged between the two girls, Lizzie is finally able to save Laura from her decay; queer erotic love saved Laura.

Eroticism, though extremely important in the narrative, is not the only motivating factor for Lizzie and Laura. Lizzie’s love and devotion to Laura verges on religious as not only are the sensations of decay shared with Laura, but she also personifies Christ-like qualities as she sacrifices herself and her wellbeing in order to save, forgive, and redeem Laura. Lizzie’s love for Laura “as exemplified by her sacrifice goes beyond the limits of normal commodity and exchanges her body, like Christ’s,” to bring Laura out of the shadow of the valley of death (Hill 462). The pure desire to not only be sexually available for Laura but to also act as a protector and keeper gives Lizzie the drive to save Laura from her decay and bring to life a new appreciation for their queer lives together. They are, very much in fact, dependent on each other for emotional and

physical survival in a constantly evolving symbiotic relationship.

Through a journey of alienation, fall, sexuality, and redemption, Lizzie and Laura are able to illustrate the dangers of losing an identity while also reversing the transgressive element in typical gothic horror, where the sexually deviant are transgressed and must find a way to survive in a queer world. “Goblin Market” provides a world where temptation into a hetero-normative society is unnatural and antagonistic to the characters, so much so that they will die from it. Through the use of reverse transgressions, Laura and Lizzie are able to live their lives as they please, with each other.

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