



M I L E S T O N E

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EAST LOS ANGELES COLLEGE

Monterey Park, California

# M I L E S T O N E

## 2 0 0 4



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*What started me [to write] was my need to be saying... things, and the immediate satisfaction it gave me to speak them. What I said I would not have spoken to any single person, not even my own twin brother; this was a voice I addressed only to myself and the world as a whole, for I believed the world was listening.*

— PHILIP LEVINE

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

AS I AM WRITING THIS FROM MY NEW HOME IN THE UPPER canyon of Sierra Madre, overlooking green hills and the city beyond, I can't help but reflect on noisy Temple City Boulevard where I lived for twenty-six years. Friends anticipated the poems I would write here as though this city poet would suddenly infuse her verse with squirrels and deer, and though one or two have managed to find a home on the page, I can't forget where I've come from.

So, too, for the contributors of *Milestone 2004*. In the various poems, essays, and stories, we will find that the places we come from range from Olympic Boulevard to Zacatecas, from a café in L.A. to a battle zone in the Pacific. There are the places of the heart, too, like remembering an eighty-five year old mother, honoring the wishes of parents who have passed on, and reflecting back on that first kiss, even if it did take place in a cemetery. Finally, there are the inevitable journeys we must all travel from who we once were to who we hope to become.

Identity has always been a major theme throughout the long history of *Milestone* on our campus. As in previous issues, we continue to highlight the myriad voices, the writers and artists, represented by the students at East Los Angeles College, whose stories, poems, and art work cross generational, cultural, and ethnic borders. And, as in the last two issues, we also have an example of analytical writing, a film review of *American Beauty*.

All of us who have contributed to and worked on *Milestone 2004* look forward to an issue as beautiful as *Milestone 2003*, which could not have been possible without the generous support of the East Los Angeles College Foundation. As the Creative Writing instructor for the Spring 2004 class, I am also grateful to the students who practiced the skills we learned in the workshop by selecting the pieces for this current edition. As always, this literary journal belongs to the writers and artists on this campus. Those of us who have nurtured them in our classes, counseled them through the transfer process, and represented them on the administrative level should be proud not only of their emerging talent but their creative, intellectual spirit as well.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Trish Glover, Graphic Arts Designer, and her Assistant, Yegor Hovakimyan, for designing and formatting; members of the Art Department, in particular Jim Uyekawa for his ongoing support and Chris Moreno for her contributions to this issue; Selina Chi from Resource Development, whose input and advice have been invaluable; and, of course, my colleagues in the English Department: Susan Suntree, James Kenny, Joan Gurfield, and Gisela Herrera. Thank you all, we've done it again!

– CAROL LEM

*Leticia Arellano* | EL MERCADO

I love the hour before getting on stage:  
my adrenalin working against me,  
doing quick warm-ups to sing mariachi  
at El Mercado in East L.A.  
a hundred people wait to hear guitars, cellos, violins,  
trumpets, and my harmonies.  
Mr. Gonzalez, the lead guitarist, is testing the sounds,  
Adolfo untangles microphone cords,  
boot heels stomp and echo  
while wife-beating men drink cold Coronas and gobble down  
oysters, almost stumbling off their chairs, ignoring  
their wives' phone calls.

Eight mariachi men wear black pants with gold trimming  
and matching shirts, gold belt buckles blind the guests,  
children cry, run up and down the stairs.  
Their mothers go after them as everyone stares,  
waitresses run back and forth, forgetting orders,  
and Mr. Lopez's five dollar red roses  
penetrate shirt collars.

The mariachi begins as I slowly walk towards the stage.  
I grab the microphone and sing "El Rey,"  
*Yo se bien que estoy afuera pero el dia que yo me  
muera, se que tendras que llorar.*  
With sweaty palms and adrenalin pumping,  
I look across the room to Jesus on his cross  
for a five second prayer and give it my all.



LEKIT IM

*Leticia Arellano* | ZACATECAS, MARCH 2004

Getting off Mexicana flight 37 at 7:00 A.M.

I smell home:

Indigenous soil, smog free as though  
micro-organisms don't exist.  
Sunflowers, red roses and carnations,  
air so fresh it feels ice cold to my face and neck.  
Birds chirp for joy,  
bees pass me by ready to sting.

Visiting a small ranch is a journey—  
Grandpa milking and feeding the cows,  
Grandma combing the horse's hair  
or washing her wrinkled hands  
just before making homemade flour tortillas  
and cheese, cooks beans and grills spicy  
chilies from Grandpa's very own backyard.

I enter my room and see my bed  
just the way I left it two years ago.  
I look around for dust but don't find any.  
I look at my dolls still missing a leg, still uncombed.

At 5:00 P.M. I'm ready to go to LA Primers Elementary  
to play volleyball with my cousins  
Mario, Juanita, and a few of their friends.  
"Quieres participar en mi equipo?" Mario asks,  
"Con mucho gusto," I reply.  
After sliding for the ball my knees scrape concrete.  
They bleed so I go home  
where Grandma places a hot vapory towel with a salve  
to heal wounded knees.

*Rebecca C. Campos* | LIFE ON OLYMPIC BOULEVARD

I am crying again driving down Olympic Blvd.

I am passing the faded stucco duplex and forcing myself to turn  
and acknowledge the smiling children at play.

I am recognizing the overgrown sycamore,  
my mother's sole protector from a madman.

I am noticing stuck-up Rosemary's house now has  
imposing apartment units propped up in the front yard.

I am wondering if our bedroom window still contains nails  
of crucifixion penetrating its frame.

I am stopping at the corner where the only source of compassion  
appears as a smile on a gas station attendant's face.

I am venturing down the trash laden alley.

I am cringing as the garage comes into view.

I am asking if any other little girls had to  
sleep in their garage and pee on the dark damp floor.

I am reliving the nightmares of my childhood.

I am willing to make them mine.

I am exiting the alley, the house, the street.

I am leaving it all behind.

I am moving forward, toward a string of green lights up ahead.

*Erik Carrillo* | AN ABSURD IDENTITY

My Mexican moles have been removed  
And my spanglish dialect is no longer in use  
This study of my English tongue is my narrow path  
The history of America is where I stride back  
Southern California is where I begin  
A dream to an end of reading Whitman  
My leaves of grass have taken toll,  
As an ex-gardening Chicano  
Cuts down all hope,  
With my pale white skin and light hazel eyes  
I do not fully represent a perfect image  
But of European descent, aren't we all  
Mixed together in American life  
Forgetting the past is not the least tragic lie  
Politically speaking I am,  
Even though I can still smell the beans from  
Inside my mouth  
No Mexican meat, vegetarian ideal  
I'm not crazy just driven by the health  
Of an American, complete  
As for my ancestral past,  
Are my moles growing back  
Or is it the hairs on my toes  
That need shaving everyday  
As a little Mexico in man  
I can't deny I am  
American-Mexican.

**I**N THE SERVICE THEY TRAIN YOU TO BE A PERSON WHO IS SUPPOSED to accept death as part of the job. “When a comrade dies they don’t die in vain, they die for the honor of serving their country and begin a new mission protecting the kingdom of GOD. Do not worry for they will be greeted by their brothers and sisters who have fallen before them,” the Drill Instructor preached to us as we faced our first live fire exercise. It’s repeated consistently in and out of training twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week during your basic training. I used to think that most were living out a childhood dream of becoming Sgt. Striker, a character in a John Wayne movie. Ironic how my words would come back to haunt me in the future.

When I landed in that rice paddy and stepped off the CH-46 helicopter and into that cold, wet, murky water, I didn’t realize that this mission would be the one that would change the lives of my squad and me forever.

We were in the Phu-Nang district of South Korea where the landscape was covered with steep hills covered with little green trees. Wherever there was an open space a rice paddy had been carved into the landscape providing food for the local population. The whole valley seemed to be one big rice paddy with a thick cloud cover protecting it from the outside world. As we began to move out the owners of these fields kept working, barely noticing our presence. They worked side by side bent over with their hands reaching in and out pulling out bushels of rice and placing them in the basket next to them. All family members were working, from young to old they worked and worked, never raising their heads from underneath those pointy conical wide brimmed hats, or so we thought. You can feel the hair on your neck stand on end knowing someone was watching you. As we began to fade into the hillside I looked back and met the eyes of a young child no older than four or five. He slowly raised his hand to wave and I met his gesture in return, then his father tugged at him to get back to work. I turned and moved out with my squad and faded into the gray luminous hillside.

Upon arriving and securing our designated position we dug in for the long haul and waited, watched and listened for something to happen.

Two days of waiting was our purgatory, unable to move during the day under the hot sun and then huddling together at night making no sound while we fought off the freezing chill. Then it happened: 07:00 A.M., March 27, 1989, the chopping sounds of helicopters were heard echoing off the hilltops.

I was just coming off my four-hour watch and was looking forward to crawling into my hole and sliding into my sleeping bag that was calling my name. The chill seemed to be colder this morning, so cold that it felt as if it was cutting small slits into your face. Frost had set in and a blanket of wet white frost had covered everything and everyone. Small clouds could be seen coming from the breaths of my squad as they sat in their positions. The word began to spread to get ready, but no one really needed to be told; we could hear for ourselves. We sat and waited, each man's mind in his own world while his eyes scanned the horizon as the fog lifted.

The next sound we heard was a loud scream that pierced the air. Then a large dark shape raced overhead, so low that the tops of the trees were sheared off. We held our weapons tighter and began to take a bead on the dark object. Word came over the radio, it's Charlie 1/5, they're setting in to our left flank and heavy troop movement was reported advancing from direct front. I thought it must be heavy if they're already flying in support. The CH-53D Sea Stallion was coming in fast and when it veered to the left it was almost on its side. A common maneuver with pilots that want to fly in low, drop their load and get out fast. But something was wrong; the bird should have already righted itself.

The helicopter fought desperately to right itself and it won only in time to slam at full speed belly first into the frozen ground. Mixed in with the shattering blades were rock and dirt. The bird slid 500 feet before slamming head first into a small rock pile. It exploded sending a 200-foot red/orange fireball skyward and hot molten pieces of steel in every direction and along with it screams of terror. Inside that massive fireball were men, men being roasted alive. Fireballs seemed to race in every direction, but we immediately realized that those weren't fireballs, those were men running from the wreckage.

Our reaction was immediate; we leaped out of our fighting positions

and raced toward the towering inferno. All we could think about is the men still trapped inside. As I reached the scene a lone man came out of the fire and ran toward me, his clothes were gone and his skin was milky white as if he were a candle melting in the flame. His screams ran through my soul as if a knife was piercing my soul. I took off my uniform top and tried to smother the flames but couldn't, the engine fuel just kept burning. His cries of pain were etched into my mind as he began to slowly die. All I could do was keep trying. Out of nowhere someone let loose with a fire extinguisher and put him out as he fell to the ground. We immediately grabbed him but were unable to get a firm grip because his skin pulled off as if he were a burnt marshmallow. I just grabbed harder, sinking my fingers into his squishy skin. We picked him up and carried him into a mud puddle that was nearby. We immediately began applying the cool mud to his now unrecognizable body. As I sat there in the mud applying the cool mud to his body his head rested on my lap. The cries of pain slowly stopped and all I could hear was a low sob from the hole that was once a mouth.

The voice was one of calmness and an eerie serenity, I leaned over placing my ear over his mouth and heard him take his final breath; he took a slow deep peaceful breath and as he exhaled all he said was "Mom" and he died. I sat there for a moment with his head resting in my lap; I gently placed his head on the ground and stood up. As I looked down I noticed a wallet submerged into the mud, I bent over, picked it up, and opened it. Looking back at me was a young strong man with the world ahead of him. I closed it and laid it on his chest and turned to go help the others.

Medical help flew in from everywhere. Helicopters came in from every direction and landed close by with corpsmen jumping out before they even touched down. The survivors were being gathered and treated by corpsmen and others who came down to help. Everyone was moving everywhere and in every direction. I found myself standing in the middle triage, a designated location where corpsmen treat and prioritize the injuries of the wounded. Men were lying on the ground all around me screaming, screaming with such pain. To this day I can still hear the pain and agony in their voices. As I stood there a medi-vac landed no more than fifty feet from me sending a cloud of dust everywhere, wind whipped at the bandages of the men lying there. Their screams became

louder as Marines began loading the wounded into the back of the helicopter. The men were lying there terrified and scared, their poor bodies were so badly burnt that you could see the veins and muscle tissue on some. Others were charred black and beyond recognition, it was a miracle they were still alive. Luckily, a few were able to get out with minor burns and injuries. These men just stared out into nothingness and the look on their faces was just a blank stare, no feelings, no expression, just blank. When the corpsmen began moving them to the waiting medi-vacs they began to scream and, crawling their way away from the waiting helicopter. Some even tried to crawl off their stretchers. "NO! NO! NOT AGAIN, NO!" Was all they could say? Some even mustered enough strength to kick and struggle, but they were put on the bird anyway. I could understand them, who would want to get back on the same type of helicopter you just crashed in? But what could we do, we had to get them to the hospital the fastest way possible.

As the screams continued, a corpsman grabbed me and handed me an I.V. to hold. His victim was going into shock while he was working on him. He couldn't breathe, his throat was burned out. Then the corpsman did something that I thought was only done in the movies. He took out his knife, carefully cut a slit into this man's charred throat, took out a pen and placed the pen shell into his throat, immediately allowing him to get a breath of precious air into his lungs. He then taped it off and took the I.V. from me, securing it on a hook above the patient. As he stood there for a moment looking at his results he slightly smiled, raised his hand and slapped me on the shoulder, "Good job, Marine." The screams continued as we exited the full helicopter and the landing gear lifted off the ground headed toward the medical ship and waiting surgeons. I watched it as it raised itself into the air and disappeared over the horizon.

Once the medi-vacs took off, whisking the wounded away to waiting hospital ships and medical teams, it was time to find the others, the ones that didn't make it. Searching through and around the burnt-out husk of the Ch-53D, I came across a hand sticking out of the ground. I immediately thought it may be someone buried and dropped to my knees and began digging; I only had to dig about six inches when the hand and forearm fell over, it was seared off at the elbow. I flung myself backward crawl-

ing straight over an embankment and into a deep crater. After a minute of trying to regain my composure I started to get up when my eyes met the gaze of gentle blue eyes. I was looking straight into the face of one of the pilots, his helmet still on and his dark visor pulled down the crack exposing half his face and his blue eye. Instead of jumping out of my skin this time I calmly regained my composure and took in the whole scene. Lying next to the pilot was his co-pilot, positioned as if they were still operating their helicopter; they did their job to the very end. They lay there crumpled like two rag dolls with every bone in their body shattered. I picked them up and moved them out of that cold, dreary, wet hole.

As I look back now, it feels like a dream or should I say nightmare. My mind keeps trying to push it downward to the deep recesses; at one



MANUAL LOPEZ

time all I wanted to do was to forget about the crash, but I can't. I will never forget about it, it will never go away. At times I can still hear the screams and smell that dreadful jet fuel searing flesh and bone, which still permeates my sense of smell. If you have ever smelled burnt hair well it's about a thousand times worse. It'll never go away, all I can do is accept it and come to grips with it in therapy and talking about it. For years I tried to blame someone, the government, the Marines, the pilots, even GOD. But it was no one's fault; it was just their time. Then blame turned to anger and I began searching for the answer to why. Why should such good men die such a horrible death, but the only answer that I was able to find was that no one can evade death. It is a transition we all must face alone.

Military training prepares you for WAR and death is something that must be accepted because it is part of your job description. But all the training in the world can never really prepare you for the sights, sounds and smells of the battlefield. John Wayne was an American icon but never once set foot on a battlefield where death is everywhere: blood, body parts, mangled and distorted bodies that once were live and robust men with hopes and dreams, images that haunt a person for the remainder of his life. Ask any combat vet from any WAR and they'll tell you the same. It's tough when friends die. But this is the fate we asked for when we signed that paper sealing our fate. But this is WAR and people die and ironically you have to accept it because if you let it bother you during your mission you risk the lives of your surviving buddies around you and you cannot allow that to happen. Maybe John Wayne was right, "Better them than you," but not for long because in the end we all die and sooner or later we all must prepare for the ultimate journey. At least I know that my brothers and sisters who have fallen before me will greet me, and they will lead the way to our next mission. ■

**A**MERICANS BELIEVE THAT SINCE WE LIVE WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES of the United States of America that we are safe and that no harm or evil can come to us. 9/11 proved that wrong and now we are in danger of a future attack. Some argue this and say it only happened once and others say we should prepare for another more devastating attack. I've heard people argue that we should take on a live-and-let live policy and the threat will go away. Current day Americans believe that evil does not exist in the world because the talking heads say there is no evil in the world and that we should only focus on ourselves. So we believe it wholeheartedly and move on as if we have no worries other than concentrating on our self-image, growing waste lines, high school dropouts, increased drug and alcohol abuse and bigger gas burning vehicles to fit our fat butts and fat families into. Worries we have no worries, but what if tomorrow all what you hold close and cherish was taken away? What if your world changed forever and you could never get it back? What if an armed man came into your home and took everything away and there was nothing you could do? Not just a man, but a man with only evil in his heart and who did not care if you were a man, woman or child, for he'd kill you all the same, no matter what you believed or preached. Dead is dead. What would you do? How would you feel? His name was Saeed Al-Sabah, a soldier fighting with the Kuwaiti Resistance during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990–1991. He told me his story and how in the early morning hours on August 2nd, 1990 a squad of Iraqi Republican Guard soldiers entered his life and changed it forever.

He was a muscular man who made his living working the soil to produce food and an income for his wife Aishah and his nine year old daughter Samia. He was a solid two hundred pounds with no signs of fat. A short cropped salt and pepper beard covered a fresh scar which ran down the side of his face from eye to chin. His brown eyes, alert and always scanning the horizon, were surrounded by deep wrinkles that only working long hours in the sun can bring. Those eyes seemed to show a serious soldier who was in the middle of a WAR fighting for your

life from moment to moment. Dark circles hung below his eyes as if he had not slept in days. At moments those sad eyes would well-up with tears but not one tear ran down his cheek. As he spoke he unconsciously brushed away every speck of sand hiding within parts of his weapon. He would put drops of oil on the barrel and firing mechanism then make sure every part was running smoothly. Once done, he raised the weapon to his shoulder and slowly took aim as he controlled his breathing and slowly pulled back the trigger. The hammer would hit home and a small click signaled that it struck its target.

“Do you know why I kill Iraqis?” he said while he re-cocked his weapon and slowly pulled the trigger once more. “You Americans know nothing of pain. What if this was taking place where you live? What would you do? What if your families were in danger, what would you do? I once had a family, a beautiful wife named Aishah who gave me the love of my life, my daughter Samia.” He then took a loaded magazine from his ammo belt and locked it into his weapon. “I’ll tell you why I kill Iraqis, then you can tell me what would you do?”

After tucking in and reading Samia her favorite bedtime story for the night he gave her a kiss on the forehead and stayed with her until his little angel fell fast asleep. Saeed then helped his wife Aishah clean up the house and they both got ready for bed. How he had loved her, his wife who always knew what he wanted and needed. He worked the fields everyday, always trying to give her what she wanted and needed. He kissed his wife and held her in his arms until they finally fell into a deep sleep.

He was awakened several hours later when his front door was kicked in followed by several uniformed Iraqi Republican Guard soldiers rushing in, kicking over furniture and roughly grabbing him and his sleeping family. Two soldiers yanked him from his bed. As they brought him to his feet one of the soldiers slammed the butt of his AK-47 into his stomach causing him to exhale and keel over. As he fell to the ground the soldiers began kicking and striking him all over his body. All Saeed could do was curl up in the fetal position and take the punishment of his aggressors. As Saeed placed his hands over his face he was able to make out three other soldiers grabbing Aishah and ripping the clothes from her body as they restrained and tied her to the bed. The Iraqi’s hands were every-

where; they each began kissing, licking and groping her while they made sure she was securely restrained to her bed. Saeed knew what was coming next. When the soldiers got her hands and feet secured she lay there naked and spread eagle, her body exposed for all to see. Saeed tried to reach Aishah but only to be met with more furious kicks and punches to his body. One of the soldiers left the room and several moments later returned with an officer.

The officer entered the room and slowly walked around inspecting the work of his men. The officer first stopped at Saeed, looking at his crumpled body on the floor. Saeed said as he looked up at the officer he spit on the officer's boot and was met with a swift kick to his head causing more blood to explode from his mouth. The officer then signaled and the Iraqis began striking Saeed, the officer then made his way to Aishah restrained on the bed. The officer slowly ran his dirty hand up her body grabbing, squeezing and inserting fingers at his pleasure. He then shouted an order and the squad immediately grabbed their weapons and left the house only leaving the sergeant behind to watch the door. The officer then dropped his pants and mounted Aishah and raped her. Saeed tried to get to his feet to come to the aid of Aishah and was met with a butt stroke of an AK-47 to the stomach by the sergeant. The officer finished several moments later, pulled his pants up and then spit on Aishah. The officer then ordered the sergeant to spread Saeed's hand on the floor and then slammed the butt of his AK-47 onto Saeed's hand, sending jolts of pain to every part of his body. The officer just laughed as he slapped the sergeant's back, gave a couple orders and then exited the home. Saeed could hear the officer laughing as the squad came back into the home, placing their weapons on the table. He could still hear them laughing as they stripped and devoured Aishah like a pack of wolves would do to a young lamb.

Saeed doesn't remember how long the soldiers raped Aishah because in between turns they would come over and beat him. Sometime later he regained consciousness and found himself alone with his wife, but now he was tied to a chair facing his wife from across the room. Aishah lay there bloodied and bruised and his heart went out to her, hoping if he could just hold her once more. All they could do was look into each

other's eyes, no words had to be said. It was dark when the vehicles arrived to the front of his home. Saeed heard orders being given and men scrambling for their equipment. Just then the door slowly opened and two private guards came in, looked around then shouted, "all clear." The two guards then took up posts on either side of the door facing the room. Their faces showed no emotion.

Saeed said, "I don't know what I saw, but I swear it was Saddam himself! But I can't be so sure due to all the blood in my face and swollen eyes. But when soldiers began saying your eminence or your grace, I knew it was someone of great importance. That general was treated like a king because all the soldiers spoke to him in hushed tones with lots of respect." The officer escorted the general and his entourage around the room proudly displaying his work. The officer reminded Saeed of a new puppy wagging his tail for a pat on the head. The general slowly walked around the room taking his time to study the injuries of Saeed and Aishah. The general smiled and then complimented the officer and his men for work well done. The officer then ordered the sergeant to bring out the little girl, Samia, and the sergeant went into the next room and brought out Saeed's daughter. Saeed jumped up and yelled but one of the guards slammed his rifle several times into Saeed's body, sending him into the floor. The general's smile grew wider as he motioned the young girl to come to him. Samia refused to take a step but the sergeant stopped that by prodding his bayonet into the middle of her back, she hesitantly began to move toward the general. The general then smiled as he slowly stroked Samia's face. One of the personal guards then shouted an order and all the soldiers left the room, leaving only Saeed, Asisha, Samia, the general, and the two guards. As the men exited the general ordered one of his guards to go out and reward the officer and his men for their work.

The general stayed next to Samia, slowly and gently stroking Samia's face, brushing aside a strand of hair that had fallen out of place. The general then picked her up and sat her on the kitchen table and whispered to her not to go anywhere. Saeed groaned and was met with another swift kick to the ribs. Saeed couldn't bring himself to go into details or for how long the general took with Samia; all he could say was "the general used her in everyway." He held his head up and his eyes were tear soaked but

no tears fell. In a rough raspy voice, he squared his shoulders and raised his head up high, “Samia didn’t make a sound. She didn’t give the dog the pleasure, she was like her mother, strong. Beautiful and I am proud of her. The last thing that general did was while he was mounted behind her, one of the guards handed him a bayonet and as he was getting ready to finish he inserted the bayonet into the base of her skull. She died right there.

The general waited until she had stopped moving then as he backed away he slowly pulled the bayonet out of her skull. A sound I will never forget. The dog then pulled up his pants and walked over to Aishah who was still restrained on the bed. Aishah was black and blue and her face was swollen and bloodied but she met the general’s gaze with eyes of steel and even when the general slit her throat from ear to ear she never stopped staring into his eyes. Aishah matched his stare even into death. She was a strong woman, I loved her. She too didn’t make a sound. I will miss her but I’ll see them once again. I cried for them.”

The general then swaggered over to Saeed and looked down at his crumpled body. The general motioned and the guard immediately grabbed him by his head and brought him to his knees. The guard then grabbed Saeed by the hair and chin and held his face up to the general. “I was looking into the face of evil, but like my wife and daughter I stared at it straight on, knowing my death was soon to follow.” The general then took that same bayonet and ran it from the corner of Saeed’s eye down to his throat causing blood to splatter everywhere. Then the general took the guard’s weapon, raised it and slammed it into Saeed’s face. Saeed fell to the floor feeling his lifeblood drain away, he remembers watching the general and his personal guards leave his home closing the door behind them as things turned black.

Saeed does not know how long he lay there but remembers being awakened by a friendly face and soft voices. But when he finally came to his senses he tried to stand up but due to his injuries was unable to. A neighbor was sitting with him dressing his wounds; as he sat there he saw neighbors dressing and taking care of Aishah and Samia, washing and dressing them in clean clothes. When his wounds were cleaned and dressed his new friend helped him to his feet and then helped him to the bed where Aishah and Samia lay side by side on the now clean bed. The neighbors cleaned and organized the house placing everything as if

nothing had ever happened, then they left leaving Saeed and his family alone as they made their way outside.

Saeed stayed with his family for sometime then stood up, kissed his wife Aishah and daughter Samia goodbye, saying he would see them again. He walked to the front door, gave one last look around and closed the front door locking it behind him. Several vehicles were waiting outside filled with Kuwaitis with various injuries; he recognized a few of them. As Saeed stood there, Kahlid, a family friend, approached him and handed him a burning torch. Saeed just looked at it as flames danced at the end of the handle, he then turned, walked to his home pausing for just a moment before setting fire to his once happy home. The other vehicles started up and moved out leaving Saeed and Kahlid standing there watching the home burn. As Saeed stood there watching he began to feel weak in the knees and almost fell over. Kahlid placed his arm around his friend and kept him on his feet. Saeed then let everything go and cried in his friend's arms. They waited until there was nothing left and then drove off to the waiting horizon.

“That’s why I kill Iraqis, what would you do? I must now find those pigs and kill them.”

Saeed then stood up, checked his gear once more and walked over to a waiting helicopter as it was gearing up to take off. He sat on the edge as his feet dangled just above the skids. Just as the helicopter was about to take off he stuck out his hand and I clasped it feeling the strength in his grip. We shook once as though we were frozen in time, and then the bird lifted and flew off. For some reason I stood there and watched him disappear over the horizon.

To my knowledge those men were never caught and now most likely are loose in the world, evil men who seek to do nothing but cause harm and chaos. I’m not saying all Iraqis are evil but those men were and those men are in every race and culture in the world. Men and women who want nothing but chaos and destruction to prevail, people who will kill anyone no matter what race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, man, woman, or child. Those men are the ones we fight today but now they are no longer over there, they are now over here waiting to strike at what you hold dear. So what would do? Or should I say, what are you going to do to protect the ones you love? ■

THE THOUGHT OF FALLING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DRUGS scare many people. I for one never thought I would ever try any illegal drugs as long as I lived. I was convinced that drugs were stupid and useless. I didn't need drugs to make me happy, I was perfectly happy with food in my stomach and a TV set in my room. I was wrong though. At the end of my sophomore year I suddenly exploded with a curiosity to see what it was like to get high. This sudden curiosity struck my life like a cobra strikes its prey, it was unexpected and almost deadly. My curiosity ultimately guided me through the dark streets of East L.A. But after it was all over I was left with nothing but sorrow and grief at a friend's funeral. I will never forget my perilous journey into the dark and my courageous way out.

The way it began is still clear in my mind as if it had happened yesterday. I used to hang around with my friend Chris and we shared a lot of experiences together. We used to play on the same baseball team for a nearby recreational park. We would usually go cruising around in my new car that I had bought. It wasn't much but it got me around. We would go to flyer parties just to pick up on girls. It was good times because we were like two frat boys running around with no heed in the world.

One day the Hot Boys from East L.A. (a party crew) were going to throw a party at a friend's house. His name was Adolfo but we all called him Dogo. I knew him from back when I used to go to Youth Group.

Dogo used to be like a mocking bird, silent and innocent just a year before. He was really quite unexplainable because if you take a geek and a gang pet and you fused them together you would probably get Dogo. I say this because he wasn't quite the coolest cat on the block but because he liked to talk so much everyone like him. Although no one ever said it, everyone felt pity for him because every time he would manage to be the only one to get caught for our maliciousness even when he had nothing to do with the situation. For example, when we would go to "Assumption Middle School" everyone in our group used to steal goodies from the ice cream lady on the way there. This one day she had a hidden camera with her, and although Dogo had never stolen a single thing in his life, he

chose the worst day to begin. The lady saw Dogo and started yelling at us, but we started to run. The lady's husband then jumped out of the driver's seat of the truck and caught only Dogo. Dogo took the entire blame for the whole thing and we walked away with our hands clean of any crime.

He was as loyal as a pit bull, and no matter what happened, he would always back you up even if it meant he would get his butt kicked. Both of you would be used as a rag to clean the floor, but you would both be used as rags together.

My friend Dogo was no longer how he used to be. He was now a pot smoking, school dropping, party animal. The innocence in him had been drained out of him but somehow he kept his loyalty. For example, there was once this boy named Jonathan that I didn't used to be keen on because he made me break up with a girl that I really liked. Dogo and I were coming from a long game of baseball when we saw Jonathan walking around with a couple of friends. I looked over at my comrade and with a quick smile, he knew what I intended on doing. They outnumbered us but I didn't care. I was full of anger and found the perfect victim I would pound my anger on. Dogo didn't like the idea but he didn't care because he wasn't about to let a homie go into a fight without the proper backup. We hit them up and all I remember is exchanging some cruel words and soon after seeing the baseball I had in my hand as protection gracefully slip out of my fingers at full speed and hit the boy in a full face collision. After that I just remember throwing wild punches and landing about half of them. Dogo stood by my side all the way and at that exact moment I realized that Dogo would never leave my side if I ever needed him.

Chris and I were going to the party that was happening at Dogo's house. We had a game to play that day so we would probably get to Dogo's house at about 10:30 P.M. As always, Chris took a little longer than usual so we didn't leave until 10:40 and by the time that we arrived to the party the cops were already there, making it obvious that the party was over.

After everyone left Chris and I stuck around to see what happened exactly. We found that the party was really getting good and that there was definitely a bunch of girls at the party. It got too chaotic though and

that is when the cops walked in. I was a little depressed because I really wanted to party that day. At least all the beer was still there and the cops didn't take anything. I remember drinking beer after beer and that was unusual because I do not drink too often. I really can not stand to drink because it makes me want to throw up if I drink too much. I guess I can accredit my disgust for alcohol from a party I went to as a freshman at Cathedral High School. That day I drank four paper cups full of straight vodka. I drank so much I became ill and my mother took me to the doctor. I explained to the doctor what happened and he reassured me that I it was possible that if I drank any more I would have needed the alcohol pumped out of my body.

It was closing time and I had to go home because it was getting kind of late. Dogo had a joint on him and he was about to spark it up. I was a little under the influence of alcohol, but till this day I'm not exactly sure why I said what I was about to say, maybe it was the alcohol or maybe it was a repressed curiosity that was about to explode and take me into territories that I should have never experienced. Somehow I found myself saying, "Hey, can I take a hit?" and he looked at me with a glare of astonishment and responded, "You blaze it?" I explained to him that I had never smoked marijuana in my life but I wanted to try it.

The moment of truth was upon me and I could clearly see Dogo passing me that joint. As soon as the joint touched my hand a quick quiver came upon me and I did not care. I took a long puff and for the next thirty seconds I coughed like I had never coughed before. Now I realized that perception of reality would never be the same.

Almost a whole year had gone by since that night and I found myself smoking marijuana just about every free moment. I did not know if this was good or not. On the one hand, I had lost weight drastically. People that I did not used to hang around with were being introduced into my life, one by one. But, on the other hand, I didn't have the same endurance that I used to have when I was not smoking. I found myself slacking off a little more in my studies than I had before. I wanted to quit but I felt gridlocked. What was about to happen would change my life around and would put me back on the right track.

It was a freezing Tuesday morning in December. The phone rang about

1:30 a.m. and woke me up. Struggling to open my eyes I answered, "Hello." It was Dogo, "Hey Juan Carlos, give me a ride to the spot so that I could up this one new wall." I did not feel like going. I was just too tired and had to go to school that morning. I told him, "Chale homes, it is freezing out there," and he just said, "Alright homie, I'll talk to you later then." I hung up the phone and went back to sleep.

Later that day I saw the homie Edgar and he told me what had happened that morning. It turns out that Dogo went to tag on the wall that morning and after he was done he smoked some weed that was laced. His mom found him almost dead in his bed and called the ambulance. They picked up his almost lifeless body. On the way to the hospital Dogo died.

The shock of one of my closest friends dead made me realize that there was something wrong with my life and that somehow I had to step it up and get out of that life. I couldn't end up like Dogo. Somehow I had to persevere and make my parents proud.

A much wiser man once said, "The wise man makes mistakes and learns from them, while the much wiser man learns from other's mistakes and doesn't commit them." I was not about to die because of a stupid addiction. I went straight after that and gradually began doing better. Even though I still party, I'm not out of control anymore. I have stayed drug free and look forward to a dazzling future.

I never regret smoking marijuana or going into the life of running around with the East L.A. thugs. I don't regret that year although I could have done more things with my time than just waste it doing marijuana. Crossing the boundary into the unknown opened my eyes and let me experience the wild side of East L.A. that I only saw in movies. I was now proud of where I came from and that made the journey valuable. I'm grateful for everything Dogo did and tried to do for me. I am especially grateful to him because he let me see a side of life that not everyone gets to see and demonstrated through his death that a life of virtues is better than the life of a thug. This is who I am and this is who I will become, but without Dogo I never would have seen that point. That is why I owe my future to him. He is a modern day martyr who took my hand and walked me out of my curiosity. ■

**I**T'S 5:27 A.M. THE STREETLIGHTS LEAK THROUGH MY BLINDS AND rest on my face. My neighbor's Chrysler pulled out of the driveway over an hour ago, followed by the Harley down the street and the F-150 across. I'm listening for a sound from one of the other rooms, a sound other than the snores of my father. In little over three hours a flight for Oakland airport will be departing from LAX and along with it my chance at true love.

I slide out of bed into the cool morning air, put my Pumas on and slink my way to the bathroom. This moment is four years in the making. The first time we kissed was an event typical of our relationship. I walked her from class after school with my mind set on kissing her. We had been dating for three months and my previous attempts had awarded me only a kiss on the cheek. As we approached our school's main door she stopped.

"Well my sister is waiting for me on the front lawn," she said, never looking me in the eyes. She must have known what I was planning.

"Oh, ok." I replied. I had to improvise.

Seizing the moment, I leaned into her for a kiss, as I did this she closed her eyes. As I saw this I did the same and when my bottom lip met hers I felt my upper lip land squarely on her nose. We never spoke about this awkward moment. After that the kisses never came as much as I would have liked. We would simply hold hands to class, no one could think of us as more than puppy love. But here I am years later on my bed clinching her love letter, or as she would have called it a "like" letter:

...I was talking to my sister today about us and she asked me if I was in love with you. I told her no because I do love you but being in love is different. Like you love your sister, but you're not in love with her, right? So I would say I'm in like with you. You understand, right? The reason she asked was because I kept bringing up Friday...

She's talking about the time we went to the cemetery, not a planned

date, but one of the most romantic days we've had. She was wearing a burgundy sweater with low hung jeans and her patented Doc Marten boots. Her backpack was a necessary accessory that day since she lied to her mom about having school.

"So what time do you have to be home?" I asked.

"Later," she replied. "Not until 7 P.M."

"This wasn't so bad, right?" I asked. I still felt bad about our date ending in a cemetery.

"No, it was actually really nice. The cemetery is so peaceful," she answered.

I was fidgeting with the casing of a battery from my discman.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Making you a going-away gift," I said. "I can't believe you're going to be leaving next week. When do classes start?"

"Let's not talk about that right now," she said. "It's still a week away. So what are you making me?"

"Hold on a bit," I replied. From the battery casing I molded a crude heart. As I handed it to her it said everything I couldn't.

"So are you ready to go?" My mom asks as she pops her head into my room. This is it, I think about what I want to say, how to say it and where I'm going to say it. I don't know what route my mother took or what songs were playing on the radio but when I see the Wells Fargo sign I know we're there. We pull up to the house and I see a man loading up a minivan with suitcases and bags. "So then you'll be home later?" My mom asks. The suitcases shine in the light; perhaps this is their maiden trip. "Remember to say everything you have to say."

I make my way to the house, past the luggage, through the gate and up the walk. I make it to the porch where we spent countless hours talking about school and the future. It was also the place where I first told her I loved her. Another awkward moment in our relationship when all she could reply was "Why did you tell me that here?"

I walk in, her mother smiles at me and I sit. There is a family gathering in the kitchen and I wait in the living room.

"You think she needs more shampoo?" Her mother asks.

“Just put in the other bottle,” answers a second voice.

After several more products are placed into another bag she enters the living room. She gestures towards the door and we exit to the car.

“So what time are you leaving?” I ask just rambling as I think about how our goodbye will be.

“Right now in like fifteen minutes,” she answers.

“What time did you start packing?” I continue.

“Like at 5 A.M.,” she replies.

“What time did you go to bed?” I’m still stalling.

“I don’t know, I think at like 12 A.M.”

We load a few things and her dad nods at me. The rest of her family stands on the porch looking at the minivan directly behind us.

“Well, I think they want to leave already, they said I should show up at least an hour and a half before takeoff.”

“Well, have a safe trip.” I look into her eyes desperate for more time.

We hug for a brief moment, cut short when she notices her parents looking at us. The hug reminds me of how empty our goodbye is and my feelings begin to rush out.

“I know we said we wouldn’t try anything because you’re going to have so much going on with school and all, but I was thinking that I can’t be with anyone else, I want to be with you and maybe it can work if we tried. I really love you and I don’t want this to be it.”

She looks up at me, then back at her parents. “What do you want me to say?”

“Alright it’s time to go.” Her father loads everyone in.

“I’ll call you when I have some free time,” she tells me, “okay?”

I don’t reply, I just nod and smile. The minivan drives off and I remember that only three blocks away, there’s the cemetery. ■

*Marvin Grande* | RANDOM ACT OF VIOLENCE

I have wanted dominance in a street fight.  
I have wanted to feel my knuckles pound into another man's face,  
to pose, muscles flexed like Muhammad Ali over Liston,  
to look around an alley of eyes and feel like a god  
standing over a body that I have put down.

I have wanted to beat them all:  
the cholos and the thugs that roam the streets in packs  
like high school drop-out hyenas.  
I have wanted to take a stand against their numbers, knives and guns.  
I have wanted to wipe them out, all one by one.

I have wanted to lose control, adding insult to injury.  
I have wanted to crack a rib with one swift kick,  
destroy a face till it cascades blood out from peeled back flesh,  
to elbow, stomp and head butt my point across  
then spit on a lifeless body.

I have wanted to let the adrenalin take over,  
to not think about the consequences, jail or retaliation.  
But I can't without becoming like them.



SERGIO ARROYO

*Christine Guerrero* | IT'S TOO LATE

There was a girl I used to know  
Had so much to live for  
A family and a life of her own  
I still remember the night you met her  
The two of you danced in the moonlight  
Always finding you in a loving embrace  
Your love for her was like a summer breeze  
It lasted for awhile  
But faded fast and hit her hard  
She held on a little too tight  
No she didn't want to let you go  
She gave you all the love she had  
Dances in moonlight, a caressing touch  
Loving whispers in the night, letters of love  
She had a college degree

Smarter than anyone she knew  
But there was not enough education in her world  
That could save the life of this little girl  
Nothing was wrong as far as I could see  
At least that's what I told myself  
No it wasn't that way  
The bruises and black eyes  
The handprint on her arm  
The bloody lip and cheek  
Wearing sunglasses night and day  
With tears in her eyes  
And the quiver in her voice  
Never daring to tell me the truth  
I turned my back and carried on  
If only I opened up my heart  
As well as my eyes  
She doesn't get a second chance  
There was a girl I used to know  
Had so much to live for  
She's not here anymore

Love, Christine

*Ashford Kneitel* | LITTLE GIRL

She's a little girl with an old soul,  
living in a brittle world that's so cold.

It takes a while,  
just to fake a smile,  
beating fast...the heartaches are wild.

She's a little girl trying to stand tall and proud,  
but she's throwing a fit and bawlin loud,  
so many tears it seems like she's gonna fall and drown.

She's a little girl, with the body of a model.  
She's a little girl, about to have a baby with a bottle.

She tried everything to hide and flee the pain,  
until one day she stuck an I.V. in her vein.

A real life *Gone with the Wind*  
her head's gone for a spin,  
so she pops open a jar of gin,  
the only thing to bring upon a grin,  
a shame that she could never admit she was wrong to sin.

For she was pregnant at the time,  
the father was a deadbeat on crack and lines.

Her own father would beat his own daughter,  
lock her in the basement with no water.

Until one day she went up to her father as he was standing tough,  
she screamed "Dad I've had enough,"  
grabbed a knife and stabbed him up.

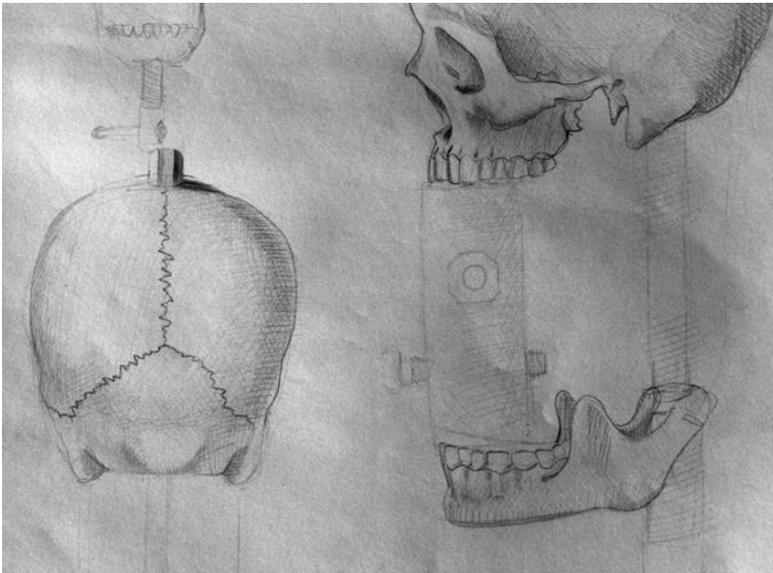
She ran out the kitchen door,  
while her father lay bleeding on the kitchen floor.

Sped through the house and hopped the booth,  
up the stairs to the top of the roof.

Walked to the edge, and some more she cried.  
Just then, her 12 years flashed before her eyes.

She looked around and her heart stopped beat...  
as the little girl fell onto the hard concrete.

As she started to plummet,  
she felt a kick in her stomach,  
the mother is gone now, and so is the life that was to come from it.



MANUAL LOPEZ

*Louise Leftoff* | BEHAVING LIKE A HUMAN  
(with apologies to Gerald Stern's  
"Behaving Like a Jew")

Cast from his nest like a tenant without rent,  
the stunned fledgling sat on the pavement trapped  
as my cat's instinct bristled.

In only a minute, my cat was confined and the fledgling relocated  
in my vain attempt to make the world right.

I grow so weary of the strong abusing the weak,  
so disillusioned by hateful mouths speaking their intolerance and  
so disenchanted by narrow minds assuming their advantage.

So distasteful is the attitude of their supremacy,  
their permission to hate, their bogus rationale,  
and the arrogance of their idiocy,

— I remain unconsoled.

I am a human being and I shall behave so.

From ancient ancestors, my recent ones learned that  
our humanity allows us to value life and respect others.

I shall tend to the fledgling, give him some nourishment  
and keep him safe and well as long as I can.

I will not walk away from the doomed young bird  
and release my cat to let nature take its course  
by allowing only the fit to survive.

My hands will gently hold the fledgling  
and my eyes will fill as I look at his frightened body  
and skinny little feet.

*Louise Leftoff* | MY MOTHER AT EIGHTY-FIVE

*(Inspired by Robert Bly's "My Father at Eighty-Five")*

Her small ears  
hear music  
most of the time.  
The dark streaks  
in the front of her hair  
confound her  
for she wishes them to be white  
like her mother's.  
Her eyes, small now,  
sometimes reflect the pleasure she sees  
but too often they show  
an unoccupied place.  
I won't take her home, she accuses me,  
I make her stay.  
The fragile tiny wisp,  
the ninety pounds of demands and insistence,  
still persists  
despite the debilitating conditions  
that betray her body and her mind.  
I sit with her and repeat myself  
again and again and again.

No longer do I feel  
any need to lose patience.  
She has been released  
from the accountable prison inside which  
most of us remain.  
I wonder how long she can be.  
I wonder how long she will be.  
Even though I love her, how long  
can I watch her become.  
Her small hands and bent fingers

remind me of her strength, of her power,  
of her control.  
Yet she has lost her control;  
she is at my mercy, at the mercy of those  
in the hospital,  
of all who now tell her what is best for her.  
She would not choose this  
but again her body is betrayed as  
something powerful inside of her  
keeps going on.



DAVID KURLAND

*Louise Leftoff* | THE MEMORIES I LOVE

Once and for all I am tired and need to stop  
picking up the broken things that are left behind,  
the blocks and airplanes, dead lifeless dolls, old pajamas and watches,  
and the books that shape the souls of the young.

Once and for all I am tired and need to stop  
hearing the sweet baby voices asking for lunch,  
hearing the mad angry voices casting the blame,  
hearing the sadness of the days when there are no sounds.

At the end the stillness will become  
the noise I hear, and emptiness will become the dreams I dream.  
Yet there will be more, nonsense, but more. I will call for them  
without speech,  
reach for them without hands.

At the end there will be ease to spare,  
and I will connect the dots, fit together the pieces  
and color by numbers all of the images and feelings I know  
until I have them all again in my no longer mind,  
the memories I love.

Louise Leftoff | A JOY FOREVER: A FILM REVIEW OF  
AMERICAN BEAUTY

SAM MENDES' *American Beauty* TAKES A CLOSE LOOK AT THE American Dream gone awry, as he skillfully translates Alan Ball's very original and dark screenplay into a disturbing film full of images of anger, violence, confinement, alienation and death, but ultimately, into a film that is about beauty. In an upscale suburban neighborhood, we observe the members of two families trapped in tangled, neurotic webs of their own choosing while they remain completely unaware and unconcerned about the needs of the other family members. This lack of awareness is particularly difficult for the two teenagers of the families who are only too mindful of where they stand in their parents' priorities. The screenplay is so well-written and the acting so proficient that the complex characters come across as credible and sympathetic, particularly when compared with the banality that is found in most American films and television. We find it is much easier to identify with these characters, just as we usually fall short when we compare our lot with that of the "Brady Bunch." The filmmaker shows us that instead of focusing on and rejoicing in the beauty of life that is all around us, we confine ourselves in prisons that are shaped by our own demanding expectations and our own denial of who we are; in doing so, we become unloving, uncaring and numb to the joy and beauty of living.

*American Beauty* tells the story of Lester Burnham, who is bullied by his shrewish wife, alienated from his disrespectful daughter and about to be terminated from his job. Not until he realizes that he has nothing left to lose is Lester able to come back to life and reclaim the vitality that is awakened in him by his daughter's beautiful young friend, Angela. In an especially fine performance, Kevin Spacey portrays Lester in his journey from an apathetic loser to a genuinely joyful man who has reclaimed his life. As the film opens, Lester's voiceover advises us that he will be dead in less than a year, but "in a way, I'm dead already." We see Lester awaken to begin his day. In the confines of his shower, he masturbates as his voiceover tells us this is the "high point of my day. It's all downhill from here." And it is. As his day continues, we observe Lester being regarded

with contempt by his wife, see him squirm in the office of his superior and rebuffed by his daughter as he reaches out to her.

Lester begins to feel some life in his sedated state when he first sees the beautiful teenage Angela, who is on the cheerleading squad with his daughter. To illustrate Angela's impact on Lester, the film lapses into a silent surreal sequence as Angela dances alone in slow motion on the gymnasium floor while we see only Lester in the stands watching her. As she opens her blouse to him, thousands of red rose petals rush out towards Lester who is obviously smitten with her. Shortly after, another incident that also serves as a catalyst for Lester's transformation is a chance encounter with Ricky Fitts, his teenage neighbor. Ricky shares his marijuana with Lester, and the two begin a relationship in which Ricky becomes Lester's mentor as well as his drug dealer. Lester begins to change his life as he finds the audacity to take the steps which will cause his termination from his job, and he even manages to extort a year's severance pay. He stands up to his wife and daughter, and he begins a body fitness program so that he will "look good naked" after he overhears Angela say, "...if he (Lester) just worked out a little, he'd be hot." Lester begins a new career as a fast food employee (a job he sought because it requires the least responsibility), and he buys the red Firebird he has always wanted as a young man. On screen, he appears happier, carefree and far more vital. We observe his transformation as we see him playing with a toy remote car, and he is really having fun. Having removed the fear (of his superiors at work, of his nagging wife) from his life, Lester now has room for some joy.

In another fine performance, Annette Bening plays Carolyn, Lester's wife, an attractive woman so driven by her need to be financially successful and to possess expensive things that she does not realize these needs have imprisoned her and caused her to become a brittle, unfeeling, angry human being who can only communicate with her family through sarcasm or scorn. Not only is she alienated from her family, she is alienated from herself. She maintains that it is necessary to preserve a façade to the outside world of her "perfect" marriage and successful image, and her demeanor is so phony and insincere, it is obvious to her daughter's teenage friend at their first meeting. Yet, in one moving scene we can

observe Carolyn's vulnerability and pain: after an unsuccessful day of trying to sell a house, Carolyn comes into the house through a patio door with vertical blinds that echo a prison cell. Her disappointment takes form as she begins to sob uncontrollably. Then she becomes so angry with herself, and we watch her slap her own face several times and berate herself for this "weakness." Even though she is alone, her need to maintain her façade is so great, Carolyn will not allow herself the release of experiencing these natural emotions, and her desire to adhere to this image of herself imprisons her in a world that is joyless and without beauty.

The effect on Carolyn of Lester's transformation is particularly interesting. As Lester emerges from submissive husband into a man who has taken control of his life and doesn't care what Carolyn thinks of him, the filmmaker shows us a frustrated and flustered Carolyn who is now unsure of herself. She has a brief affair with her professional "enemy," the real estate "king," learns to shoot a gun and rages against her husband's newly found indifference to her. At one point, Lester and Carolyn come close to touching each other again as Lester reaches out to Carolyn and, with concern, he asks her, "When did you become so...joyless?" As they move together in an embrace, Carolyn notices the beer bottle in Lester's hand and tells him he will spill his beer on the four thousand dollar sofa. The moment is lost, and he confronts her, "This (Carolyn's possessions) isn't life, this is just stuff. And it's become more important to you than living. Well, honey, that's just nuts." The filmmaker makes us aware that Carolyn is unable to see the beauty of a warm and mutually satisfying relationship, the beauty of allowing herself to feel and express her own emotions, or even the beauty and joy of life itself.

Another outstanding element in the film is the use of symbolism to enhance its thematic content. Red roses abound in the film, and its title can be interpreted in different ways. Literally it pertains to the beautiful red roses found in the vases throughout the Burnham home where it represents the only color and vibrancy in an otherwise colorless (but tasteful) décor, which echoes the deadness of the Burnham marriage and the emotional numbness that permeates. Even though Carolyn grows the beautiful roses, she seems to be impervious to their beauty and regards them only as an attractive accessory in her life. Her gardening inclination

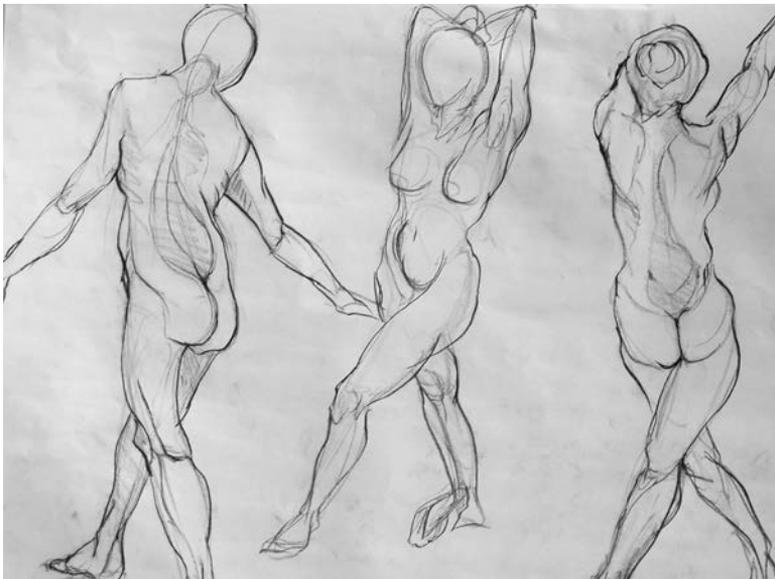
is just another act in her presentation to the world of her image. There is also a certain irony in the title as it refers to the lack of beauty in the lives of the main characters who are so caught up in their own neurotic needs. And the title also refers to the character of Angela, the teenage beauty with whom Lester becomes obsessed. The color red itself becomes a repetitious motif itself as it is used to symbolize passion, the color of rose petals always present in Lester's fantasies of Angela. Red also stands for life, vitality and, in some scenes throughout Lester's transition, is the color of Lester's toy car, and the real one he buys, as well as the color of Lester's blood that we see slowly leaving Lester's lifeless body.

Another well-crafted motif in this film is the exploration of the subject of homosexuality. The character, Colonel Fitts, U.S.M.C., embodies the homophobic mentality still found in existence in American society. After meeting his new openly-gay neighbors, Jim and Jim, the only two seemingly "normal" characters in this film who have come in good faith to welcome his family to the neighborhood, the Colonel shares his anger with his son, Ricky. He asks, "How come these faggots always have to rub it in your face? How can they be so shameless?" Later, when he mistakenly believes Ricky is having a homosexual relationship with Lester, he beats his son and throws him out of the house. In a climactic scene, the Colonel confronts Lester, embraces him and kisses him on the mouth, and then is gently told by Lester that he has "...the wrong idea." The Colonel is humiliated; not only has he been rejected, he has revealed to himself (and Lester) that he is a homosexual, and his self-hatred is enormous. All of this time he has denied his homosexual bent, and in doing so, imprisoned himself with this denial which he masked for so long with his hatred and intolerance. As Ricky pointed out earlier about his father, "Never underestimate the power of denial." The Colonel has no beauty in his life. It is fitting that he has in his collection a China platter from the Third Reich, the ultimate symbol of hatred and ugliness in the 20th century.

Another unusual and moving symbol of beauty in this film is the white plastic bag Ricky has videotaped. He describes it to Jane as "the most beautiful thing I've ever filmed," and we see them watch as a wrinkled white bag floats effortlessly on the screen; the wind carries it, twists and turns it, makes it rise and fall. The humble white plastic bag is one

of the least significant and most profuse articles in our lives, and in Ricky's video, its graceful dance across the screen shows us a beautiful moment that few of the characters in this film would have any ability to appreciate. It is a major contrast to Carolyn's tasteful furnishings, and especially to the Colonel's rare and expensive Nazi memorabilia. I recall a quotation (but not the author) from the 1960s: "Beauty is everywhere. But not everyone can see it."

Strong visual images contribute immensely to the thematic content of *American Beauty*. The photographic techniques of slow motion and repetition of motion prolong and augment Lester's fantasies of Angela, and each one is a carefully orchestrated cinematic segment that portrays Lester's obsession with his symbol of beauty. So carefully is the Burnhams' home photographed that it nearly becomes a major character in its own right. Many scenes depict the characters framed behind windows, the panes becoming the bars that imprison. The brightly lit red roses are a marked contrast to the drab interior of the home. Only Jane's room and finally Lester's transformed garage (a gym and toy room) radiate any sense of color and life. Carolyn is framed in the doorway with her



ISRAELIAN HRACH

arms outstretched but still confined while she denies that she is a joyless soul. Characters are photographed in their cars, hanging out of windows, and always seeming restricted. Particularly revealing is Lester in his cubicle at work, with long columns of figures reminiscent of bars showing on his computer screen, while at the same time, the reflection of his face is superimposed on the monitor, and we see Lester in the prison his work has become.

Interestingly enough, Ricky Fitts, the eighteen year old drug dealer, becomes the spokesman for the ideology of the filmmaker. As the character who uses his video camera to record life, he is able to find the beauty that eludes most of the adults, and his youth also affords him the ability to be fearless. Perhaps Lester becomes attracted to him because Ricky has no fear, and Lester learns that letting go of the fear is a large part of breaking out of the prisons we make for ourselves.

Lester learns at the moment of death as he gazes upon a photograph of his family with a simple life-affirming “Man oh man oh man...” we must treasure every moment of life. He cannot stay mad, for beauty triumphs over anger. And in the end, he is a happy man. Lester repeats in his voiceover after he dies the same message Ricky told us earlier, “...there’s so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing it all at once, and it’s too much, my heart fills up like a balloon about to burst...”

Lester’s journey from a state of sedation to having the ability to experience the joys of life makes us all aware that if we have the courage to admit who we are and take some time to enjoy the beauty that is ever present in life, we can release ourselves from the confinements of our own making. More than any other film on this subject, *American Beauty* expresses these truths to me, perhaps because of the plausibility of its characters, the humor of the screenplay, and the moving images captured by skillful photographic techniques. The film is just so well put together that it becomes easy for most of us to see ourselves (both positive and negative) in some of the characters, and to identify with the events that take place. Lester’s journey is one that nearly all of us could benefit by taking. Let’s hope we can all find some time to stop and smell the roses. ■

I look forward  
to being here every week.  
The curious faces puzzling  
over a passage from Mrs. Dalloway,  
their own stream of consciousness rushing  
to complete homework notes.  
Or is it a poem like a Keatsian ode  
inspired by Mrs. D's delphiniums that makes  
the pen pause as eyes gaze into space  
like the bard himself pondering  
the next phrase?  
Maybe it's Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*  
casually picked up while browsing  
the stacks of L.A. Central Library, and she  
just wanted to share it with the class  
being a budding writer herself who has to  
fight for her side of the room  
with a sister and occasional boy friend  
who drops in to practice  
his acoustic guitar.  
The hunger gnaws at her soul  
and finger tips inching across the page  
to make a place inside  
her own.

As for the ninety minutes or so  
we spend in A-11, Monday and Wednesday,  
fifteen weeks may just be enough  
for me to plant those small seeds of desire  
that may some day blossom  
into paper flowers, just enough  
for sound and sense to line the little rooms  
we go each night filling our journals  
with red carnations.

WHAT'S THE POINT? SOMETIMES I THINK LIFE IS FUTILE. My being here has no real effect on the home life. I contribute nothing, but advice. Yet, it always seems to fall on deaf ears. So, fuck it. Let them do what they want. Head towards self-destruction...I mean that's where I'm heading, I might as well have company. Life cannot possibly get any worse than it already is. I'm poor, I can't drive, I'm living with some damn sickness that controls my life, and my family doesn't respect me...shit, God gave me the finger years ago and has been laughing at my ass since. Fuck him and fuck all of them that keep telling me "You have so much to live for."

What? THIS? Condescending siblings, family members that think they know me when they don't know the slightest thing about who I am, disobedient kids, and only one room in my house that has been kept the way it was from when my father lived here...yeah, I have it all. I write to get my mind off all this shit and I talk about taking that walk into the unknown and all the time I find one more reason not to. Well, I'm starting to run out of reasons and that walk is becoming more and more enticing. Call me what you want. Suicidal, psychotic, tired...I don't care just don't call me when I'm gone. Because the truth is, when I leave I left because I couldn't take anymore. No more family advice, no more empty promises, no more lies...just no more bullshit.

Well, why don't you tell them how you feel? Gee, like I didn't think of that, but do you think any of them gives a flying fuck about how I feel or think. No! They humor me for a while, but then it's back to the same old shit. The truth hurts sometimes, but I'd rather be hurt by the truth than live with the lies.

"When was he found?"

"Yesterday night"

"Any idea why he did this?"

"No...the family thought that he seemed all right."

"No signs of this?"

“Guy was a bit depressed, but that was only because he had lost his parents. Besides that...nothing.”

“Who was the last to see him?”

“His friends, but he seemed to be acting normal.”

“Friends and family that cared for him, no problem that couldn’t be solved by some help from the family, and he decides to just chuck it all.”

“This guy was a talented writer too.”

“You can’t get that from reading his note. I mean they all seem to be works of art when they’re gone.”

“No, I mean it, listen to this...”

‘Like a phantom, I shall leave at the coming of day

To rise at night as a phoenix

Free of all troubles and worries.

And I shall burn bright

And be seen from afar

As I embrace the night

And soar above the heaven and stars.’

...pretty sweet, huh.”

“The guy could rhyme, so could Dr. Seuss.”

“This guy was published in four books.”

“So was Dr. Seuss.”

“Well don’t you think it’s a shame he won’t be able to create more works for others to read?”

“Sure, it’s a shame.”

“I knew you liked his work.”

“If I did or didn’t, what does it

matter? I mean why do you have  
such a hard on for this guy anyway?"

"I don't. I just think it's a shame."

"Yeah, it's a shame, but he made his  
bed now, he has to lie in it...well you  
know what I mean."

"I suppose so. Even though they don't  
know it, everyone has something or  
someone to live for."

"Tell me something?"

"What?"

"Why do you care about these people?  
Why do I have to listen to you go on  
and on about people you didn't even  
know?"

"Because they were people that went  
through some tough times and it  
took them having to go to such an  
extreme for anybody to notice."

"Do you even read their notes? Most  
of them do it because they think that's  
their only way out."

"Doesn't that tell you anything?"

"Sure. Wack job."

"No, it says that nobody is listening  
to them."

"Whatever. You say toma-toe, I say  
tomato. Let's just finish up here and  
leave."

"Alright."

Those who have the idea that a person only hurts oneself when he thinks there is only one option to life's problems are sadly mistaken. He also hurts all who knew and were close to him. There is truth in this fictional story. Learn from it because there is always someone that would

like to listen to what you have to write or say.

As I sit here with a pack of ziggags and my bag of tickets for a Technicolor ride, I realize that everybody has their demons to fight with and obstacles to overcome. I have my share and am not ashamed to admit that every now and then I fall prey to the shadow within me. I am not ashamed to admit this because knowing that I have demons to combat and knowing what they are gives me the strength to stop them from consuming me. But sometimes my demons pierce my heart with their razor claws and they make me question life, my role in it and my role out of it. I have seen the darkest corner of my soul and was almost so overwhelmed by the darkness that shrouded my heart that I did not think I could possibly have the strength to keep on fighting. No, I never held a rusty razor blade to my wrist, but I was at the point where I found myself, in my bedroom, on my knees crying for somebody to reach out and save me from this quicksand. Just grab onto my hand and pull me out of this misery that is slowly pulling me under. Sometimes I am amazed that I am still standing and willing to endure pain for merely a few moments of pleasure in life. But it is a sad fact that pain and pleasure go hand in hand. To feel one is to revel in the other. So what choice do I have but to fight on and keep my demons at bay? I know, from a little boy being in one hospital after another that life can get hard and to just give in seems so much simpler, but then I would leave an even greater hardship on my family. I don't think I could do that. Then how did I get better? I didn't. I am still struggling to keep my head above the sand, but that's life. One which I plan on living for a long time. This was for all you happy people that don't know what it's like to live a fucked up life so be thankful for that. ■

REGRETS ARE FEW IN A LIFETIME AND AS LONG AS YOU learn from them, they should not really be anything bad to look back on. However, there are some regrets that no matter how many times you look back on them, spin them around, turn them upside-down, and tell yourself you are glad you stuck by your choice there are those that you wish you had a second chance at. My regret has to do with a girl – big surprise—that I would lose to five words that are as sharp and cold as even the finest crafted steel blade. Five words whose meaning would stab at my heart and slowly twist its way through.

I blame myself. I did not treat her the way I did when we first met. When we were in love's early stages, I was a first class gentleman. I was so gracious and courteous I almost felt British. I would open the doors for my lady, help her out when she needed it, give her massages when she had a hectic day, and all I asked in return from her was a smile. By no means am I a man of wealth, looks, or have the body of some jock, but that never mattered to her. Why? Simple, because I am a man that is pretty hard to find. Looks never really mattered to me—sure I would love to date some girl that looks like a runner-up for the Miss America crown and there have been times when I was fortunate to be with such women. If they have it going on upstairs in their head I am perfectly content with that. She knew this and it was this reason that led to dates to the beach and to dates where we would slip away from the ruckus of today's life and spend the day hidden in our own little pocket of the city. She showed me how much she cared for me when she just clutched onto me and held me tight just for being there for her. We would sometimes agree to meet somewhere in public and when we saw each other we would act as if we didn't know each other and then go through the process of flirting to try to "pick up" the other. Many times we came close to picking someone else up, but that was the fun of it. Seems odd, but then again I have always been considered an oddball and the women I like must have a good sense of humor and this is a good way to show that they did.

One day we got caught out in the rain and although her sweater was fine for the cold, its material was not good for the rain, so I gave her my

jacket and walked her to her car. Well every good deed comes with a price and I paid for it. One week sick in bed. When I got better, all I heard from my friends was “Dude, you are one whipped mother fucker” or “I’m surprised you were allowed to come out and play.” These were some snide remarks that my friends felt were long over due, merely because I spent most, if not all, my time with her. That week in bed seemed to be the perfect excuse to unleash their forked tongue insults. I shook it off and called it jealousy. Hey, I was going to win this girl over, even if it killed me and the way things were looking after a week in bed, anything was possible. To her, that week in bed was a grand gesture of my love for her; at least it seemed that way to her. To me it was punishment for being such a nice guy, but whatever it seemed like, or whatever it was, she finally believed I was a risk worth taking and she loved the fact that I was such a gentleman. I was happy, but after being together for a month or so, my other side came out and beat the crap out of that gentleman she fell in love with. I don’t know why. Maybe it was out of fear of a commitment because relationships, good ones, are a sacred institution of love, and we all know once you are committed to an institution you can’t leave. There are no free days or weekend passes.

The doors stopped opening for her, massages were replaced with a kiss on the cheek and a pat on the head, and most of my time was spent playing basketball with my friends than being with her. I had become my old East L.A. self once more. It was not intentional, but rather my subconscious telling me to quit the BS I was giving the girl. I would think from past experiences that I would learn to be more in tuned to my girl’s feelings. I would like to think that, but chances are that I would be wrong. I mean I am not some inconsiderate bastard, but sometimes I forget to treat my girl like the queen she is for putting up with such a conceited sarcastic idiot. Yes, I’m talking about myself. She warned me that someday I would lose her and I would regret it. “Sure babe,” I would whisper to her when she wasn’t looking. Hey, I may have been a bit crude and rude, but I wasn’t stupid. Then one day we had “the talk” and she let those five vipers come out and sic their venom in me as she said,

“WE SHOULD JUST BE FRIENDS.”

With that, she poured salt onto my wounds by kissing and then leav-

ing me. Okay, scratch what I said earlier about being stupid because it took her leaving me to realize just what kind of woman I had. Someone who loved me for who I was and not for the kind of fashion labels I sported. Someone who loved me despite my forgetfulness, for sometimes missing those signals she would send me with a wink of her eye, the shake of her beautiful body, or the caress of her silky arms. I wish I had time to do things over again, but I don't think I could go through that heartache again if things ended up the same way.

I know I said if you learn from them, regrets should not be anything bad to look back on, but sometimes it's hard to see a regret as anything else. ■



DAVID KURLAND

*Ruben Lopez* | I WISH

I am not a man who can be found opening for System of a Down  
Or stringing rhymes like Eminem.

I am not a man that can lift 100 lbs with one hand,  
I do not sweat pain or cry fury  
Like you see the men who every Sunday  
Sacrifice their body for pigskin  
And the admiration of fans,  
At times I wish I was.

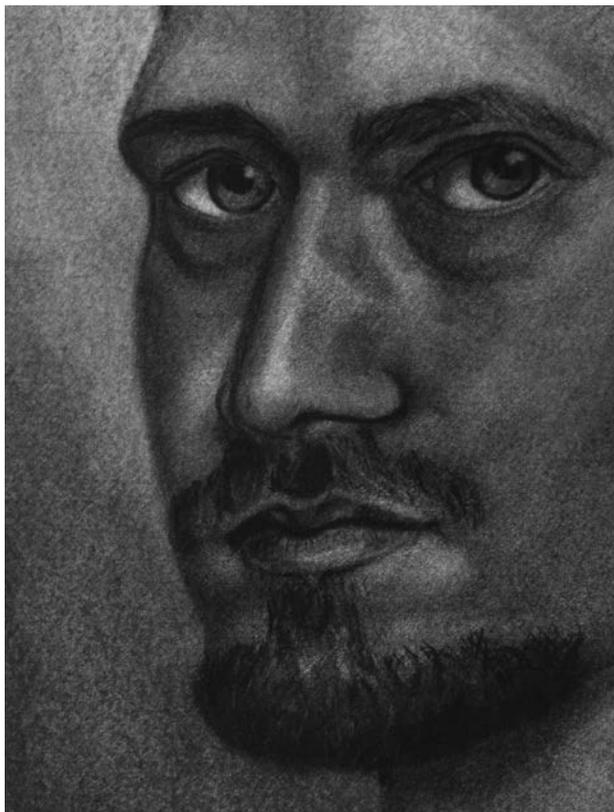
I am not a forked tongue politician nor do I hold any political views.  
The only time my mind swayed to the White House  
Was when I laughed at the fact that there was a Bush and Dick there.  
Sometimes I wish I was that politician  
Promising you everything  
Giving you nothing.

I am not your Don Juan that can get a lady with a wink and a sly line,  
Women are not beating down my door  
To quote a lost love  
“You grew on me like a rash.”  
I wish I were that Romeo who has all the right things to say,  
Those great responses and comebacks  
Only found in so many Hollywood scripts.

I am not your Mr. Einstein who is solving some great equation  
That would shatter the world in  
Thermal Nuclear Dynamics...well not anymore.

I am not your handyman Mr. Bob Villa  
Or your big bucks Donald Trump.  
I sing like Scooby Doo getting strangled  
In looks and fashion...well let's just say I'm not Mr. GQ.  
Fingers are crossed on being rich though.  
I just bought a lottery ticket.

I am your shy schoolboy,  
Your cynical journalist,  
Your sarcastic American Idol judge, Simon.



LUCIANO PIMIENTE

I am that patronizing movie star, Brad Pitt,  
I am that Stone Cold 3:16 son of a bitch  
    That's not afraid to put them up when pushed.  
I am your Malcolm Little trying to expand his vocabulary  
    His knowledge  
Himself.  
    But I'm still only as smart as George W. Bush.

**I**F YOU WERE ASKED TO PICK AN IMPORTANT POINT IN YOUR life, what would it be? Would it be the day you decided what college to go to or the day you decided to go to college? Would it be that time in your life you decided what you wanted to be or that day you decided what you don't ever want to be. Perhaps it was the day you knew about that special someone you couldn't live without and all the others you could do without. For me, that time is now.

I was looked after, my whole life, by my mother and father. Whatever I wanted I got. I was not a brat, but I was a baby. I was the baby of the family; most importantly, I was my mother's baby and (technically) my father's only son. So, as you can see my parents looked after me. Growing up my own siblings, including my two brothers, must have hated me for that fact, and I think that sibling hatred might have carried over into adulthood. All those snide remarks, the glares, and the whispers I would pretend not to hear when I attended our annual family gatherings. I never knew what to think, so I closed my eyes and tried to just let it go. Meanwhile, inside I'm yelling my head off at them. Yelling, "I'm sorry I'm not as perfect as you, Marianne" or "When are you going to call me YOUR brother, Ray, instead of always introducing me as Mario's son?" I can go on and on with all the things I used to yell at them, but most of it is all in the past now. My mother, being the ROSE that she was would say, "Oh, never mind what they say." My father wouldn't say much; he would just make a funny face and then take me out to eat. Like I say, "My parents looked after me."

They had an answer for all my problems. They listened with an ear that was always there to hear my problems. After a talk they would take me out to eat, give me money, or buy me (can you see where my siblings' hatred came from) anything from clothes to a new game system. Yes, I was the baby of the family and every argument I had or party I went to with one of my siblings, they never let me forget it. The oldest of my sisters, Terry, forbade me to drink beer. My older sister, Mickey, would burn holes through my shirt just looking at me drink a beer. My favorite would have to be my older sister, Marianne, who would give me a lecture on drinking

beer in front of everybody. My two brothers and my sister (who was only a year older) were ok with it, but they decided when I had enough to drink. Because I was the baby of the family, this went on into my middle twenties. I was the baby and they never saw me as ever being or becoming an adult. Why? Is it because I don't have any kids, or because I'm not living with some girl I knocked up? I guess to be fair to them I grew up as a sick child. I became ill at the age of eight with a sickness that I am uncomfortable talking about, as well as admitting to the fact that I have it. Simply because I believe, and sometimes know, that I would be treated differently. People would not see the person I am, but rather the sickness I have. Epilepsy. It is an illness that deprives me of being normal. It is funny though, in its own sick and twisted way, doctors don't know why I have it and by all medical standards I am a healthy normal person. A normal person that had to grow up taking medications I couldn't even pronounce. Thanks to the number of medications I was on, the years that I would never forget became the years that I can't remember. I don't want any pity. Just like I never wanted any of my siblings' pity, but nevertheless I was always made to feel as an infantile. This, accompanied by the way my parents treated me, was cause for a number of arguments. In all our arguments, one of their best lines was, "Mom and Dad give you money now, but what happens when they are gone?" Well lately times have changed, people have changed, and lives have changed.

Then that line my siblings had ready every time we had a fight came back to haunt me. Nearly a year ago, one night, something happened that I had never spoken about and I don't think I could. I seriously doubt that anyone would believe me anyway. I don't talk about it because most people would probably roll their eyes back as if saying, "Okay. Sure, whatever you say." They were the last days of July. The days were warm with an occasional gust of wind to keep everyone from overheating and the nights were no different. My family had just started trying to adjust after my dad had passed away, when we had to face the loss of another. We had just laid my mother down to rest a week earlier and I was trying to come to terms with the loss of my father and my lovely mother. I had entered into a deep depression and no longer cared what happened to me. I had stopped feeling the joy of life and all that remained was a twenty-six year

old husk of a man filled with pain and sorrow. Life was becoming too real, things were becoming too hard, and suicidal tendencies constantly ran rampant in my mind. I could overdose on a drug, use the restroom in my room to wet my hair and stick a pocketknife in a plug, or accidentally slit my wrist while practicing with my katana. So many ways, so many possibilities, but did I have the guts to do it? I just wished it would all go away. I wished I could get away and live on an island isolated from everyone. That way I wouldn't be able to care or feel about anyone. I had wished if there was a God, as people say, that he would reach his hand down and pluck my soul and carry it to the heavens where I could live with the people that had been taken too soon from me. And as I locked the door to my room He did that for me.

I was with my mom and dad once again, but it did not last. The whole time I was there they held onto my hands. My mom was on one side and my dad on the other. We were in my house. It's strange because it was my house, but it wasn't home. The inside had not changed, except for the furniture. There was only a couch, facing away from the window, in the center of the living room and a hammock by the window behind the couch. I could only imagine that hammock was for my dad to relax on like he always wanted to do. My mother looked out the window once and smiled, but I was unable to look out because it was too bright. They spoke to me, but I can't remember what they said. Perhaps it was because they were able to say so much with merely a look or gesture. My mom told me all that I needed to hear with a shake of her head. It was not my time. My father gave me his patented wink and smile to let me know things would be all right. The last image I remember is both of them letting go of my hands. I awoke in a hospital. I had been in a coma. After some visitors, one of my brothers arrived. As he grabbed my hand and looked at my weak body lying in a hospital bed, I looked at him and said, "I saw Mom and Dad." His eyes widened as he said, "I was just going to ask you that. It wasn't your time, so they must have let you go."

After a few weeks in the hospital, I was released and sent home. I am fine now, but I sometimes wonder about that night in July. Did God actually take me to my mom and dad like I wished? Was my heart so hurt it put me in the hospital? I will never know, but I do know I did see my

mom and dad one last time. I had come real close to the edge, but luckily for me I didn't go over. Well, since waking up I have had the feeling that I don't belong in this family. Now, between my family and me, there is an uneasy tension in the air. Before it was something like "Here comes Rudy, let's pick on him." Now it's "Here comes Rudy, look after him." It feels as if they are walking on eggshells when they talk to me or when I enter the room. Damn, I haven't changed; I'll still cuss you out, flip you off, and beat your kids up. Why are you acting like this? I guess I really don't blame them, I have become quieter and a bit more reclusive. They just don't feel like family anymore. With all my heart I wish they did, but they feel more like strangers in masks. I don't know. The coma messed my head up. I think I am going to just need time to bring them back to who they were with me.

Since my mother and father passed away, most of my siblings are looking out for me...well trying to at least. They all have families of their own, which makes me the odd man out. My mom and dad were my family, now they are gone. That depresses me and makes me want to chuck it all and just go. To simply open up the door, start walking, and never



MANUEL LOPEZ

look back, which makes this the most important point in my life. I can take that long walk into the great unknown, or I can do what I promised my dad at his wake and my mother on her deathbed. I can make them proud of me, do something with my life, and show them their baby has grown up. This is being written one day before one of my family gatherings. If I go and I can make it through the day unscathed then there may just be one more paragraph to write, if not then I bid you a good day.

I must love punishment because I have chosen to honor my word to my parents and make them proud of me. I am going to get a job working as a fingerprint classification expert. I know that once this is done I can settle down, have a child, and add another branch to the family tree. This has proven to be an important point in my life: I have chosen my path and although I am unsure of what lies ahead I am willing to accept all the consequences that come as a result. And when I get my first check I will dig a little hole at their gravesite, place the receipt there, cover it up, and hope both of them can see just how good their baby boy is doing.

September 2004 marks one year since I was able to restart my life. It has not been easy. I have lost so many brain cells and I've had to learn how to do everything all over again. I had to learn how to do some of the things I took for granted like walking, speaking, forming sentences without having to think about what I'm going to say or how I'm going to say it. But most of all I have to learn how to be Ruben once more, that sarcastic yet charming man who was always quick witted and fun to be around. If people didn't like me, I would just say, "Screw you." All that mattered was what I thought. I am nowhere close to being that person I was. Now I'm a reclusive man trying to please everyone. If people don't like me, I wonder if it is because I am not what I once was. All the people that know me are probably wondering if they ever knew me, after reading this. If you think you know me, please tell me. ■

Stephanie Luevano | YOU

You  
You whom I call friend  
sitting there  
face and eyes  
red with crying  
tears  
leaving snail trails down your face,

You come to me with your problems  
Your petty, pathetic, puerile, pitiful problems  
How I hate you.

How I long to say that to your face  
to see it grow more red  
to see the tears fall faster  
to see you bleed as my words scourge  
brutal and harsh as *The Passion*.

You come to me with your problems  
Your petty, pathetic, puerile, pitiful problems.

And I hug you  
you with your red  
swollen  
snail-trailed face.

And I tell you it will be all right  
that he does love you  
that you are beautiful  
or smart  
or funny  
or talented.

I'll tell you  
"Of course you're right,"  
or  
"Of course what you wrote  
or drew  
is worthy of the Renaissance Masters."

I tell you this  
because  
I am your friend.

Really though  
my gorge rises  
bile bitter on the back of my tongue  
choking me  
as I force the reassurances out.

I do that  
because I am your friend  
and that is what friends do  
for other friends

Even when they come to you with their problems

Their petty,  
pathetic,  
puerile,  
pitiful  
problems.

Stephanie Luevano | LOVES MUSIC, BUT DOESN'T  
LOVE TO DANCE

**M**USIC TOUCHES US ALL, EACH AND EVERY DAY WHETHER we know it or not. How many times have you gotten a tune, or song stuck in your head? Often the most annoying one is the one that stays the longest. Many commercials employ background music and subconsciously we associate a particular song with a particular product. It makes you wonder, why do companies add music to the commercials? Well the answer is easy. Music affects your mood, and the right song will make you feel good, thus hopefully influencing you to buy their product.

For as far back as I can remember I have loved music. I don't mean I played any instruments or sang. Far from it; I am tone deaf. But looking back on my life I have come to realize that many of my happiest memories have a song attached to them. Going to the beach with my father, feeling the wind in my hair, tasting the crisp, saltiness of it: anytime I want to remember that feeling all I have to do is play "Don't Fear the Reaper" by Blue Oyster Cult, or "Nobody Left to Run with Anymore" by the Allman Brothers and everything comes flooding back as fresh as if it happened yesterday. Why, you ask? Because those songs are the ones my father always played when we would go to the beach. If I want to remember the summer I spent going to the show every week with my sister to watch "Mortal Kombat," all I need to do is play "Dreaming of You" by Selena, "Missing" by Everything But the Girl, or better yet, the "Mortal Kombat" theme song, the three songs we heard most during that time. H.G. Wells step aside; here is a far safer way to time travel.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts music has given me is the way it gave me common ground with my family and other people. My great aunt and I, usually so different in our opinions of what is good and bad, can sit and discuss our love of Andrea Bocelli, or the Three Tenors, or the 60s classics. My sister and I, as opposite as opposite can be, can sit and laugh, poking fun at, or just enjoying a slew of various songs. My cousins, dear lord those children are difficult. But I just turn on the old music list and we're hanging out, laughing and joking and they're behaving.

Music can affect me and change my mood in the blink of an eye. I love it. I just absolutely love it. When I am sad, I fire up my trusty playlist and program in some sad songs. Five songs, twenty minutes and some shed tears later, I feel drained but relieved, my sadness gone. Or I play my happy songs. No tears shed but they lift my mood. Even now, as I sit here writing this, I'm "Walking in Memphis" with Lonestar, my head bobbing in time to the music and all worries gone.

I find it funny though that I never realized any of this until a year or so ago. I knew I had always liked music, but I never knew just how deeply and passionately I LOVED it, until the day my walkman broke as I was on the bus heading home from LAVC and I was left with nothing to listen to. I went nuts! I fidgeted in my seat, shaking my walkman in the futile hopes it would magically spring to life again. All in vain. My walkman was down for the count. When I got home I immediately went to my computer and turned on my playlist, sighing in relief as familiar notes and melodies and words flowed over me.

From that day on I started to pay more and more attention to songs I liked, listening for the story they were telling, for the music that could affect me so. Then one night I was watching "Saturday Night Live" with my sister and a friend. A group I had heard of but never really heard came on. The Dixie Chicks, singing their song "Travelin' Soldier." I listened with half an ear because I wasn't really into country music at the time, but halfway through the song I paid a bit more attention. The singer had quite a beautiful voice and the instruments, so simple: just a violin, drums, a guitar and the flawless harmony of the three women. The song ended and I was left thinking, "Wow. That was pretty." Then I went on my merry way, only occasionally thinking back to the song and wanting vaguely to hear it again. A few months later, they re-ran that episode and I really listened to the song.

If I had thought it was pretty before, I saw it as absolutely beautiful now. Eagerly I ran to my ever faithful computer again and downloaded—I mean put in my CD. Yes. That will do. No downloading for me. That's illegal—and played the song. Again I was floored by how simple but still achingly beautiful it was. On a whim I looked up the lyrics and, with the lead singer's voice guiding me, I read them. The soulful

music combined with her crystal pure voice and the heartbreaking lyrics and I was reduced to a sobbing mess. I never realized exactly what the song was about and when I did, I couldn't stop crying for an hour. A young girl falls in love with a soldier during the Vietnam War and loses him. This explanation cheapens the song, but then, any explanation would. The song must be heard to be fully appreciated.

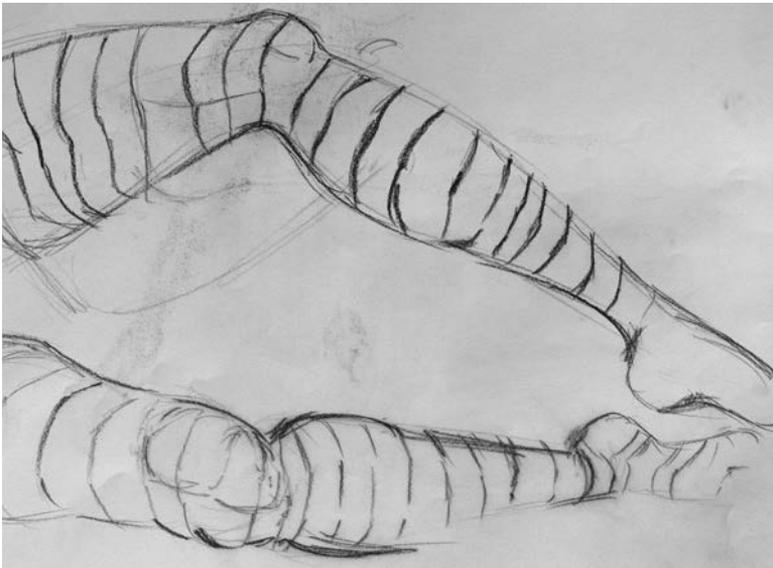
I couldn't stop thinking about it for days. It reminded me of a similar story I had heard about my Great Aunt Mercy. How she never married because her fiancé had been killed in World War II. I never knew if it was true or not and she won't talk about her love life, so it is left to speculation. Now me, I love a happy ending and this song did not have one. Over the months, the more I listened to the song, the more I could envision the lovers, both so young, so in love and one left to carry on that love alone.

I began to see the café where the song says the two lovers met. I could see the young man, "two days past eighteen and waiting for the bus in his army greens" and the "pretty girl with a bow in her hair" who took his order. Their names came to me; his was Michael, hers Andrea. I saw the small town they came from. The school she attended. I saw the broken down bus he came to the town in. I could see the people who "too young for him they told her, to be waiting for the love of a travelin soldier." The whole story started building up in my head. In a creative writing class when we were told to write the beginning of a screenplay I knew I had to make "Travelin' Soldier." My only problem was how to start it. It didn't seem right to start it directly with the story of Michael and Andrea. Something was off and I couldn't quite figure it out. It was the fact it ended in tragedy I think. As I mentioned before, I love a happy ending. I love a good love story even more. I knew this would have a tragic end and I hated that. I felt the story would serve no purpose. Then another idea crept in. What if their tragedy DID serve a purpose? What if Michael and Andrea could influence another couple in a similar situation?

The more I thought about it the more it made sense. Yes. A young man and woman in modern times are facing a similar dilemma. He is going to war and she is being told she is too young and he is no good. This young man would also be named Michael, the girl Kerrigan, Keri for

short. She would be told by her parents she couldn't marry him because he was no good and she was too young. Her only support comes from either an Aunt or teacher named Andrea, who tells Keri her story, of her love with a "Travelin' Soldier" named Michael. Here, as Andrea comforts the distraught Keri, I could start telling the story of Michael and Andrea, two people who, influenced by a song, have started to become as real to me as the people I see every day.

Music always was, always has been, and always will be a major influence in my life. Even more so now because I can fully realize and appreciate what music has given and still continues to give me. From it I have secured countless treasured memories. In it I can find surcease from my troubles, whether by providing me with an emotional outlet for tears that would otherwise not fall, by offering me a hand up in the form of a well timed beat and infectious sound or by giving my family and I common ground to bond on. My screenplay, Michael, Andrea, Keri—all of them would have never existed without music. To music, they owe their lives and I, I owe music a big thank you for bringing them into my life. ■



SERGIO ARROYO

*Stephanie Luevano* | HAPPY LITTLE BOY

Feet pounding soft, damp earth,  
rich and loamy.  
Formerly pristine white slippers  
now dyed  
in a riot of mother nature's colors,  
browns, reds, greens,  
all mixing  
grinding indelibly into the material.

And still they keep pounding,  
unmindful of the mess,  
eating the distance  
like  
a starving person at a buffet.

High laughter singing out,  
sweet  
and pure as church bells on Sunday.  
Happy  
he's a happy little boy

See his compact body  
run with abandon.  
See his hair  
red as a rose,  
red as blood,  
fly in the wind.  
See his skin so pale,  
tinged a healthy pink now.  
Eyes  
blue enough to rival the sky  
they dance  
with their own inner fire;  
target sighted.

Faster, faster his feet move  
the scenery  
a green blur  
movie on fast forward

Flash of blackest night  
wicked and sharp in his hand.  
The target:  
tall, muscular, lithe,  
nude under the sun.  
She never sees  
death running towards her

Silent now  
his laughter stilled  
he aims.  
Small arm raised high  
obsidian blade just as long  
long enough.

He's a happy little boy.  
See he's smiling,  
lips pulled back, teeth bared.  
See his hair  
red as blood  
her blood  
stick to his head.

He's a happy little boy.  
It's his first one.  
Pats and praises are his reward.  
He's a happy little boy.  
See his eyes  
blue to rival the sky  
staring blankly

start to burn  
with their own inner fire  
threatening to consume him.  
See his eyes  
sky blue  
spill over  
quenching the fire.

He's a happy little boy.  
He gets to live now.  
She  
his first  
paid the price.

He's a happy little boy.  
Covered in her blood  
of his  
first time.  
First blood spilled.  
The blood of innocence.  
But he's a happy little boy.

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP I WASN'T THE TALLEST, FASTEST, or strongest person from where I was born and raised. I was the scrawny bony kid that everybody picked on. Big fat kids used to attack me like vicious beasts and the worst part was that they would send out their vicious bulldogs after me. I ran like lightning through the alley and escaped from the jaws of hell. Who knows how many times my dad, the untamed wolverine, saved my scrawny butt. That's one of the reasons I look up to my dad like a superhero. I think those bullies picked on me because they were jealous of my long thick golden hair.

Since morons that don't know how to spell anything were picking on me all the time I needed someone strong and courageous to look up to. Also that person had to be an immortal and who better to look up to than the man who created Hulkamania, the immortal Hulk Hogan. Hulk Hogan had arms as big as boulders and the heart of a Real American. Hogan fed off the intensity of the crowd like a child eating tons of chocolate and he had a finish that got the crowd off its feet, the atomic leg drop. When Hogan did the atomic leg drop, his rivals felt as though an atomic bomb had fallen on their scrawny little necks. Although I couldn't be him I got a Hulk Hogan action figure so I could imagine being the Heavyweight Championship at Wrestlemania over and over again.

During this time, I also looked up to a red cool character from the famous television show called The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and my favorite ninja turtle was named Raphael. I enjoyed pretending to be Ralph because I would build Sais out of brown rough wood and make sounds like in the movie "3 Ninjas, 'Keeyah'!" Sais are Japanese weapons that have three sharp ends and the weapons are small. They are easy to carry through an adventure. As girls talked about who they liked and Barbie dolls, I would jump out and slash the girls with my Sais as they ran in fear. I also collected the popular Ninja Turtles Cards, which I got from el paletero.

Action figures and ninjas were great, but I had other role models as well. One person I looked up to was my older cousin Edwin. I always

tried to be just like Edwin. We would listen to old school artists like MC Hammer, Vanilla and The Digital Underground; and the songs we sang to were “Can’t Touch This,” “Ice Ice Baby” and “Humpty Dance.” The way we danced was out of sight because first we would limp to the side as though our legs were broken, shaking and twitching as if we had been smoking. People told us that we looked like MC Hammer on crack. I looked up to my cousin like an older brother because I am the oldest and I have no one to look up to. He took care of me ever since I was baby and I think that makes us brothers.

I also loved my bike when I was growing up. I used to ride my black mystic bike all around the smoothed block and through the eerie alley. My bike was like a dog because I never went anywhere without it. But one sunny afternoon my bike was stolen when I went inside to get an ice cold drink of crystal water. I would play stickball with my friends in the eerie alley kind of like that movie titled Sandblock. Also I would play tag, freeze tag, and police with guys because all the girls were like lumps on a log. With the girls I played house because of the delicious chocolate chip cookies, which warmed you up inside and were soft as angels. I used to play the video game of the lovable red character that’s an icon for Nintendo named Super Mario.

When I was bored I used to torture ants by peeing on them or burning them with red fire. I hardly went to school because I was always sick as a mule with some type of crazy thing such as flu, cold, fever, cough, diarrhea or strong stomach pains. My mom taught me how to read and write the Spanish language and she also taught me mathematics and even though I wasn’t taught at a regular school I still turned out all right. ■

RECENTLY, I'VE FOUND MY THOUGHTS OF HER, AFTER arresting my head, have begun to occupy my heart. These feelings grow each time we meet and more so with our separation. Even after the most serene of days, my nerves are forever rewarded, after those two clumsy steps I must take to again meet her face. It's here, before her eyes, where I take my time.

My eyelids begin to beat in unison with the unsteady pulse emanating from the inside of my chest. My hope for what lies on the inside excites a riot in my eyes and is evident by the black holes quickly enveloping the brown they used to be. Safety, security, and warmth are what I'm hoping to be welcomed by, eventually, upon entrance. But, as for now, standing face to face, my sweet imagined taste of her and cool kiss of air against my exposed arms is what keeps me from rushing in, every moment is important.

Millions of thoughts and questions infiltrate my skull. Is there really anything for me on the inside? Has anyone been here before me? If so, have they left a mess? Is everything in its right place? Does she really want anyone inside of her, if so, am I welcomed? I entertain most of the thoughts to keep myself grounded and to further swell the pleasure of the affair. The unimportant surrounding is noiseless and is lacking color. This is when I'm sure, "This is where I want to be."

Still hesitant about going inside, I imagine what I've to offer as incentive for being allowed to pass. Promising forever and always, in spite of the crimes of my days I will never in any way show her any less respect than she deserves. Any and everything I touch will be done so in a fashion so delicate, she'll wonder if I've done anything at all. Before I leave, I also promise that at the least, she'll be left as found, but as my nature, I will attempt to always leave her in a state better than before my stay.

On agreement she and I both feel that she needs me inside of her as much as I want to be inside. This is important that we are both balanced in our need. As the world slowly loses its sound and color entirely, I slowly lift my hand, feeling my finger tips pink with the rushing of blood to them; I hold my breath and enter. The smell is lavender and tastes white. I imagine this is home. ■

*Domingo Mercado* | AT THE END OF THE HALL

(at the end of the hall)  
down  
at the end of the hall  
a doctor loses his nerve  
adultery  
takes the form of saline  
slides  
down  
the sides of his face  
drips from his chin  
and  
ruins his family  
he's on his knees  
as  
he begs  
(sixth floor)  
21 d  
a cold machine  
breathes  
new life  
into  
an already dead alcoholic  
years from now  
her battle with life  
she'll win  
(in the lobby)  
and  
on television  
i learn  
sex and ammunition  
and how to pleasurablely enjoy the two  
simultaneously  
myself

to  
the siren  
“your affronted stare  
and  
nicotine gasp  
exalt  
a depression  
like that  
found  
in the recess  
of a sour skin  
stone  
cathedral  
whose eyes are stained with stories  
most  
will never believe  
ye of little faith  
god will see you through”  
(behind a desk)  
amidst illness and hurt hearts  
a nurse  
smiles at her reflection  
in the white linoleum  
“jesus is a machine”  
whispers the siren



SERGIO ARROYO

*Adriana Michel* | A SESTINA

As a child is put into a corner, her heart  
races and her mind does not understand.  
She is scared.

She can not understand these gestures of sexuality.  
She experiences these moments outside her body  
and her mind and life are left disturbed.

The memories and flashbacks come to disturb  
the mind of the abused and make it hard for her heart  
to love or to let bodies  
come close. Those who haven't been abused do not understand  
that you've experienced sexuality  
in a way that scares

you. Thinking of your abuser while with the one you love scares  
your mind because it's disturbing  
to be faced with that sort of sexuality  
when you are trying to comfort your heart.  
It's hard when you are in the moment and you can't understand  
why your body

is filled with discomfort next to somebody.  
This uncomfortable shift of emotion is scary.  
It's hard to come to understand  
that what's happened to you will leave you disturbed  
for the rest of your life and your heart  
will have to guide you through your sexuality.

Your sexuality  
is far ahead of your body's  
maturity and of your heart's  
acceptance. You're scared  
that your mind will always be disturbed;  
it's what you have to understand.

Come to understand  
that it is not your fault that your sexuality  
is forever disturbed  
and that you're not somebody  
to be blamed, try not to be scared  
anymore, allow your love to flow through your heart.

Don't be afraid to understand your body  
or explore your sexuality. Don't be scared  
to release your disturbed emotions and live with your clean heart.

*Adriana Michel* | THESE LIPS

*(Inspired by Lucille Clifton's "homage to my hips")*

These lips are loud lips  
that need to  
speak in life.

They don't hide  
themselves with make-up. These lips  
are honest lips.

They don't like to be silent.  
These lips have never been hit  
they say what they want to say.

These lips are strong lips.  
These lips are wise lips.  
I have known them

to kiss a man and  
make him melt.

*Adriana Michel* | MY FAMILY SINGS

Some begin as the rest join in.  
They sing like lost souls.  
If the dead they sing for were alive,  
there would be no tears or lost souls.

I've lost family members,  
stood in front of caskets to see  
life drained from the body, the emotions  
running down my face.

I can't help but to sing along,  
how love is worth living for even after  
they're gone, no longer being able to kiss or hug,  
becoming lost and having an eternal love.

Everyone has begun to cry, missing  
someone that never said goodbye.

*“Maybe religion is not so much belief,  
as the need to believe”*

– Garrett Hongo

While troops reunited with their families,  
hugging and laughing, giving big loud slaps on the back,  
tears falling from women’s faces and men saying  
“I’m proud of you,”  
my father was carrying his military green duffle bag standing alone  
with no one to greet him or say “Welcome home.”

When he was twelve and not in school,  
he sang “Love Me Do” by the Beatles, wiping dirt off  
from his jeans and picking out thorns from  
his fingertips from sunrise to sunset and  
being paid for every box of tomatoes he picked.

From smelling menudo in the mornings and beans cooking  
slowly at night  
while walking on dirt road villages in Mexico  
to the burgers frying on open grills and  
Mustangs, Camaros, and El Caminos burning rubber  
on concrete boulevards,

Then crawling on all fours with bullets flying by his head  
he spoke to God, “Kill me now but if you let me live, let me live  
till I’m old.”

While men in his troop polished their guns or their boots,  
ate their instant made military food of dehydrated beef, beans and soup  
my father pitched a tent with three bamboo sticks and a military  
blanket and  
wrote Spanish love letters to my mother.

Just before his wedding, his father was driving a car down a mountain road through tight turns;  
at the final turn, with his right foot off the gas pedal and pushing on the brakes  
the car would not stop and the steering wheel locked, throwing him and two passengers off  
the road hundreds of feet onto a lush green meadow below.

Traveling at forty-five miles per hour down a mountain cliff in my father's El Camino  
I reduce the speed to ten miles per hour at that final turn  
where my grandfather fell to his death.  
My father's eyes do not water, he just clears his throat.

A man that does not cry while jumping off helicopters  
or walking with his M-16 above his head through chest high swamps  
cries in his California home.  
A dream of his second son in a casket surrounded by sand makes him weep.

**E**NERGY—NERVOUS ENERGY.

Technically, it was still ten minutes to show time. But there was a tradition to uphold. Ever since Alma had been a freshman at the academy, I'd always shown up early to help calm her pre-performance jitters. So, on our time, I was running late. I had to buy film. I didn't usually bring my 35 millimeter camera, but this was to be her final performance before moving on to USC.

From the outside, the auditorium of the Los Angeles Academy of Fine Arts and Humanities looked like a typical high school building. Its exterior walls were generically painted white with green trim, which coldly camouflaged the pulsating, anticipatory atmosphere inside. The main lobby greeted one with a vintage Bechstein piano, set in the center of the room slowly rotating on an elevated, spinning platform. The black lid of its frame was open, which drew attention to the yellow soundboard within. Around it, people of all ages — the younger siblings of the academic student body, their parents and faculty — swarmed into the lobby, moving about the room, anxious to take in this special performance.

The surrounding walls pictured famous alumni, from abstract artists to philharmonic conductors, who had all planted their seeds of artistic ambition at the academy. Next to the center stage entrance was a poster featuring tonight's artist. A FINAL ENGAGEMENT: ALMA FUERTE, FLAMENCO GUITARIST. I photographed the picture they used of her. It was a portrait in sepia, in which I brought out her ring-shaped, green eyes. In it, she was dressed in jeans and a sleeveless blouse, playfully leaning on an acoustic guitar as if it were a cane. The lobby lights flickered on and off, indicating five minutes to show time. Everyone rushed into the auditorium.

Unlike the uncomfortable wooden chairs at my high school, this structure was equipped with red, felt-lined stadium seats that descended down towards an expansive stage, which hid behind a lavish gold curtain. Moving through the crowded aisles, I made my way to the stage-left area. I adjusted the camera lens, hoping to catch her off-guard. I could hear

her practicing her fret movements: power chords and the pentatonic scale. She was sitting on a stool in front of the curtain with her head down. Her long, amber brown hair was tightly wound in a bun exposing her smooth, swanlike neck. She was wearing the dress. The one I loved. The one that fit her like a glove. The one that hugged every curve of her voluptuous frame. Silky black with classic slits, the dress showed off her athletic thighs. Its low-cut frontal design exposed just enough skin to tease the beholder of the creamy hills that heaved beneath the fabric.

Poom, poom, she patted the face of the guitar with her right palm, accentuating the sound of her foot tapping in time. Her face still eluded me, but I knew her eyes were closed, as her body swayed like a tropical tree in the midst of a swirling wind. Her head bobbed back and forth, side to side, in trance-like motion. I stood in silent solitude, as Alma Fuerte played with the mastery of a soul much more skilled than that of a seventeen year old.

A stage hand quickly set up a boom stand with a microphone for her guitar. He whispered something in her ear and ran off, stage-right. The curtain opened. I instinctively raised the camera to my face, so as to gather my emotions and filter her beauty.

Complete darkness, except for the spotlighted artist on stage. All eyes were on Alma. She smiled at the audience, who she could not see, and without hesitation began playing. I recognized the opening, variation-filled chords to Bulerias — a flamenco piece that demanded a player rhythmically pat the frame while interchanging a fast-paced, tonic chord structure. Her shoulders moved up and down, animating her entire body. Her crimson, supple lips simultaneously mouthed the notes she played. I snapped my first shot: Click.

The sounds of plucking, strumming, and squeaky fret movement did not distract me from hearing her breathing, deep and slow. She was relaxed, in a zone. It dawned on me that she had never suffered any pre-performance jitters. Our little ritual was arranged for my solace, so that I could steal a moment away with her before the rest of the world discovered this heavenly creature.

Her left hand moved up and down the fret bar. Her fingers pressed down on the six-string acoustic with the precision of a mantis moving in for

a kill; eyelids closed, her entire face twitched as the song came alive. Click.

Etched on the scarlet red face of her instrument, below the acoustic opening, was the phrase “With Love.” For this was her performance guitar, the only one she would ever bring on stage. The man of her life had created it; the entire thing from scratch. From the miniature butterflies and sunflowers imprinted on the fret bar to the black faceplate trim; from the precisely curved soundbody to the hollowed out acoustic chamber—Carlos Fuerte had made this for his daughter many years ago.

As the song escalated to a climactic crescendo, the tonal chord structure took on a conversational tone. Through the use of her hands, she was talking to her dead father.

“I miss you.”

“I know.”

“Are you proud of me, daddy?”

“Of course, I am.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

“You just keep playing this guitar, mijita. You’ll see me.”

I snapped one last shot before the song ended. No one else had heard the conversation, nor did they sense the anguish of my suffering. No one felt my shortness of breath or my sweat-filled brow. No one knew of the hours spent staring at the many pictures I’d taken of her, fixated on her oval face and green eyes. No one else had experienced the countless sleepless nights when I cried out in shame for masturbating at the thought of holding her, of kissing her. No one knew of this—not even my own cousin, Alma Fuerte. ■

THE SMELL OF FRESHLY SANDED WOOD ALWAYS REMINDED Chela Guzman of her grandfather, Anselmo. Of her annual summer trips as a kid to that small Mexican town in the heart of Jalisco called Arandas. Of the red dirt that would stain her white sneakers. Of the sound of children's laughter as they hid behind benches in the town's public square. The smell of freshly sanded wood reminded Chela of her grandfather's calloused hands and of all the guitars he made before his death. Anselmo Guzman was a craftsman, a renowned master guitar builder. He learned the craft in Arandas when he was only nineteen years old.

In the early 1920s, Arandas was a booming pseudo-metropolis that had surpassed its neighbor to the north, Tequila, in the production and distribution of Mexico's staple drink. Arandas, nestled between rolling green hills, was surrounded by winding dirt roads that consisted of a vermilion soil. Along these roadways were massive agave fields as wide as the eye could see. Agave—an aloe plant originally cultivated by the Aztecs, who mixed it with sap to produce a drink called pulque used for medicinal purposes—was now grown for the production of tequila. Its thorny blue-green leaves blossomed from the earth like the tentacles of an octopus buried headfirst into the ground. This intimidating botanical creature was the town's lifeline. It constructed churches. It built schoolhouses. It fed the children. It cared for the elderly. It funded the construction of Arandas's heart and soul, its impressive plaza.

White metal benches with intricate native designs ran along the plaza's perimeter. In the middle of the public square, rosebushes and tulip gardens surrounded a spacious, wooden gazebo. On Sundays, the plaza would overflow with townspeople. A band would play corridos from the gazebo and the town's older men folk would drink and sing along. Their wives would rest on benches, huddle in close and spread outrageous rumors about scandalous affairs that ranged from cheating to bestiality.

Vendors sold churros and taquitos by the dozen, often times running out of the product. One such street vendor, Anselmo Guzman, fared especially well in this climate. His dimpled smile, thick brown hair, and

green eyes always attracted lady customers while his reputation for taming the wildest of broncos gained him the respect and business of the town's male contingency. At fifteen years old, Anselmo was already making more money than his father had accumulated in over thirty years of manual labor. Thanks to the Prohibition Act, the gringos up north were buying tequila in droves by way of the black market. So, the people of Arandas had plenty of money to go around. But a devastating drought from February, 1925 to November, 1928 completely destroyed the town's agave crops. This, along with a mysterious fire which burned down the Arandas distillery, proved to be the end of roaring times. Although the mystery would never be solved, the citizens of Arandas would forever suspect that someone from the competing township of Tequila set the fire.

Now floundering like the rest of the war-torn, embattled nation Arandas needed to find something new to produce. The mayor, Rodrigo Carranza, a short, fat, balding man with a thick mustache fashionably curled at its tips, was forced to hold weekly town hall meetings for over a year. This was a façade as Mayor Carranza knew that there were no economic miracles in sight. Without agave, the town would starve. Still, Carranza went so far as to appoint a provincial committee to draw up a plan that would rescue Arandas. This committee consisted of the Mayor's bankrupted friends, who had all lost their capital in the tequila business. The charade led to a disastrous decision by the townsfolk. They voted to allow its provincial committee to sponsor a statewide commodity search, which completely cracked the province's already depleted nest egg. Like empty-bellied wolves to a slaughter, men from all over the state came in to persuade the people of Arandas to fund their particular lifesaving business ideas. It became a complete circus. All the while, babies were dying due to either malnutrition or infanticide. Without signs of immediate progress, mothers took to dropping their infants into empty wells or suffocating them in their sleep. At the end of this alleged commodity search, a man by the name of Justo Cruz rode into town on a medicine show stagecoach claiming that he had bottled the fountain of youth. This gimmick clarified the mockery of the process to its fullest extent.

Justo Cruz, a tall, gangly man with small eyes and a big nose would never leave town. Before he could escape, the starving citizens of Arandas

surrounded Cruz in the middle of the plaza. “So, you want our money to bottle the rest of the fountain?!” an anonymous voice yelled from the crowd. A loud bang rang out and Justo fell to the ground as his right knee had been shattered by a rifle shot. He moaned like an injured coyote and twisted his body violently, flailing his arms uncontrollably. “Please! Don’t kill me! I have a family! Please! Please!” he cried out. The crowd of men, women, and children circled around and began closing in on him. They would’ve torn him to pieces, limb by limb, right at that moment, were it not for one man. Anselmo Guzman squatted directly on top of Cruz’s body, so as to shield him from all sides. “Get out of the way, ‘Selmo, he’s a shark, he wants to take advantage of us!” the crowd yelled. Anselmo, with his arms fully extended like an eagle exposing its wingspan, tried to reason with the bloodthirsty mob.

“You think I don’t want to kill someone? I lost my living, too! But this isn’t right.”

“He deserves to die! He’s from Tequila!”

“It’s not this man’s fault that we haven’t had a drop of rain in years.”

“No matter! Move it or we’ll kill you, too!”

“I’m already dead. We all are. This will only ensure our stations in hell!”

Anselmo Guzman was struck by a stone on the left side of his head. Blood gushed out of his ear and he covered his face with his hands. With that, the crowd moved in and pushed Anselmo out of the way. He hopelessly tried to fight his way to the shrieks and yells in the middle of the rabble, but another thump to the back of his head knocked him unconscious.

When he came to a few hours later the plaza was empty, except for the lynched body strapped to the gazebo. The murderous crowd made sure to expose Justo Cruz’s face by nailing his ears to one of the gazebo’s wooden pillars. His eyes had been gouged out and a sign hung around his neck: WE ARE NOT SO BLIND. BE WARNED.

“You are injured badly, young Guzman,” Anselmo heard a deep voice behind him. He turned around and saw that it was Hamoudi Hayek, the town’s Arab. Hayek was an old man with a long gray beard and deep-set eyes. His dark skin was accented by his bright clothing. He wore a long-sleeved, white silk-woven shirt and an elongated yellow vest. His matching

pants extended past his sandals. A red turban shielded his head from the hot Mexican sun. His peaceful demeanor looked out of place in this town. "Come, I will heal you," Hayek said putting his arm around Anselmo.

For the next few days the old Arab took care of Anselmo, giving him medicinal teas and bandaging his head wounds. Trying to piece together the aftermath of the tragedy and perplexed by the Arab's assistance, Anselmo tried to get some answers, as the old man cleaned his raw wounds.

"Who gouged his eyes out?"

"It was Mayor Carranza. He feared that the mob would turn on him next."

"And the sign around his neck?"

"The Mayor, pleased with his own viciousness, wrote it."

"I heard people say that the man was from Tequila. Was that true?"

"The dead man had never once set foot in Tequila, Jalisco. He was from the south."

"Why are you helping me?"

"I am a descendant of the moors. I know how violence can consume a people."

"Moors?"

"The Arabic people brutally ousted from the Iberian Peninsula by order of the Spanish Crown. We are not so different: our peoples. Many generations ago, my family made a pact to advocate pacifism and help those in need."

"How come you didn't help the dead man?"

"I tried. I am old. You are young and strong. You've tamed wild horses, Guzman. It was not difficult for the crowd to hold me back."

"I didn't mean to offend you. It's just..."

"Would you like to work for me? You know what business I am in?"

"Yes, guitars. I don't know how your store has survived these terrible times."

"I am a craftsman. I am blessed with secrets from the old country. Secrets that assure success in the eye of a storm. So, would you like to work for me?"

"Yes, of course."

And so began Anselmo Guzman's guitar-making apprenticeship.

Hamoudi Hayek was pleased to find that Anselmo was a quick study. Within a few months, Guzman had practically mastered the craft, learning how to measure a fingerboard and piece together a soundbody. Having revealed all his secrets, Hamoudi Hayek had even taught him how to entice a woman's orgasm without ever having to touch her, by tenderly manipulating the strings on a quality handmade guitar. When the Arab died a year later, he left Anselmo the business in a last will and testament. With the intensity of a resurrected soul, Guzman proudly added his own revolutionary adjustments to the craft. Before he knew it, his guitars were revered throughout all of Mexico. Thereafter, the Guzman guitar became the preferred instrument of musicians from every corner of the earth. His innovations and quality work produced new jobs for the townspeople of Arandas. He had given rise to the economic miracle that the citizenry had so longed for.

A buzzing electric sander smoothed out a piece of wood in the background giving off a smoky, sawdust scent. "What do you think, Chela?" her husband Rene asked, tapping a pillar of the skeletal framework that will one day be their dream house. Men in white t-shirts and blue jeans wearing hard-hats filled the landscape. "The contractor says this is the strongest wood on the market today," Rene finished. Holding her impregnated stomach with her hands, Chela smiled approvingly. Feeling a stir within she yelled, "Oh my God! I think I just felt him kick! I just felt little Anselmito kick!" Rene clumsily tripped over a two-by-four reaching for his digital camera, "I'm okay, I'm okay." The buzzing sander stopped, and as Rene dusted off, Chela couldn't help thinking of how the smell of freshly sanded wood always reminded her of her grandfather. ■

**M**Y FATHER AND MY BROTHER ARE QUITE DISTANT, HARDLY ever talking to each other. When my brother was young, he was always a little quiet with everyone in my family and did not talk much when the house had visitors. One time I have never forgotten was a winter day in December.

“You do not understand me! You never did!” Thai, my brother, cried as he slammed the door behind him. My father, a gaunt and slim old man, silently shook his head as he watched the door steadfastly shut in front of his face. My brother had gotten mad at my father. His emotion was always like that when my father and he talked to each other. At the time, I was a little girl but I could feel they were falling into something that would be so wrong. Outside the window, it was raining and tears were falling from my eyes. I kept asking, “Why did it have to happen? Why didn’t this fighting end?” My heart felt cooler and cooler. It should have felt warmer because I had turned the heater on, but I felt chilled.

\* \* \*

It was 2:00 A.M. and raining. I woke up in my half dream and walked down to the kitchen for a drink. In the thunder’s light blink, I could see the shadow of my father. He seemed so tired from too many sleepless nights, not to mention the fights. He sat down on his favorite armchair with the light off, wondering whether he could survive this hurdle, the bittersweet relationship with his beloved son. He slowly opened the case where he stored his most precious treasured photographs and picked up the first photo. It was a stained black and white picture. His eyes got sadder as he looked at the happy family in the picture. It was my family only twenty years ago, a difficult time but a happy time for my brother, Thai, just a sweet little boy, who brought joy to my father’s life everyday.

My father had been taken as a prisoner of war from our family after the end of the Vietnam War because he had been a Republican soldier. It was five days before my brother’s fourth birthday. In his dream, my father could still hear my brother crying for him as he was taken away. My father tried hard to get through seven sorrowful years in re-education camp. The day he came back marked the end of their blissful father-

son relationship. He could never forget the look on his son's face as he saw him: alarmed and remote. In my brother's eyes, my father was a stranger. "God! That feeling! A painful feeling...a thousand words. I still can not explain!" he cried, squeezing his family's picture. He did not blame my brother for not recognizing him nor did he blame him for anything because of those seven years of the separation between him and my brother. Under the Communist educational system, Thai had been taught about bad and evil Republican soldiers, who included his own father. The lights from the street below cast shadows on the walls as my father sat in thought, with tears falling down his gaunt cheeks.

"Ding dong ding dong" sounded the door bell, suddenly bringing my father back to the present from the deep bittersweet memory of my brother and him. Although my father gave all his heart to my brother, Thai had become cold and distant toward him.

Now, my family is separated around the world. Thai got married at a young age and now lives far away from us. I hope that when he becomes a father, he can understand how much my father has loved him. I believe that for my father and Thai the sunshine is some days ahead. Love, especially the love of father and son, is always complicated with no words to express and define it. That is a love with a constant solid outside, but it is hidden inside by a softer, deeper, and even more emotional love. It is so wild sometimes, but inside our little and private world we can always find love. I desire this for Thai and my father: "Sharing joy is double joy; sharing sorrow is half sorrow" (Swedish Proverb). ■

Bob Noz | SPITE

Yesterday, she saw me pruning  
her rose bushes  
and said nothing.  
Today, it's her turn.  
She zeros in on the chili bush,  
begins to dismember its branches.  
I ask her not to destroy  
the source of chili in our food.  
Her 93 year old jaw sets  
as she strains to uproot its young trunk.  
"It is not necessary to use force or violence  
on children or plants."  
She ignores me, so  
I retreat to my room  
like a misbehaved child.

She comes back in  
with a headache that won't go away.  
"Doctors have warned you  
that strenuous effort  
can cause a stroke."  
She waves it off.  
"If you don't listen—  
I remind her in her own words—  
Dios te va a castigar."

She waves it off.  
"With a little more thought and less effort,  
You could have used a *pala*  
and saved yourself a headache."  
She quietly goes to her room  
and closes the door.

*Nancy Lorena Perez* | BETRAYAL

These squirmy little things!  
I must have eaten worms somewhere  
And now they're trying to crawl out.

Most of the time, I go out looking for any kind of bird  
To eat these caterpillars, these worms, for the way  
They make a home in my intestines  
And scratch the pit of my stomach until  
My body shakes, or my hands sweat  
Or I absolutely grow numb in my head  
And my tongue takes the form of a stray dog without a leash.

I know I have to let them out.  
It's no good keeping worms like these inside  
For they can deteriorate your metabolism,  
Cause severe digestive or insomnia problems  
And not to mention, the most complicated:  
Problems of the heart.



SERGIO ARROYO

I now know that I have to let them out,  
But I don't like the way they  
Crawl out of my eyes before  
The gentle winds or starry skies at night.  
Or how a smile sneaks them out from  
The bolted throat I nail shut.

I've been looking for any kind of bird  
To eat them off but it's of no use;  
I see how a bird does not close its wings to fly:  
It flaps them open, showing itself to the soft and rough winds.  
I look at the flower that opens its petals to the bee  
That dips in, and its color, sniffs.

I see,  
Then realize that these worms, these caterpillars  
Are more than I'll ever be  
And they turn me into  
A flying butterfly,  
Crawling out of its own black skin.

I stand by a balcony and watch the  
Ocean making love to the sand.  
Many waves, going up and down,  
Come and go  
But the ocean and the sand  
Never part.  
And my eyes take a dive into the blue ocean.  
What lies underneath only the sand knows.  
And I wish I were grains of sand so you  
Can bury your body in me and I could see  
Underneath your skin.  
Then I would know your corals, your pearls and your waves.  
We would go beyond the shore and into the churning of water and  
sand,  
Mixing, together dancing to the song of the wind.  
But I'm not sand; the sand is sand.  
And you're not ocean; the ocean is ocean.  
And only the sand knows what's underneath the ocean, not I.

Nancy Lorena Perez | EN LA ARENA Y EL OCEANO  
(*The Sand and the Ocean*)

Yo miro el ollo en el mar:  
Aquel azul y profundo.  
Granitos de arena ayudan llenarlo.  
Lo cubren, lo acarician y luego caminan con el,  
Cada vez pasando por sus laberintos.

Granitos de arena, pedacitos de mar,  
Me siento en ellos por la noche negra y me quedo  
En silencio; el viento de la arena parece querer hablarme.  
O alomejor es mi palpito el quien te late.

Pero eso no porque tus manos  
Estan pintadas en la arena.  
Cada granite en mi piel, en mis pies,  
Me cubre, me acaricia...y luego me  
Dice que esta alli,  
Debajo de mi.

Despues hay ojos en el mar  
Y son los mios, mirando hacia la arena.  
Llamando le, gritandole que los valla a descubrir,  
Que se entierre en ellos.

Pero luego miro hacia el cielo y no miro estrellas.  
Quiza la noche oscura las opaca,  
Pero eso no.  
No las miro porque solo estoy sentada  
En la arena,  
Pedacitos de mar que lo llenan  
Y que solo se mueven con el viento  
Como si no supieran que yo estoy alli.

*Nancy Lorena Perez* | THE OCEAN

Someone must have cried  
Where there's so much blue and so much salt, yes...  
Someone had to have cried.

Perhaps for the blind folding nights  
Or the cold winter storms that dropped their  
Thorny rivulets in every corner of the Earth.

Yes, I know someone would have cried.  
For how do you explain so much blue water,  
So many waves, so much salt?  
Someone must have been next to  
The mother that screamed tears  
With the son who carried a lamp with  
A dim light.

Someone must have seen  
The girl walking with rocks in her shoes,  
Someone must have known  
The dog with spiky teeth  
Who would bite  
Yet carried a chest with  
Stars inside.

Why is there so much blue water?

Could it be that someone, by riding  
In the huge waves, in the thick and low ones,  
Shed puddles of salty water, as you once shed,  
Until these grew into an ocean?

*Nancy Lorena Perez* | ALGUIEN (THE OCEAN)

Alguien a deber llorado.  
Donde hay mucho azul y tanta sal, si-  
Alguien tuvo que haber llorado.

Quizá fue por las noches sejeras  
O quizá por los fuertes inviernos que pasaron.

Por esto, yo se que alguien  
Hubiera llorado.

Pues como se explica tanta agua,  
Tanta ola, tanta sal?  
Alguien tuvo que haber estado allí,  
Junto a la madre que grito lagrimas,  
Con el hijo que cargaba una lampara  
Pero con luz opacada.  
Alguien tuvo que haber visto a la muchacha  
Caminando con piedras en los zapatos,  
Alguien tuvo que haber conocido  
Al perro que mordía pero que  
Sonreía cuando estaba solo en la obscuridad.

Porque hay tanta agua?

Sera que alguien, que con pasear en las olas grandes,  
En las olas gordas y bajas, derramo  
Charcos de agua salada, como tu alguna vez haz derramado  
Y estos se convirtieron en oceano?

It's unbearable everyday to live  
in a house with brothers and sisters.  
To fight everyday over who gets to use the bathroom  
like a pack of ravenous wolves that hasn't been fed.  
To fight each other for our parents' attention  
like birds in the nest that want that worm first.  
To have an older sibling treat you like a second class citizen  
like the American G.I.'s in World War II were  
treated by the Japanese.  
To have your personal life and space invaded  
like when Syria and Egypt invaded Israel during Yom Kippur.  
To have a younger sibling take and destroy your treasures  
[my favorite CD or shirt]  
like Hitler and the Nazis did to the Jews during the Holocaust.  
To be betrayed and hurt by them  
like when Fredo betrayed Michael in the *Godfather*,  
a knife driven into your heart.  
Life can be very unbearable with siblings like these,  
but nevertheless we must bear this burden because fate will  
always dictate when they will need you the most,  
just like the dog that needs his old bone and  
will dig it up when he wants something to chew.

*(Note from the author: Parts of the dialogue  
have been altered for publication.)*

HE SAT BACK IN HIS CAPTAIN'S CHAIR AND SIGHED. BROKEN skateboards adorned the walls surrounding his work and living space. In his line of sight, there were many electronic devices and electric guitars hanging on the walls that he'd covered with fake wood paneling to remind him of his childhood bedroom, which had not been redecorated since the early 1970s before his birth when someone else had occupied the same space. He scanned the perimeter of his small, self-contained living space. 1960's era keyboards and organs sat along each wall, and each wall was shelved and covered with either musical equipment or toys from Japan and other symbols of the life the boy led, autographed tour posters, and various high-end boutique brand baseball caps and beanies; he preferred "Supreme." On the mantle of the fireplace sat still more trinkets from the adventurous life the boy was leading: Run-DMC action figures, Ultraman toys and portable record players, dusty against a "Planet of the Apes" poster.

The boy sighed again and began tapping his foot rapidly. He stared at the telephone; then entered the bathroom to stare at his own face. He was pleased with what he saw in himself, a seemingly charming young man with charisma and sensitivity in a face that was not capable of disguising emotion. He wondered if it had happened again: had his honest face set him up to be used? His mind quickly wandered away from this thought as he stared into his own pupils, glassy and dilated from a morning of pogo-ing off the walls, drinking English Breakfast tea and talking on the telephone so fast that the world had to follow suit, and now he was in a sort of a caffeine induced, anxiety limbo. He noticed the redness that the sun left upon the ridge of his smooth straight nose, as if it had kissed his face.

"This is crap!" he said to himself, as he walked back into his room and picked up the telephone. He'd been through this before, but this time there was a simultaneous duality, as the feet dragging had begun in his personal life and professionally. Feet dragging or procrastination is

almost always a sign of some sort of dishonesty. He whispered to himself, “Damn!” and threw the cordless phone against a stack of compact discs that someone he did not care for had mailed to him.

“Always taking up my space, man!” he said to himself as he fell to his knees and scooped up the stack of CDs he’d just knocked over; he hated messes in his space, so he scooped up the compact discs and threw them in a “Levis” bag and carried it out to the garbage. He felt guilty because he knew that most people took him seriously and were anxiously awaiting his musical opinion but his space meant more to him and outweighed the guilt.

Just outside his room in the back yard of the family home, the wind blew hot against his face and lifted his shaggy hair away from his head. He looked into the sun and then at the foothills that sat seven miles away in the distance. As his eyes fell back to his immediate surroundings, he saw his BMX bicycle glistening in the sun. Without hesitation he jumped onto his bike and started pedaling; with ease he was four miles from home, outside a studio used by the guy from “Black Eyed Peas.” He rode up the embankment adjacent to the studio, spastically pedaling while he twisted his larger than average frame of a body and simultaneously leaned his head over his handlebars like a bull that was about to spear a matador. His bike left the surface of the embankment and bounced off a chain-link fence like a trampoline in one swift motion, and the young man’s heart and mind were freed of all anxieties for a brief moment in time.

“Yeah-yay!” he shouted as he continued pedaling up Grandview Drive and over the hill, zipping in and out of the traffic that was leaving Cal State, Los Angeles. He rode up his street past the Kelly Osborne look-alikes, intentionally getting airborne on the driveway transition in front of their house so they would notice him.

The muscles in his jaw, chest, and legs twitched as he walked up the driveway that ran between two lawns and under an overhang that connected his home to the detached garage. Just beneath the sound of leaf blowers, he could hear his cellular phone ringing. He ran inside to answer but missed the call; the missed call was a 212 area code number. He knew it was Cara Lewis’ office calling from the William Morris Agency, and she wanted the deposits for the artists he’d booked, all ten thousand dollars of

it. Droplets of sweat formed on his brow, he did not have the money yet, and his professional reputation was hanging in the balance.

He called his “employer,” a guy from a nonprofit agency that contracted him to do what he did, make the show, sell tickets, make noise, basically get paid to do the only thing he was really any good at. He dialed and the call was sent to voicemail.

“Yo...Sean! It’s Ben. What’s up, bro? You were supposed to bring me a 6500-dollar money order and a two 1500-dollar deposits for the support. You’re making me nervous, man; call me back!”

He sat back down in his captain’s chair and closed his curtains. The room was dark and cool. The boy’s heart felt so heavy and sad. He picked up his cell phone and called the girl he’d been talking to for the past three years; he was planning his big move, they’d made-out before, but that’s about it. “Hey beautiful, it’s me. Sup? Call me back. Let’s go to SF. Mark is playing with Mix Master Mike. It’s a private show, and I’m trying to get interviewed for a documentary. I miss you, tough guy.”

Two minutes later, his phone rang; it was Sean, the nonprofit guy. “Yo Ben...how’s it?”

[Stupid nerd. Where’s my money, ass!?] “Fine, fine. Dude, where’s the wire?”

“There’s a small problem. We...”

“DUDE! I know you’re not going to tell me there is a problem with the Money!!”

“Well, that’s the thing...here, talk to Kwasi.” Kwasi, the dumb guy, an African American “bad cop” who spoke with a clichéd California accent appeared on the phone. “Ben? It’s Kwasi; hi, hi.”

“Yeah dude, we’ve said hi already. What’s the deal, holmes? I’m on the hook for ten K right now, and every second that passes, I’m seeing my credibility dwindle away like sands through the friggin’ hour glass on that T.V. show you were so obviously watching when you were supposed to be in business school!”

Offended, Kwasi loses the fake niceness that is inherent in his tone, “What? Excuse me? What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I don’t do business like this, yo! What the hell? Where is the money?”

“Well calm down; that’s the thing. MFA sent a forty thousand dollar wire to my account, and I gave them the wrong account number; I gave them the number off of my ATM card...I, I...”

“Bull! Do you have some viagra? Do you want my mom’s address? Because you are acting like a MF-er right now! I’m on the hook for this lute, bro!”

The dumb guy passed the phone back to the “good cop,” “Ben! Ben! It’s chill man! It’s chill, just tell ‘em it’s on me...”

“Forget about it ‘the dog ate my homework,’ you better call me back...let me cool off. I don’t want to make you cry. I’d hate to tell you that I’m pulling the plug on you, man.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean, toy? I’m going to get ill right now!”

“Dude, dude, dude, you’re over-reacting.”

“Over-reacting? How do you figure, buddy? You lied to me. You sat with that retarded face you learned in business school, and you promised me that this wasn’t a stroke!”

“I give you my word. This was a simple mistake, it could have happened to anyone.”

“Look, you wannabe Clive Davis, chill with your bull! Fine, it was an honest mistake? That guy’s a liability, I don’t want him near me, dig? I only talk to you now; he’s not allowed to speak! If he speaks, I walk. You guys go make out with each other on your time, not on mine. My seventeen year old brother knows that the number on his ATM is not his account number! So stop with this ‘I give you my word’ shit because it doesn’t make it okay! Do you know who I am? I’m the A-Team, Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, Tony Hawk meets John Lennon with a hard-on like Bill Clinton in a community college literature class, so show me your mom’s bitch because I’m the MF-er now! You’re tempting fate with a hurricane...”

“Okay, okay, okay..that’s beautiful...you’re the boss, you’re the man. You’re my man, Ben. We’re cool, everything’s cool,” the liar’s voice now quivered with fear, “ I’m going to get you some girls, man. You like those blonde Asians, right? I’m going to take you out and get you drunk and laid, bro, we’re boys, bla bla bla bla bla...”

The boy's eyes rolled back in his head and his leg began to twitch. His heart was sad. He saw the face of a small child smiling, looking back at him from the mirror in his mother's compact: A train rushes past the boy's tiny house, next to the tracks that run down Monterey Road in South Pasadena. A tall man smiles at the boy and gets into a Porsche 356 C Coupe. The Boy's mother is crying; she walks into the whitewashed California Craftsman and closes the door on the child. He looks to the tall man, who is kissing a woman in his Porsche. The tall man pulls his shaggy hair into a pony tail and rolls up his sleeves to reveal tattoos of big bosomed women on the inside of his elbows. His handlebar mustache spreads apart to reveal a smile, sincerely conveying a selfish happiness.

The boy cries out, "Daddy" and rides his tricycle toward the smiling man. The roar of the exhaust pipes gets louder and louder until the child is within inches of the smiling man. The man laughs, places his hand on the inner thigh of the scantily clad woman and winks at the child.

"Take care, mijo." The Porsche speeds off and the child's eyes fill with tears. The child rubs his eyes, looks at his South Pasadena home. There are boards on the windows now, and the grass has turned to a yellow field of weeds and dirt. The house is much smaller; the boy is much taller.

The boy stands on stage, looking out at 40,000 people. He notices that all of the girls are so cute; when they smile at him, he looks away. Lights flash and hands are in the air. The boy is handcuffed to a briefcase full of money. The skin is peeled away from his chest to reveal a heart that frowns. If you look closely at the beating heart, tiny images of memories form scar tissue around it, the tissue forms a surface on which film loops roll, flickering in and out.

We see a posse of teenagers, the boy's brother leading the pack on a skateboard. He is nothing but big hair and a smile. Suddenly, he is no longer those things; but from a coffin full of money, he still has the same smile. Together they sit, sweating in a hotel room at the Bonaventure Hotel on New Year's Eve. "Here. You can take some from here," the boy's brother hands him a plastic bag, "We're going down to the party. 'Circa' Ryan wants some so don't do it all!"

The boy pours the contents out of the bag and hovers over the desk that sits in front of a window, six feet tall and twelve feet wide. He lifts

his head from the table and stares out the window. His eyes are still filled with tears from when that tall man drove away. His cell-phone rings, it's his mother. He sends the call to voice mail.

As home movies play on the boy's eyelids, he sees himself, smiling, and then crying. He reaches out to tell himself, "don't cry, you're the king!" He is now the ghost of Christmas future, but he can't speak to the past, all he can do is sit and watch and feel every punch in the face, every kick in the gut, every slam to the concrete, every failed attempt at flight, every broken heart, every hug, every kiss and guilty moment spent selfishly trying not to feel; but he feels! He feels it all at once!

He sings out:

"Old Man look at my life, 24 and there's so much more,  
I live alone in paradise that makes me think of two.  
Old Man, take a look at my life, I'm a lot like you,  
I need someone to love me the whole day through.  
Just one look in my eyes, and you can tell that's true"

The movies continue. The boy is on stage again, but this time, there are less people in the crowd, but he knows them all. Smiling debutants, beautiful Latinas, the kind that wear Chuck Taylors, not the kind that wear high heels and tight skirts or low-cut jeans; the Chinese Stanford girl bows to him and grins in a sinister manner while in the back of the room the girl he invited to SF looks disappointed and quietly walks away. Drunk with pride, he doesn't notice her. He sings:

"Gather 'round my sons and listen to the puns of a boy  
whose heart is broke,  
I screw the girls that broke it, as I choke it to sweet  
memories of loves I lost, and girls I knew. The love  
I lost was you."

Violence and sadness scar the boy's eyes and face, rendering him a walking target for false caregivers, groupies, and gold-diggers. He rides a BMX bicycle in 100-degree heat. With each revolution of the pedals, his heart rate rises, and he sweats out the toxins that form chains that bind him to the ground until the chains break and he is strong. His bicycle finally leaves the ground, free of weight. His eyes are still filled with tears. He keeps them there to remind him of where his strength comes from.

A warm breeze blows the contents of the bag off the desk at the posh hotel. The boy washes his face and nostrils and smiles at himself. He urinates on the bed of the hotel room and lights it on fire. He pulls the scabs from his heart and places them on the flaming bed. The suitcase full of money slides off of the boy's wrist as he has become more flexible over the years. He opens the suitcase and takes a stack of money, but just enough to keep him from having to work too much.

Our hero walks away from the flaming hotel and sits down in his body, which is still sitting in the captain's chair in his living/work space.

"Look dork! Stop talking. I'm not your boy! Do you know who I am? Why do you think you can even step? I don't have time for this, and it's not right for me to just wait here for you to destroy my career, okay Pepperdine? Save your lies for your parents when they ask you what you've learned, 'cause I ain't having it. 'Peace bro? It's all good bro?' Dude! I've seen fire and I've seen rain! You think I am expendable? You think you can give me weed and ass and I'm gonna be like, 'okaaaiiiiy Forest, we can kick it.' I don't even drink, boss, and you should learn a thing or two from this reaming, that's right, boy, you can't say shit right



SERGIO ARROYO

now because my foot's in your mouth and my right hand is holding a contract for ten K and I'm giving you the Ozzy sign with my left! Who do you think you are to mess with me, you embezzling little booger!? I don't skim, and Imma talk some crazy shit to the news tomorrow if you don't get this freakin' money, bitch! Call me back and tell me one of two things, 'Ben, sorry for the extreme inconvenience, the money is in the account,' or, 'Ben, do you have a good travel agent; because I have to move away from L.A. since I'll never get jobs here because you dimed me out.' Got that, my son? I'm not messing with you, and my drunk Irish lawyer is going to bone you on the judge's bench if I have to wait for this money, don't screw around. That clear, Eddie?"

"It's clear."

The boy slammed the phone down and drank another cup of tea. His upper lip wrinkled from the catharsis he'd just experienced. He knew she wouldn't call. This was why it would never work, this was why she couldn't handle him, his intensity; this is why the boy's only true friends were people from the music business, and they lived in other cities, so as to not get too much of anything or anyone, but they were his brothers and tours and concerts were the parents of these orphaned boys who had stopped aging as children with such sensitive and damaged hearts, capable of recoiling with the strength and might of hyperbole, empty threats, and poker faces; making money off hip-hop while listening to the Strokes and Neil Young, and eating tofu and drinking soda water while the unfortunate victims of "the life" chopped lines with backstage passes, sold their souls to the worst women for a little compassion and attention. What a lonely lot of fools, big hair and smile, and the women...jet set, new wave hair and backless shirts-vintage Halston, so quick to drop your name, only to get back stage and steal your friends.

He knew this was no life she wanted. He packed his bags, loaded his skateboard and BMX bike into his 4Runner, and drove away to San Francisco, winking at a small child on a tricycle.

Old man, look at my life. I'm a lot like you. ■

*Khamberlie Ta-Aca* | CUPID'S GIFT

As I enter this room that I use to write to you  
the darkness slowly withers from the glow of the moon-lit curtain.

Every tick and tock of the clock  
turns the strong black night into a faint glow of light.  
I lean against the wall and watch the furniture reveal their shapes.

And as the midnight moon shines on the armchair,  
I picture your body sitting in a fetal position,  
drawing your every colorful emotion onto a white piece of paper.

I see you stare at the paper for a long while, looking,  
waiting for inspiration. Scratching your head you begin to write.

Your hand seems to have a will of its own  
but somehow you manage to fold the paper up  
sealing it in a red envelope.

Now my body sits in this armchair,  
that red envelope glowing by the moon's pallid light.

And beside it is the folded piece of paper.

Unfolded

the clock's tune beats faster  
but the pale light remains focused on the paper,  
no longer white, only painted with the color of red.

Then comes the realization that the clock's tune is the beating of my heart  
and the pale red glow of the night is  
Cupid's special gift.

*Khamberlie Ta-Aca* | ANOTHER DAY

He opens his unwilling eyes  
staring at the white ceiling.  
The air is cold, damp.  
His thin blanket did very little to keep out  
the morning's cold.  
His eyes blur with tears.  
Water drips from them like a salty fountain.  
He lets out a sad moan  
blinking constantly to reclaim his sight.  
The early morning breeze penetrates his transparent blanket  
striking his body cold.  
But his insides burn like acid eating up his organs.  
Suddenly, he smells the aroma of garlic.  
He feels his bed shake like a strong earthquake.  
The terrestrial movement is followed by a voice,  
Get up. It's time for school.  
And the boy's paralyzed fixture is broken as he is forced  
to face another day without you.

*Khamberlie Ta-Aca* | JUST A BOY (A SONNET)

Empathize with me the life of a boy,  
an Asian boy in a Mexican world,  
minority among minorities.  
He walks head down with his large green sweater.  
Where you going, pepino? Ching Chong Chang!  
The laughter keeps his disgraced face hooded,  
the sweat of his body, his burning face.  
The humid climate does not matter to him.  
But when he takes that green hood off his face,  
they find the person he was not showing:  
the Asian who preferred poultry, not pork,  
who preferred white rice over tortillas.  
The boy's struggle is coming to an end,  
the boy who becomes their closest of friends

**H**ER EYES WERE BRIGHT AS A SHINING DIAMOND STRUCK BY a ray of sunlight. She smiled from ear to ear with pride and honor as if she were the happiest child in the entire world. For a fleeting moment she stole the spotlight. All the children in the worn out, dilapidated and overcrowded classroom at Ridge Elementary School were clapping and cheering for her. She was enjoying the moment as though she just got a brand-new toy or as if she were eating the tastiest chocolate ice cream in the world. For a moment, I envied her happiness.

She ignored the broken windows and the pieces of roof missing from the classroom ceiling. She didn't even notice that the floor pattern and design were slightly visible now. She paid no attention to the floor that had been scratched over the years. She refused to acknowledge the walls that were peeling off with sections covered with white paint instead of matching colors while other sections were falling off.

"Let's give a round of applause to Maria," Mr. Silva announced, "and celebrate her achieving second best score on the math and English test," he added. Maria was very short for her eleven years. She was very slim and her legs looked like two overgrown toothpicks. Her sweaters were always so big for her they definitely must have belonged to an older and larger sister; they had lost their luster and color and a number of holes showed on the sleeves. She also wore solid color skirts right above her knees like black, red, brown, or gray. When it was cold, she wore socks with her sandals instead of shoes. Maria had golden bronze olive skin, straight facial features; her cheek bones were just right, her nose was sharp, pointy and cute. Her eyes seemed like two large black shiny marbles and her long black hair was beautiful. She was charming, calm, patient and noble. Maria spoke no bad words, she never cussed, never got mad at anyone; she was polite beyond normal, always saying "please" and "thank you" for the slightest of things. She always went out of her way for anybody asking for help, and always with a smile. Her soft voice welcomed everyone to approach her, and she was always eager to learn in class. She never missed a day except when she had food poisoning and then missed two days in a row. Maria must have been a real source of pride for her parents.

Our teacher, Mr. Silva, never smiled and always appeared to be mad at something or someone. He had no particular achievements that I know of. It appeared he did not have any friends. He was never nominated for the “Teacher of the Year” award or anything similar as far as I know. I never understood why he was so unhappy with himself. I never heard Mr. Silva greet the entire classroom with a cheer. He never learned all his students’ names. At least that is what appeared to me because he never called out on everybody to read aloud or to do a math problem on the board. His favorite students were Joanna, Carlos, David, Karla, Mike, and Caroline. They had light complexions, always got A’s in all subjects, had perfect attendance and spoke very good English. Mr. Silva would always call on them and compliment them on their work. On occasions he would mention other students but to ridicule them as he did Maria. After he asked us to celebrate that she had obtained the second best score in the test, Mr. Silva followed with a remark: “Let’s celebrate that Maria obtained the second best score in the test, but best second to the last.” Mr. Silva then made a smirk with his right upper lip lifting it up as though he was smiling but instead it was clear he was ridiculing Maria. Many students laughed out loud. “Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” I heard repeatedly and saw my classmates’ smiling faces while many were shifting their bodies back and forth on their chairs with laughter as if they were sitting on a rocking chair. Maria’s success bubble popped, she cried with embarrassment and humiliation; her ego was destroyed that day. She said nothing, merely cried and cried. I never understood why Mr. Silva became a teacher but that day I realized he liked making others feel bad.

The incident with Maria is the most vivid memory I have of those unforgettable elementary school years. I bet Mr. Silva was unforgettable to other students that attended Ridge Street Elementary School in the heart of East Los Angeles. Ninety-nine percent of the students when I attended were of Latino heritage and most of them spoke fluent Spanish as their first language. The kids that attended the school were immigrants that had just arrived in the United States or were at minimum children of immigrant parents that had been here for a short time. Most of the teachers were of Latino descent as well except for Mrs. Johnson who taught third grade and Mr. Smith who worked with the six graders.

Mr. Silva was one of the Latino teachers. He also was in charge of extra-curriculum activities at school such as the drill team, the folkloric dance team and the track team. As the head of extra-curriculum activities, Mr. Silva was powerful since he had the responsibility to select the students that he wanted to participate in any of the three extra-curriculum activities. I decided to try out for all three but to no avail. In particular, I was interested in the Mexican folkloric dance team since I had prior experience. At age five I had joined a team in my community, East Los Angeles, where I performed every Sunday after church. We performed on the park stage in front of dozens of people that enjoyed watching us dance. I was thin, athletic, I always drew a crowd of my personal fans applauding my performance. I was in good physical shape, had charisma, I had it all and yet I was rejected by Mr. Silva.

Before I tried out for the school dance team, I learned all the steps involved in the choreography. During the “tryouts” I tapped my feet, spun around and turned with graceful maneuvers while holding the edges of my hot pink loose skirt up. My performance was nothing short of spectacular. Other classmates made errors; they stumbled, did not smile and were not as professional as I was. But Mr. Silva never called out my name. After not hearing my name my eyes filled with tears that started to roll down my cheeks. I had no words as I couldn’t think about anything other than being rejected. I did not have a smile on my face anymore as I did while I was dancing. I couldn’t look at anyone in the eyes. I felt ashamed for even trying. All I remember is running home as fast as I could, five blocks without stopping. I climbed up the stairs to my family’s apartment and jumped into my mother’s arms.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” my mother asked.

“Mr. Silva did not pick me, mom,” I said in between sobs as I cuddled in my mother’s arms as if I were a teddy bear. I lay on top of her as she was sitting in her rocking chair. My mother held me tight and caressed my head repeatedly.

“It’s all right, he made a mistake and maybe he forgot to call you. Come on baby, don’t cry, you are gorgeous, we will fix it tomorrow,” she said. I fell asleep in her arms; I felt my mother’s warm chest and her voice singing to me to sleep while she tried to calm me down. I felt a soothing

relief. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

My mother was always involved in my activities; she walked me to school every day and picked me up after school, filling me with hugs and kisses. She was always comforting me when I felt bad or down like the incident with Mr. Silva. My mother must have been really upset since the next day when she picked me up she held my hand really tight as we walked to my classroom. Turning the knob she stepped firmly in without looking back, and I was right next to her. She looked around at the empty chairs and the crumbled pieces of paper all over the floor before gazing at Mr. Silva. Walking towards her target, my mother's footsteps were loud enough for him to hear us approaching.

Mr. Silva was about five feet eight inches tall, had dark skin, his hair was short and black, he had a mustache that covered his upper lip and visible gray streaks of hair. There were many papers on top of his wooden brown desk where he was sitting. His eyes made contact with ours as he stared at us in disbelief. Mr. Silva raised his right arm to caress his hair and took a deep breath as though he knew what was coming. "Good afternoon, Mr. Silva. How do you do?" my mother asked with a serious and determined voice.

"Well, hi, I am busy as you can see, but how may I help you?"

I looked up at my mother standing tall and stiff. Her blue slacks and black three inch heels made her seem powerful. Her outfit resembled a uniform and demanded respect. She did not smile as she held my hand close to her. "Well, Yadira was really disappointed yesterday," she said without blinking an eye as I became a happy observer. I had the best defense lawyer in the world on my side.

"Wow. She is a lovely girl," Mr. Silva admitted without hesitation.

"I am here because my daughter has been dancing folkloric dances since she was five years old and I don't quite understand why she was not selected. I know that my daughter is more than qualified for this activity. I want an explanation for your decision to disregard my daughter," my mother demanded with conviction. Mr. Silva was tapping his right foot under his desk and listened to my mother carefully.

"Well, I know that Yadira is qualified and believe me she is a great dancer. There is no doubt about that," he admitted. "Hum mmm!" he

mumbled, then waited a few seconds before beginning again, his brown eyes looking up at the ceiling, “I just wanted to be fair with other students, and I thought that since she was already in a dance team it wouldn’t be such a big deal to her. I also wanted to give the opportunity to students who are not involved in any activities in or outside of school. I understand that Yadira already participates in a community dance program,” he concluded as though he had found the right answer.

My mother suddenly let go of my hand, she then grabbed me by my shoulders and placed me right in front of her. “I don’t understand why a community event has to interfere with becoming involved with one in school. I thought you would be more than happy to have a professional dancer in your team, but if you wish we could bring it up at the parents’ school committee and have a vote on it.”

“That is not necessary, Mrs. Tovar, Yadira is welcomed to come on the team any time. So I’ll see you in ten minutes at practice,” Mr. Silva said turning to me.

I glared at him and put my arms around my mother’s waist. While walking towards the door, I looked back at Mr. Silva as he stared at me with no particular expression on his face. I then turned to hold my mother’s hand tightly, feeling confident that she was there and I knew Mr. Silva could not say anything to me then. My mother asked if I wanted to stay after school to practice. I refused because I felt Mr. Silva was going to retaliate against me in practice. I was afraid he would say something to me regarding this recent incident with my mother.

Regardless of my disappointments with Mr. Silva, he continued to be my teacher for the fourth, fifth, and part of the sixth grade until my mother requested to the principal to switch me to another class and a different teacher. Before leaving his class I always noticed he picked on students like Maria and me. “Repeat what you said in English, I don’t understand Spanglish,” he often said to us. Both of us had a really hard time speaking English and doing math. Both of us had Spanish-speaking parents and had just arrived in the U.S. a few months before. I had been here since I was five years old but my first language at home was Spanish. At school, teachers refrained from lecturing in Spanish. In my class there were many students like Maria and me. Take Jose, for example, he had

just enrolled in our class about a month and a half earlier; he always sat in the back and was quiet all the time. Mr. Silva never asked him for homework, nor to participate in any activity in the class. In fact, Jose was not even formally introduced on his first day of school.

There were also other students like me. I refused to ask questions regarding any subject that I did not understand partly because I was intimidated by Mr. Silva. Every time I wrote about anything and turned it in he would return my paper with a “C” or lower. He would then approach me, “You can’t write. Learn from your peers like Joanna.” Mr. Silva also pointed out other students that did poorly on their papers and read them out loud citing mistakes. “I told you several times to always use a capital letter when beginning a sentence. Is there something wrong with you?”

I was so afraid to write in Mr. Silva’s class. Granted, my English was not polished yet, it was weak, my vocabulary was not extensive and I had a Spanish accent when I spoke English. But I was not giving up yet though Mr. Silva would say, “Move to the left of the classroom” when he noticed a new student having difficulty with English. “The more intelligent students will be on the right side of the class.” Students that spoke English sat on the right side where they participated in all the classroom activities such as word games and raffles or drawings of tickets that Mr. Silva had for field trips to the zoo or the theater. I was one of the students that sat on the left side, which meant watching the other students play games and read assignments out loud. The left side received many silly assignments like filling in the blanks to an incomplete sentence such as “The bird \_\_\_\_\_ to the top of the tree.” I normally sat in class for hours before the bell rang for lunch. When I didn’t understand something I asked my friend Sandra who was more advanced than I and she always helped me complete my work. I missed various assignments many times because I was afraid to turn in what I wrote or at times would not write, thinking that I was going to be criticized by Mr. Silva in front of the whole classroom. As a child in his class I began to lose interest in math until I was too far behind to catch up. In high school I did not do well in math or English. In fact, I had no particular interest in any subject in school at that time.

When I was admitted to East Los Angeles College, I took the assess-

ment placement test and scored low in math and English. I was then placed in the second lowest possible English level class and the lowest level math class. As I moved up in both subjects, I took English 101 three times before passing the course. I spent hours sitting and brain storming for an essay and panicked in the process. I read my assignments twice, three times, and sometimes even four times before understanding the materials. No matter how hard I tried, in all the papers I turned in, I always received grades of “C” or lower. I did not blame Mr. Silva for my insecurity in school or for my academic failures until recently. I was more afraid of being criticized and ridiculed than getting an “F” in the class no matter where I went to school or who my teacher was. But I am proud I am beginning to overcome my phobias because I am able to write this paper on this very personal and emotional subject.

I decided to stop being afraid of writing and decided to let my creative imagination grow, create stories to be read and to tell my own story through what had been one of my biggest fears, writing. I want to be a lawyer someday. I know that being a lawyer requires advanced writing and reading as well as oral skills. I know that legalese is a language of its own. I know that lawyers argue over the meanings of words and come up with different definitions. I know I have to improve my skills even more. I have come a long way and I am not about to give up my dreams because of my elementary school memories that unconsciously have held me back. I will continue to learn, to write, to grow and someday I will write and publish bilingual children’s books to help other children like Maria and myself to learn English while at the same time teaching other students to speak and read Spanish. ■

*Yadira Tovar* | THE WOMEN OF JUAREZ

“La Llorona,” a woman in despair who has lost her children to the waters:  
the story is a myth, but many have heard it,  
she cries at night like the siren of an ambulance  
hoping to find her loved ones still breathing with a palpitating heart.

Here, where the mountains rise touching the blue cotton clouds  
and a June afternoon feels like being inside a cremator,  
where the red toenails have converted to ashes,  
this is where the myth comes to life.

In desperation for past failures,  
President Fox has hired Rudolph Goulianni to stop organized crime.  
And yet, remains of women’s flesh are daily found,  
flesh that has been hacked and sliced,  
layer by layer drying the body with dripping blood,  
blood of every scream unheard,  
a scream that howls of pain,  
a pain that reflects a hunter’s knife.

Mothers that search for their lost daughters in despair,  
with rivers of blood flowing from their eyes,  
they leave a trail of tears behind,  
screaming out their off spring’s names,  
they are the modern day real life version of “La Llorona”  
but nobody listens and nobody cares.

Cristina never came home last night,  
Twenty-one years old she was only,  
her missing person’s report is left alone,  
resting on a desk where five hundred other reports  
will suffer the same fate  
like the leaves of trees that feel a gradual death  
falling into the abyss where no one cares.

The naked land has no more plants  
and makes space for the unruffled women,  
the women that would be buried,  
cremated by their mothers, children, husbands,  
or even friends if they could find them,  
cremated without lungs or livers or other organs,  
cremated because they were slashed to death so cruelly  
that no one can recognize their shapes or forms,  
cremated so that others could breathe  
and have a chance at life.

The “Cartel” no longer invades like the Nile plague,  
poisoning with their bitter alkaloid,  
they are now like Mexican crows,  
eating the cornea of the corpse unclaimed,  
they take the smiles and leave the wounds  
to profit with money by trafficking  
with organs of the dead,  
“Las Mujerez De Juarez,” no one hears and no one cares.



SERGIO ARROYO

*Brian Vazquez.* | EMPTY BOTTLES

At fourteen she crosses the San Ysidro International border into the U.S.  
She cries, leaving behind the comfort of a world she knows.  
Now in Los Angeles she begins to look for comfort  
and finds it inside “caguama” bottles of cheap beer.

At eighteen she ends up at a textile factory near downtown.  
She learns to sew, sweat dripping she must sew,  
chaos from the machine around her roaring as she finishes  
garment after garment.  
She cries in front of her needle,  
“¿Porque no sirves?”  
She yells,  
“¡Estoy embarazada, necesito el dinero, porque soy tan tonta!”  
She must work harder now that she is eating for two.  
Clara Rosa Garcia, that’s what she names her daughter.  
Unmarried and alone, she struggles to make ends meet.

At twenty, still sewing, she’s moved up,  
she sews buttons,  
a penny a button.  
She counts the buttons by the hundreds,  
makes about \$175 a week,  
enough to pay the rent  
and buy a little comforting drink.

A few months later she gives birth to Brian Vazquez.  
From now on things will be easier, Brian’s father marries her.  
At her wedding she drinks a little more than usual,  
but no one notices.  
At twenty-five she gives birth to Axel Vazquez.

Now she is a PTA mom,  
the one who volunteers for everything at her son’s school.

She helps Axel with his homework.  
That's her baby.  
She does not want anything to go wrong with the way she raises him.  
"Axelito," that's what she calls him when she's drunk.

At twenty-nine,  
fifteen years have passed since she arrived to the U.S.  
It takes much more now to make her feel any comfort.

You see, she's my mom,  
and I am very proud of her.  
I am proud because almost thirty years after her arrival,  
she's been sober for about nine years.  
She thinks I don't know  
or that I don't care.  
But I do.



LEKA IM

*Michael Venegas* | INCOMPLETE

It's unbearable and yet, every day  
is incomplete. I've felt this many a times before,  
being the deck without a joker.  
A song without a dance, a prom devoid  
of dream and romance, and a voice  
without sound.  
A world lacking heroes,  
the I Love You  
in an unsent war memo.  
A religion without faith,  
yin without yang, good without evil  
and Death without his touch.  
An untold story, unmentioned emotions  
and words with no definitions.  
I'm a child without innocence,  
a son with his father,  
the moon in need of the sun,  
marriage in need of trust.  
And a person, without a love.

*Most don't know. Many don't care. Whether you care or not is entirely up to you, but not that long ago Superman died. Though I was an adult, in his eyes I would always be his son. I never thought I was going to be able to deal with the loss, but somehow, somehow, I am. This is only one step, but I truly believe that I will never be able to deal with it completely.*



IT'S A SAD REALITY WHEN MEMORIES BECOME STORIES BECAUSE it's then you realize that no more memories will be made. I always knew the day would come. I just never expected it so soon. Only three days before, we were fixing the house, putting up new doors because one door in the house was broken so we had to change all of them. Whether it was fixing doors or repairing a bathroom, painting a house, decorating the house for Halloween or Christmas, or my favorite—the \$300 mission impossible sneak runs we needed to do every Fourth of July since I was three years old because had mom found out then how much we spent she would have killed us both. Just like the last time we had Fourth of July we told mom that we only got about forty to sixty dollars in fireworks since everything fit into two or three small boxes. We'd always get them by themselves, never in prepackaged boxes because they never had your favorites, the cone ones that only Blockbuster Fireworks has or Killer Bees or only one of the monstrous fireworks. At each place we'd get three to four Killer Bees since they were the family favorite and a few others then the monsters. In all actuality, I think, we spent at least \$400 that last time because we went to five different places. Sure, we came home with a little by our standards, but we had the ones that lasted five to ten minutes each, and we had two of each. Even at the age of fifty-one you were still a little kid at heart, and working together was our thing, it's what we had. Every time I look at your tools I remember us working together, I always remember you telling me, "One day all these tools will be yours and your brother's." Then you would get back to work, stop and look back at me and say, "But that day is far away." I should have made you promise me every time I heard it because the day wasn't far away.

Only after you died did I learn so much about you. For that matter, I learned a lot about myself. I never realized the way you were bringing Sal and me up. You were teaching us to be better men. There were a few times when we were eating I would sometimes say I was still hungry and there was nothing left. You always gave me some of your food off of your plate. I always felt guilty that you would do that because I knew you had a hard day working construction. And eating off the wagon, you wanted to come home to mom's meals. Every time you did it you would always assure me, "A man always makes sure his family eats before he does." Then you would rub my shoulder, kiss the top of my head, even though I was eighteen years old. Trust me, dad, I won't ever forget.

It's only been two years since the day, and I'm sorry I haven't visited you. For that matter, I'm sorry I haven't even driven by. Seriously though, how did you do it? How did you drive by your parents' graves every weekend? In all honesty, I didn't even know they were buried in Resurrection Cemetery until after you died. Every Saturday you and mom would go to Manuel's across the street and eat breakfast. Every weekend you had to see their graves just by walking in. I can barely stand looking at Manuel's anymore. I can barely stand looking at the hospital where you died. Both keep reminding me of you. Can you please tell me how you dealt with it because there are times when I wonder if I can. Did you just not think about it? Did you just think about your sons? Did you think you had to show us the toughness of a man?

If that's true, then it worked. I know I've shed some tears once on the day of your funeral, but I don't know if I can handle it again. Hell, that's why I got into writing so much. It became a release, a way to forget those feelings. It's become my passion, everyday, all day I can only think about my next story. And somehow, in every story, you come through whether one of the characters has your strength, your courage, pride, loyalty, responsibility, or your anger, and temper. It's really the only way I can remember you now. Without looking into a picture, I can only vaguely remember your face, can only remember your mustache. I saw you every day for twenty-one years, and two years later I can't remember your face? What does that say about me?

Even as I write this, I can't remember any details vividly anymore.

The burial ceremony is the only thing. Sal gave the greatest description of you at the church, “He was a force of nature, literally,” and you were. You were given a job that was supposed to be over budget and over due, yet somehow somehow you saved GM motors a lot of money by finishing the building a month or two under deadline and still under budget. You were like a reverse hurricane, you went to Oltmans’ screw-up sites, and you somehow cleaned them up. Even at your burial ten full grown men still had trouble holding the casket. It wasn’t because you were fat or anything; in fact, you were probably about eighty percent muscle and still towering over us near six foot five. After working for so long in the sun, it seemed like you had a permanent tan with your brown face and arms. Everything else that was covered by the sun was dead white. Though I can barely remember vivid details other than that day, I still remember the attitude that you instilled into me.

I want to thank you for giving me my passion to read and write. When I was a kid you would always give me ten dollars a week for only comic books. You didn’t care which comics I got as long as I read. You would even read the one I got or the ones Sal got. You knew that eventually I would get tired of them and want to read something with more substance I bet the wallet wasn’t taking much of a hit once I started reading books. Now, I want to be, no, I will be an author of those books, be it with comics, novels, movies or TV, I will be a writer. It was you who taught me never to give up on your dream, never take no for an answer, especially when you got your superintendent position for Oltmans after starting as a construction worker, moving through the tiers until you got what you wanted. Every day I’m working on improving myself as you did, and ever since I knew that this is what I am going to be it’s become easier, even easier remembering you.

In all honesty, though, I don’t think you’re there, at the grave that is. In fact, I know you’re not there. You were never one of those people that just sat around on your ass waiting for something to happen. I only hope that one of those things that you’re doing is watching over me because though I’m growing older, I still want my father. Who’s going to teach me now to be a better man than I was before?

Why was it I learned so much about you only after you died? Was it

because I didn't ask you, or was it because you didn't want me to know? Come to think of it the only thing I knew before you died was that Sal and I were your sons. You proposed to mom less than a week after you guys met. You were always proud that you were a part of the First Airborne Cavalry in Vietnam. But after you died, I started hearing all the horror stories of your job and some of the things you went through in Vietnam, like your bronze star and two purple hearts. How you were shot two times and had scrap metal from a grenade lodged into your head, and even after that you still went out to fight alongside your brothers in arms. Or when you had rebar falling on you a couple of times at work, or when you slipped off of a steel support beam and your friend saved you and so many others just from your job. I can only guess as to why you didn't tell me, us—mom, Sal, and me—anything was because you didn't want us to worry about you. You wanted us to be able to sleep easier at night, and I thank you for that because had I known then what I know now I would have been calling you every hour just to make sure you were safe.

Even as I write this I still don't know how to express the feelings, the memories. There are just far too many, too many for words to even comprehend. To this day, I still hold my tears back. "Why is that?" you may ask. I wish I knew.

It's a pity really, I've become a cliché. You know that saying, "You don't know what you have until it's gone." Well, it's true, I can't believe you had to die in order for me to realize it, and for that I hate myself. You told me at our last Thanksgiving that you had realized what you had with your father only after his death. I wish now I would have followed your advice because unlike Sal I was never able to say, "I'm sorry for being a little asshole growing up." I only hope you know that I truly am, and I AM proud to say you were my father.

I hope you read this, dad, because I miss you. ■

*Teresa Jennifer Venegas* | THE REMOTE CONTROL

The remote control  
filthy with cheesy Cheeto dust.  
Eyes become fixed upon images flashing across  
the entertainment center.  
1 through 9, plus 0  
channel up or channel down  
volume up or volume down.  
Ears ring with  
“It is our duty to free the Iraqi people,  
we must protect America.”  
A twitch in the body,  
as Saddam’s statue falls.  
“Four more soldiers have died today,”  
eyelids flicker and an eyebrow rises.  
The hand without the remote control  
reaches into the Cheeto bag.  
Taste buds come alive as  
Britney Spears is married  
in a Las Vegas chapel, then quickly has the marriage annulled.  
“No weapons of mass destruction, but  
now on to why Ben and Jen call it quits.”

FIVE P.M. ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON AND HERE I SIT ON the living room love seat watching *True Life: Arrested for DUI*. My photography class starts at 6:40, but today, I have no film to develop or photos to print, so there is no sense in attending the class. As I begin to unlace my black All Star Converse, the loud beeping sound of my father's yellow Durham school bus echoes through the street as it reverses into a parked position in front of our mint green East Los Angeles home. It takes him a few minutes to check all the seats, make sure all the belts for the wheelchairs are properly working, log all this information into his Durham log sheet, turn the bus off and lock it up. As I sit on the love seat with bare feet reclined on the arm rest, he enters the room with his black Durham jacket in hand, wearing faded black pants and blue Durham work shirt. His eyes are slightly bloodshot and tender from a long day at work. When my younger brother was two years old, he could never pronounce the "re" in Teresa. My father has called me "Tesa" ever since. "Hi my Tesa," he stutters, surprised at my presence, "shouldn't you be in class?" I roll my eyes then answer, "No daddy, no class today." As he exits the living room, I see the tension in his forehead as he reaches down for his right knee, "Why don't you go see a doctor about your arthritis?" He responds with a grunt and makes his way to the kitchen.

My mother is in the bedroom my older sister and I share. She is reclined on my sister's bed with head in hand watching the evening news on channel 4: "Breaking news, there is a high speed chase in progress in the city of Los Angeles. The driver is believed to be under the influence of alcohol." My black multicolored tabby cat is sleeping on my bed in a jungle of blankets, books and clothes. From where my mother sits, she has a clear view of my father as he enters the kitchen. He drapes his Durham jacket over one of the kitchen chairs and flicks the light switch bringing more light into a dimming room. She hears the clank of salsa and soy sauce bottles as he opens the refrigerator door. He then reaches in for a Bud Light tall can left over from the night before. "I washed your work shirts today," my mother announces as she watches him tower over the refrigerator door with beer in hand. He pops open the can and takes

a sip. From where I sit, I can hear him grunt in response to my mother's announcement and it is then that he retreats to the white plastic chair that sits on our front porch littered with cigarette butts and beer cans from days and weeks before.

Our house sits on top of a hill overlooking the city of Los Angeles as it disappears into the smog. Perhaps he smokes and drinks on the porch because he enjoys the view. Whatever the reason, the porch has become my father's sanctuary of forbidden pleasures. The porch is the only place no one can complain about the smoke or continuously ask the forbidden question, "Why do you drink so much?" I'm not exactly sure why or when he started drinking every single day, but whenever the forbidden question rolls off my tongue and spits from my lips, he rolls his eyes like a teenage diva and proceeds to explain how much his "goddamn fucking knees hurt." When I sit in my room with the forbidden question creating knots in my head, I begin to wonder about the unspoken pain in my father's heart. When I close my eyes and think about when he started drinking every day, I think about the recent trauma of his brother's death. I think the Bud Light gives him an excuse not to talk about Uncle Sal. Then I realize that his drinking started long before my uncle's death.

One night when I was about twelve years old, my father came home from work very late. The sound of metal crashing against metal shook our family and the entire neighborhood from the comfort of our homes. When I opened the front door, I could see my father in his white station wagon, hanging out of the driver's side window screaming an invitation to my neighbor Anthony, "ANTHONY!...Let's go to the nudie bar... aahah hah hah!" Anthony was only one year older than I and there he stood at the driver's side door laughing and encouraging my father's childish behavior, "Hey Herman, let's go get fucked up" to which my father responded, "Get in the car, get in the car, let's go to the nudie bar."

Seeing that my father was intoxicated and repeatedly crashing into the parked car in front of him, my sister ran outside from behind me and tried to get my father out of the car. "DAD STOP! Let me park the car." I slowly walked down the stairs from our front porch into the street. My hands were numb as I watched my father reverse and crash into the parked car a third time. My eyes were glued on my father as his left arm

dangled from out the car window. He laughed at everyone trying to talk him out of the car. The volume on the radio was up full blast and tuned to his favorite radio station, Arrow 93, “the best classic rock in Southern California.” The dark night soon grew silent as I began to realize that my daddy was a drunk.

Once he is done with his first beer, which is the last beer in the refrigerator, he comes back into the house and asks me if he can borrow my car to buy more beer. The image of a mangled Toyota Corolla on the television screen becomes fixed on the forehead of my brain. Back when my father was employed at the Gilmore Envelope Corporation, he would visit the bar three blocks from the company after work. After a few beers, he would drive home drunk just as he did the night I saw my father for what he really was. The voice of a young girl from the television, weeping over the death of her best friend to a drunk driver repeats in my head like a broken record, “Why...why her? She never hurt anyone...why? I don’t understand.” Driving under the influence was not treated as the serious crime it is today in the twenty-first century. A twenty-two year old by the name of Kristy visits her probation officer for the first time. One crazy night at a club turned into a crash into the back of a bus and Kristy in handcuffs, “aaagghh, man this sucks.” As my father waits for my response, I think to myself, he’s only had one beer. It takes a lot more alcohol to make my father drunk. If he doesn’t get his beer, I’ll have to listen to him bitch and complain about not getting his beer. If I don’t lend him my car, he’ll walk to the Plaza Market down City Terrace Drive where City Terrace gang members are known to terrorize the community by hiding behind 9mm semi-automatic handguns. With my eyes fixed on the screen, I point to the keys that sit on the dinner tray in front of me. I hear the start of the engine and the pitter patter of the motor as it drives down City Terrace Dr. to the Plaza Market where he buys seven Bud Light tall cans, six for today and one for tomorrow. ■

*Teresa Jennifer Venegas* | I HAVE WANTED A STRONG  
MOTHER

I have wanted to carry you on my shoulders,  
break down the steel gates of your mind,  
shower you with hours of admiration,  
mangle the faces of those who said you were slow.

I have wanted a mother with still hands,  
a mother with the claws of a tiger.

I have wanted a mother who would scream,  
a mother who would fight,  
a mother with an iron fist,  
a fist that could snap the leather belt from the waist of the monster.

I have wanted a father with smoke free lungs,  
a father who would never poison the lungs of his children,  
a father who would never raise a closed fist to a woman,  
a father who would never bring tears to the eyes of his children.

I have wanted  
a father who would never use a leather belt to make his point.

I have wanted a strong mother.

I HAVE LIVED ON COMLY STREET ALL MY LIFE. TWENTY THREE years with the same view to look out upon, the same faces and the same incline to climb. From our dining room window, on a clear day, we have a beautiful view of the Hollywood hills. From my front porch, at the bottom of my street, I can see the playground of the school I attended as a child. I can remember walking up the incline of my street as I returned home from school five days out of the week. Twenty-three years and I have accomplished so much.

It has taken so much of my energy to fight the stereotypes of being a product of East Los Angeles. Yes, I am a twenty-three year old female with a high school diploma and a Liberal Arts Degree. I did not give into the urges of my body and have children at a young age. None of the members of my extended family fell into the death trap of gang life. My family is made up of college graduates from schools like East Los Angeles College, California State University Los Angeles, and the University of Southern California. We are the true products of Los Angeles, smart and intelligent Mexican-Americans, ready to challenge the world.

I feel as though I have to prove myself to my family, to my community, to my city, to my country, but most importantly, to myself. I was gifted with many artistic talents. I am able to place what I see in the world and transfer it onto a piece of paper with a single piece of charcoal. I can paint a scene with the keys of my keyboard. I can use the lens of my camera to make the world see what it does not want to see. I am a master of the creative process but the world doesn't know it yet. My time will come and when it does, my films will serve as an information center for smart and intelligent Mexican-American females like myself. I want my films to reveal the true products of Los Angeles, the rich culture of my people, and to shine light onto the discrimination many Mexican-American generations have had to endure. Filmmaking is my calling, and with each goal I accomplish, I get a little closer to fulfilling my dream. ■

*Christopher Makoto Yee* | THESE SPRING DAYS

These spring days  
I am louder than a finch  
chirping from far before dawn  
until dusk

    a cherry blossom tree  
full to the brim with petals  
that waft down  
with each passing warm breeze.

    The near-summer sun  
even brightens the rows of  
Chinese shops and restaurants  
    filled with people pushing  
and ignoring one another.

I can still see the Buddhist temple  
before the obon when the sun sets  
and bright lights appear overhead  
    with food and game booths below.

I could swear I was there in Kyoto,  
with all of the other courtiers, dancing  
to the sounds of taiko drums and koto,  
    or in a little town in China  
helping out in the fields in daylight,  
drinking and forgetting the emptiness later.

I am the meeting place of many cultures,  
an intricate mural  
of the ever-changing landscape  
that this world has become,  
painting me  
    colors of you.

*Christopher Makoto Yee* | EVERY DAY

The sun comes up over Monterey Park,  
the day starts anew with people bustling.  
Hondas and Toyotas have near-crashes,  
pedestrians fill the streets and storefronts,  
so begins the day, they are the lifeblood.  
The corona peaks, restaurants come alive,  
kids skip lunch to play at recess longer.  
Then school bells ring, store doors close for the day.  
The sun moves farther from this point on earth.  
Bus stops crowd with weary homebound workers.  
Cars come closer to crashing in the dark,  
with pedestrians out of mind, in danger.  
Angry eyes cross paths, horns blare, gestures fly,  
this is the daily routine; is this life?

*Christopher Makoto Yee* | MY CONFLICT WITH COFFEE

How do you take your coffee?

Do you even like coffee?

Do you want me to know

whether or not you like coffee?

I know you like tea,

but tea isn't coffee.

Maybe one day I'll ask you.

We could imagine we're at your  
favorite little Parisian café  
at a table meant only for two  
sitting across from one another,  
eyes fixed in a helpless gaze  
as I push thin black wisps out of your face  
while you caress my hand like  
a warm, gentle breeze passing across,  
when a waitress comes by to take our order,  
to whom I say with a smile, "This is the  
woman I love, she'll have café au lait."

But first I'd have to ask.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

REBECCA C. CAMPOS was born in East Los Angeles and grew up in the surrounding areas. Her connection with ELAC goes back to the days when she was a young girl living near by and exploring the Swim Stadium's construction site. She also looked up books of poetry in the old library card catalog drawers. Rebecca, currently finishing up transfer classes, plans on attending Cal State L.A. and earning a degree in Art Education. Rebecca's heart belongs to her mother Dolores, best friend and sister Maggie, husband Joe, adult children Jacob, Amarina, Elisa, and Joseph; father Albert and, most importantly, her love of every aspect of the learning process and the journey that it encompasses.

ERIK CARRILLO is a person who is confident in himself because he knows what he wants and seeks after it stubbornly. He has a good balance in all aspects of his life as he is an open-minded, well-rounded person who achieves positive results by having a sense of humor, parallel to not losing his sense of worth as a person. There is never a time when he is discouraged about his goals of achieving an educated success in English, for he is dedicated towards achieving his own beneficial level of satisfaction in life.

LEANDRO G. CHAYRA expressed a high level of anxiety as to what feelings or memories might surface in English 127, Creative Writing. Images of the Iraq war permeated the airwaves as his anxiety level grew, but shortly after sitting down to write, the floodgates opened and he was overwhelmed by memories and emotions of a war locked away in the recesses of his mind for over a decade. Leandro was born and raised in Boyle Heights then joined the Marine Corps as an infantry squad leader. His travels took him from the frozen Bearing Straights to the mountains of South Korea and then to the blistering heat of the Middle East, where he served in a forward infantry unit during the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War. About the current war, he states, "As we are now faced with a war in its third generation and can reach to every corner of the world, I wonder if we really have grown as human beings and how many bodies is it going to take to finally treat all human beings as people and provide them with the three basic requirements all people need: work, education and recreation, or are we going to spend this next century treating each other as cannon fodder as we did in the previous one?"

JUAN CARLOS FLORES, raised in East Los Angeles, is proud to be among the first in his family to attend college. Although he is not yet certain of what university he wants to transfer to, one thing is for sure: wherever he goes, he will not have gotten there without the help of the Puente Project. As a prodigy of a typical Mexican family, he was no stranger to the dangerous streets of East LA. Many

obstacles and perils have been placed in his way, but refusing to subside to the injustices of a growing society, he has conquered them all, proving once again to his peers, family members, and anyone else who looks down his shoulder that César Chavez was not crazy when he said “Sí se puede.” He plans to one day be a Mechanical Engineer, so that one day he can also inspire other young Chicanos to be all that they can be.

CHRISTINE GUERRERO has hopes of transferring to a four-year school soon. She wrote “Its Too Late” after talking to an old high school friend. Christine felt that the world needs to know abuse is not acceptable to ignore. She has been writing for a few years now and this is her first poem published. She hopes to continue writing and making the public aware of issues that need to be addressed.

ASHFORD KNEITEL has been rhyming for as long as he can remember. From high school freestyle battles to poems, his writing inspirations come from the current day and age we are living in. He welcomes anyone who wants to talk about poems and rhyming. E-mail Ashford at Mib405@aol.com.

LOUISE LEFTOFF, born in Alhambra and raised in Los Angeles, is a third-generation California native who believes there is much to be gained from the diversity of living in a multi-cultural location. Her love of reading from a very early age and some encouragement from her English teacher, Carol Lem, led her to discover the joys and frustrations of writing. She now finds herself mature enough to better appreciate the life lessons learned from her grandmother and mother, and she makes every effort to pass them along to her grandchildren. She has found that writing poetry helps her to express and better understand her relationships with her family and appreciate the fact that her granddaughters seem to enjoy her poetry, particularly when they see themselves in the results. She earned her Certified Legal Assistant certificate at California State University at Los Angeles and works as a paralegal at a law firm in downtown Los Angeles.

CAROL LEM has recently published poems in *The Chrysalis Reader Rattle*, *Red Rock Review*, and *Runes*. A reading of selected poems from her current book, *Shadow of the Plum*, may be heard on her CD, *Shadow of the Bamboo*, with music by Masakazu Yoshizawa. Lem says, “Poetry reflects an interior landscape shaped by the influences on my life: growing up Chinese American, the 1960s, playing the shakuhachi, a Japanese bamboo flute; teaching and writing. The transforming power of poetry creates order out of chaos, acceptance out of grief and loss. Poetry is a redemptive process.” Ms. Lem has been an instructor in the English Department since 1977. Her website is [www.carollem.com](http://www.carollem.com).

RUBEN LOPEZ was born and raised in East Los Angeles. This is what he has to say about his writings in this issue: "This is my second appearance in Milestone. "A Taste of Sorrow" and "Epoch" are pieces that were written out of sadness. They come out of mourning over the recent passing of my parents; they come from my heart. My future is to be a fingerprint classification expert. Trying to restart my life after a terrible accident, I was pleased to find out that four of my pieces were accepted. I hope to have my own book in the future but only time will tell."

STEPHANIE LUEVANO is really God come back for a small vacation. Not wanting to attract too much attention, she is disguised as a quiet, mild-mannered, somewhat insane, twenty-three year old girl who was the second-born of an Irish/German mother and Hispanic father, and raised in the Far East...of Los Angeles, along with one older sister, one younger, and more pets and cousins than you can shake a chicken at. She currently resides in Boyle Heights with her faithful dog, Cookie; grumpy turtle, Joon-Joon; mother, and a few great aunts, regular aunts, uncles, and cousins, the number varying day by day.

KAREEM MENJIVAR was born and raised in Huntington Park. As he was growing up, his father said to him that hard work pays off at the end. Kareem took his father's advice and worked hard throughout school and life. He has never had it easy because his parents made him earn everything he owns. As Kareem goes through life, he believes that he has no limits and he is second to none.

DOMINGO MERCADO was born on a Sunday afternoon in 1982. Domingo has been in love and Domingo has stared down the barrel of a gun; he didn't flinch as the gun kissed his chin. He believes in ghosts and considers himself to be very "spiritual." Domingo loves to sleep as much as he loves to smile. Domingo has tired of writing about himself. He looks forward to writing about life as much as he someday hopes to...

ADRIANA MICHEL is a twenty-one year old transfer student at East Los Angeles College planning a career in Fashion Design. As she ages in this period of young adulthood her life is opening new doors and letting out old skeletons. She no longer feels the need to lie as she did as a child for she feels there is no reason for her anymore to run away from the truth even if it's unbearable. She believes that everyone gets different lessons in life and her lessons are finally being understood. By this time in her life she knows that all that she loves is not forever. She once heard her mother admit that one day we all will die; she always knew it was true but to have her mother admit that to her was almost a surreal slap of reality across her face. Life is no longer sugar coated as it was when she was a child. Yet the spirit of who she was as a child has only gotten younger with age, for she

knows that she is here until death takes her and she is gone forever. But while she is here she wishes to experience all the lessons life has to offer.

JESUS NAVARRO, JR. grew up in South Central Los Angeles. His ghetto experience left him feeling powerless and alienated. Through the written form he has found solace and a sense of empowerment. He believes that “literature is a wonderful forum to explore and critically analyze the human condition. In general, people experience deviant thoughts and emotions but never voice them. A writer has the capacity to incorporate these sentiments into his craft and produce a universal theme. A good writer is fearless and willing to push the societal envelope.” Additionally, his short story “Show Time” highlights the fact that all art is thematic, even an instrumental musical piece. Jesus dedicates this fable to his parents and Sandra, who have all supported his literary ambition.

BOB NOZ has this to say about himself and his writing: “While on my way to a Masters in Creative Writing, Cal-State LA’s English Department told me I had to get a second BA in English. My first one was in Psychology from UCLA (’75). Then, while on my way to that BA in English—only three courses left—I ended up postponing my life to take care of my now ninety three year old mother who has a slow growing breast cancer, congestive heart failure, an inefficient heart (cardiomyopathy), and lately, moderately advanced Alzheimer’s. I take classes at ELAC not only to break up the monotony of the role of Primary Caretaker but also to be able to resume my academic goals at some future point. As my mother’s life changes for the worse, I find myself constantly parent-challenged, that is, not only solving the problems her newer disabilities create, but also having to deal with the old nemesis of our mother’s dysfunctionalism, which translates into relational inadequacies that have always caused turmoil in my own life as well as that of my siblings. It’s the kind of stuff that can inspire poems, stories and/or screenplays: the genres of this semester’s English 127 efforts. My attempts have taught me that the form—of a poem, story or screenplay—is as important as its content. Today, I understand that better and I think I have a good start on a screenplay, which I will continue to refine.”

THANHTHUONG NGUYEN is currently a student at Pasadena City College, majoring in Nursing. She will transfer to California State University Los Angeles in Fall 2005. She took ESL classes at ELAC because she wanted to improve her writing skills. The classes here presented her with a chance to write “The Chasm: Father and Son.”

NANCY LORENA PEREZ was born in Hollywood, California of Mexican parents. As a result, she eats lots of tortillas and chili. Originally a Spanish poem writer,

who will not call herself a poet since she is still in the learning process, she enjoys listening to the romance of jazz, especially Frank Sinatra, read and write in the presence of calm trees, dark starry nights, or in local parks, or just on her porch. A fan of Robert Frost's allegories, E.E. Cummings' views on conformity and Henry David Thoreau's Transcendentalist thoughts, Nancy's poems speak about individual freedom, allegories about life, and the diverse struggles to keeping the human spirit alive. But mainly they deal with the fascinating topic of love, its beautiful simplicities and complex effects on human emotion, its fingers caressing beating hearts or its dancing eyes. Nancy's goal is to attend USC and finish with a Masters or PhD in creative writing, poetry, and Spanish and English literature, but she recognizes that without true love "You are no one."

ROBERT SGROI is an eighteen year old high school graduate, who has been attending East Los Angeles College for two years and is currently working towards his AA degree. He also wants to be an author and has started his first of three books in a series he is writing.

BENITO RUSTIC SOLIS is "just another skater from Alhambra." He works in music and rides BMX bicycles on ramps. He's managed to maintain a self-employed existence in the music and skateboard industries. Working in an industry with such loose boundaries has allowed him to define his own terms with the world, "I won't work a slave-wage job. I won't contribute to the continuing segregation and separation of the classes. I'll make it, or I won't, but I'll not live by the inequitable rules of the current society."

A true California son, the son of a former lawyer turned high school teacher and a Cal-State Los Angeles professor, Benito is the cultural result of the 90s and the entrepreneurial and artistic freedoms that his family allowed him to explore: music, skateboarding, fashion, entertainment, and art.

Benito plans to write about the multicultural life he led in the Alhambra suburbs, "There's something so beautiful about this whole area to me; I love how the tree-lined hilltops overlook graffiti covered boulevards. There's an entire generation of kids who've experienced the same things I did in Alhambra, Highland Park, South Pasadena; so hopefully, some of the things I write about will touch people and remind them that this isn't just 'someplace to move away from.' There are various subcultures that are unique to this place. I'd like to document them in some way, so that future generations of 'Fresh Kids' can learn to harness the creative energy that exists here...the art that lives here."

KHAMBERLIE TA-ACA spent most of his childhood in the Philippines and moved to the United States by the second grade. He has put a great effort into learning a new language as quickly as possible, and ever since, he has been in a

constant struggle to catch up to his expected English level. Now, at the discovery age of nineteen, he is extremely happy to be part of this year's *Milestone* because it gives him justification that he is doing something right. His poetry is a reflection of his initial experiences like first love, first heartbreak, first mockery, etc. In this theme of "first," this is his first attempt to write poetry and he is delighted to be recognized for his efforts.

YADIRA TOVAR was born in Juarez, Mexico, attended school and college in East Los Angeles. Ms. Tovar has championed for respect and dignity of each and every individual. She feels thirst for intellectual and spiritual growth. Ms. Tovar has chosen to be a lawyer, a district attorney, a judge and a member of Congress. She will be attending Cal State Long Beach. Her undergraduate major is political science. It took Ms. Tovar years and years to finally overcome her fear of writing and hopes her writing becomes an inspiration to others.

MICHAEL FRANCISCO VENEGAS, twenty-three years old, has been attending East Los Angeles College for four years. During his time here, he feels that he's one of the few lucky ones that has found his passion. Writing, he says, is a release, an escape from the real world. Though he is looking to stay another year, he feels that it is right for him, as he can truly work on his craft. Starting in Fall 2004, he will join the ranks of other news writers when he becomes part of the Campus News staff. What can I say, I love telling stories, whether they happen in real life and I report them, or make them up. Campus News will be another step, another milestone in my journey to discovering myself.

TERESA JENNIFER VENEGAS was born and raised in East Los Angeles. After graduating from high school, she spent two years at Pasadena City College studying art, then transferred to East Los Angeles College where she completed her general education requirements. She played on the 2003 Women's Soccer team and after two years at East Los Angeles College graduated with her first degree in Liberal Arts on June 4, 2004. She began writing poetry in high school. Since then, she has used writing as an outlet to express her emotions and deepest thoughts about different issues in her life and around the world.

BRIAN VAZQUEZ grew up as an honor role student at Suva Intermediate in Bell Gardens/Commerce, California. However, in the seventh grade, he dropped out to join the neighborhood gang. After spending two years in and out of Central Juvenile Hall, he was released at sixteen. On different occasions he was shot, stabbed, as well as beaten to the point of death with a steel bar. At eighteen he found himself in the Los Angeles County Jail for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In jail, Brian lived up to its expectations and played the role of a thug,

but inside his mind he began to reflect on his way of life and made the decision to walk away from the gang life. At twenty-six, after five years at East Los Angeles College, he was assigned to write a poem, the first one he ever wrote for someone's evaluation. He chose to write about his mother as a mother's day present. "Empty Bottles" was inspired by a conversation he had with her about her life.

CHRISTOPHER MAKOTO YEE is a former-engineering-turned English major who just finished his first year at East Los Angeles College. He has lived in Monterey Park since he was three and feels very much at home considering he is half Chinese, half Japanese, and speaks English only (the four years of Spanish at Mark Keppel had very little effect).

