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CCWRITER

**MAGAZINE OF CREATIVE NONFICTION,
SHORT STORIES, POETRY AND ART**

SUMMER 2006

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NORTH LAKE COLLEGE CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM**

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CONTENTS

SHORT STORIES

| | | |
|--|----|------------------------|
| A Simple Misunderstanding | 5 | Liese Sherwood - Fabre |
| Debtor's Drama | 10 | Laura Breaux |
| My Grandmother's Necklace | 12 | Angela E. Vernon |
| Uncle Joe's Hobby | 14 | Sarah Steinbach |
| The Hitchhikers | 16 | Thomas J. McMahon |
| The Mobster and the Musician | 19 | June Pratt |
| The Professional | 23 | Shawn Livengood |
| My Name is Froggy Layton | 26 | Lucien René Nanton |
| Thanksgiving Breakfast | 31 | Bryan Cepak |
| Lou Krump and the Case of the Zombie Plant | 34 | Brian Oi |
| The New Old West | 37 | Thomas J. McMahon |
| Mrs. Hansby's Cats | 41 | Sarah Steinbach |
| A Bundle of Joy | 44 | Shawn Livengood |
| The Gypsy and the Butterfly | 45 | Liese Sherwood - Fabre |

ESSAYS

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| How I Ended Up on Welfare at Age Six | 8 | Shawn Livengood |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------|

POETRY

| | | |
|--------------------------------|----|------------------------|
| Five Eyes | 4 | D. Scott Curry |
| Einstein | 22 | D. Scott Curry |
| A Lesson In Tolerance | 24 | D. Scott Curry |
| The Army That Is the Ocean | 30 | Erik Montenegro |
| A Sacred Feast | 33 | D. Scott Curry |
| William Carlos Williams | 36 | Larry Koebernick |
| Atalanta and the Golden Apples | 38 | Bonnie McClellan-Swank |
| Another Runaway | 40 | D. Scott Curry |

PHOTOGRAPHY & ART

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| 3 <i>Seeing Sienna</i> , LaDonna Larsen-Bauer | 21 <i>In Orange Light</i> , Casey Chung | 35 <i>Dancing Skeleton</i> , Mark Dungan |
| 4 <i>iContrast</i> , Matt Fields | 22 <i>Mask</i> , Trey Mitchell | 36 <i>Concentration</i> , Jennifer Ciaccio |
| 5 <i>Dew You See Me?</i> , Teena Kabetzke | 23 <i>Hand It Over Now</i> , Pat Sutterfield | 37 <i>Night Life</i> , Les Crader |
| 6 <i>Pink Ballerina</i> , Casey Chung | 24 <i>Romeo is Bleeding</i> , Ladonna Larsen-Bauer | 39 <i>Eye Told You</i> , Junko Otsu |
| 9 <i>Tricycle</i> , Mark Schambura | 27 <i>Breaking Through</i> , Monica Winters | 40 <i>Women Free</i> , Richard Widener |
| 11 <i>Chapter 7</i> , Teena Kabetzke | 28 <i>Verdant Symphony</i> , J. L. Hunter | 41 <i>Cat Eyes</i> , Marina Mozhayeva |
| 12 <i>John's Window</i> , Shirley Griffin | 29 <i>Sun</i> , Parul Sharma | 42 <i>Modigliani Fusion</i> , Marina Mozhayeva |
| 13 <i>Connections</i> , J.L. Hunter | 30 <i>Seascape</i> , Parul Sharma | 43 <i>Closet Owl</i> , Chiharu Soeda |
| 15 <i>Coyote</i> , Song Guoning | 32 <i>My Favorites</i> , Junko Otsu | 44 <i>In Grandpa's Eyes</i> , Teena Kabetzke |
| 17 <i>Loneliness</i> , Kapil Dixit | 33 <i>Crimson Dreams</i> , Patricia Lambert | 45 <i>She Disagrees</i> , Patricia Lambert |
| 18 <i>If Only</i> , Lisa Boone-Arellano | 34 <i>Spanish Harlem: 2:30 a.m.</i> , Richard Sharum | 47 <i>Lips</i> , Jennifer Ciaccio |

FIVE EYES

By D. Scott Curry



iContrast, Mixed Media Collage, by Matt Fields

Five eyes
peer from woody darkness:
I am not alone
tonight.

Wet wood
on my campfire exhales
heavily, silently censuring
the forest.

Five eyes
peer from woody darkness:
two raccoons root through
the leaves.

Firelight
shines in four wild
eyes – I am not
alone.

Five eyes
peer from woody darkness:
Slowly my fire dies
to coals.

God's eye
floats across the starry
sky: tonight, I'm not
alone. **CCW**

A Simple Misunderstanding

By Liese Sherwood-Fabre



“Do you have a book on poisons?” a man asked. I turned from my computer screen to see a tanned middle-aged man resting his arms on the reference desk counter. A gardener, maybe? “Several,” I said, starting the computer’s database search. “It’s for...?” “An animal. It needs to be colorless, odorless, not detectable by most forensics tests.”

I stopped typing and stared at him. *He doesn’t look like a murderer.* His cleft chin and sandy hair made him look more like an actor.

As if he read my thoughts, he smiled. “I’m a writer. Name’s Leonard Kensington.”

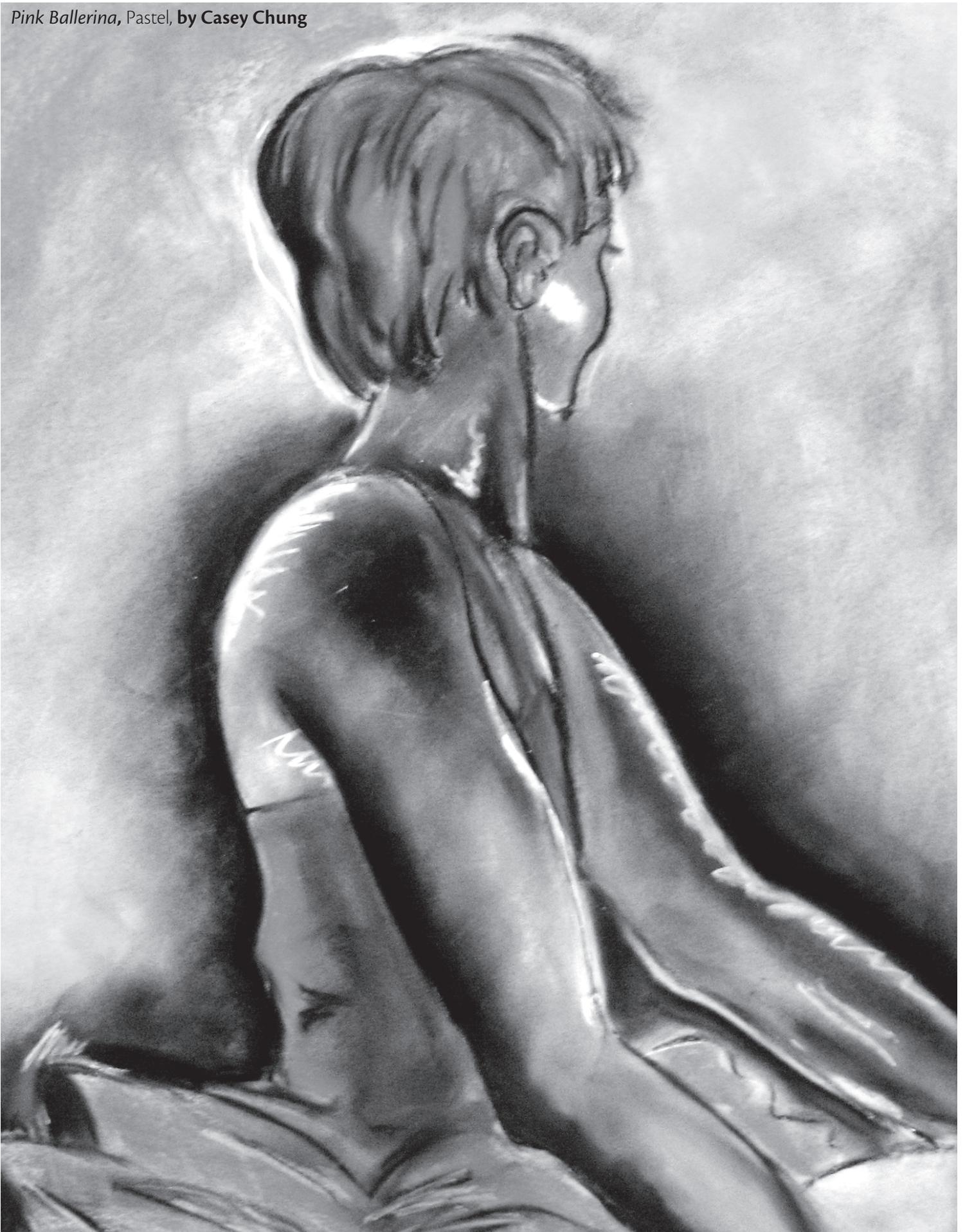
My mouth fell open. “*The Leonard Kensington?* I’ve read all your books.” I reached over the counter. “Alicia Chandler. What’re you doing here?”

“At the moment, research.”

I returned to my keyboard. “There’s a long list here.”

Dew You See Me?, Acrylic, by Teena Kabetzke

Pink Ballerina, Pastel, by Casey Chung





I stared at its cover for a full minute, debating my next move. My divorce was final six months ago, but I still found it hard to think of myself as free to do as I pleased.



He stepped behind me and studied the screen. I caught a whiff of his cologne, something woody. He pointed to one title. "What about this one?"

"We don't have it."

He sighed, rippling the small hairs on the back of my neck that had fallen out of my ponytail. I glanced back at him. "But we can request it from another library."

"Perfect. I'll leave you my phone and address so you can contact me when it comes in."

We chatted a few more minutes about what there was to do in the area.

"We'll be performing *My Fair Lady* in a few weeks at the local playhouse. I'm in the cast," I said, feeling my cheeks warm. One of my resolutions after my divorce was to pursue my singing, something my ex-husband hadn't approved of.

"Eliza?"

"No. Just the chorus."

"Where can I get tickets?"

"I can give you some when you pick up your book, Mr. Kensington."

"Please, Len. It's a date, then."

A girl of about ten came up to the desk asking about plants. Len straightened himself. "Ms. Chandler'll help you. She's already been a big help to me." With a wave of his hand, he walked toward the exit.

The book came a day early.

I stared at its cover for a full minute, debating my next move. My divorce was final six months ago, but I still found it hard to think of myself as free to do as I pleased. Joining the community theater group had been the most daring thing I'd done since my separation. Len, however, seemed genuinely interested in me. After a further minute's hesitation, I dialed his number.

"Len? Your book arrived."

He sighed into my ear. "I don't have time to pick it up today."

"You're on my way home. I could drop it off."

"Could you? I'd be eternally in your debt."

I slipped the book in my bag next to the book of tickets I was to sell for my theater group.

At Len's address, a six-year-old boy answered the door. His cleft chin was an exact replica of Len's; his hair, sandy like Len's, but curly.

Already knowing the answer, I asked. "Does Leonard Kensington live here?"

He nodded.

I shifted on my feet. "I brought him a book he needed from the library. Could you give it to him?"

He took the book and asked, "You want to come in? See my mom?"

"No thanks. Just make sure he gets the book."

I turned and heard the door shut behind me. Once back in the car, I forced myself to take deep breaths. My exchange with Len's... Mr. Kensington's... son had the same effect as a glass of cold water in the face. I shook my head. I'd mistaken his friendliness for something more.

You'll meet eligible men. Just be patient and focus on your own interests for now.

With the musical scheduled to begin in a week, extra rehearsals pushed everything, including Leonard Kensington, from my thoughts. I even misplaced a whole book of tickets.

Opening night, however, all my thoughts returned.

I stepped onto the stage with the rest of the chorus and almost dropped my fruit seller's basket. Leonard sat in the middle of the second row. On one side of him was the boy who'd met me at the door and on the other, a woman with curly hair just like the boy's.

The man playing the street sweeper, barely missing me with his broom, hissed at me under his breath. "Alicia, move."

I stumbled forward, recovered for the rest of the number, and finished the play on automatic pilot.

Afterwards, I hung back as the rest of the cast left for an opening-night party, ashamed of my performance and how poorly I had misread one brief encounter. The stage and theater were dark when I finally pushed open the back stage door and stopped dead in my tracks for the second time that night.

Leonard Kensington leaned on the railing outside the stage door.

I shivered in spite of the warm evening. *You're an actress. Act.*

Straightening my back, I pasted on a smile, which wavered when he pulled a bouquet from behind his back.

"Congratulations."

I stared at the flowers. "Thanks."

He dropped his gaze to his shoes before shifting it back to me. "And thanks for all the tickets. I was able to bring my sister's whole family tonight. Her husband died suddenly. Heart attack. They needed some amusement."

He cleared his throat. "I thought maybe you hadn't called because of my nephew. He didn't mean to be rude. He's young and —"

"No. I've just been so busy with rehearsals that..."

"Me, too. I've been helping my sister sort out everything, and I'm afraid I never called you about the book or the tickets." He held out the bouquet to me. "Thanks."

I took the flowers and grinned. "Just a case of misunderstanding, on both sides, I guess." I sniffed the bouquet and caught his eyes over the blossoms. "I'm about to go to a cast party. Care to join me?" **CCW**

HOW I ENDED UP ON WELFARE AT AGE SIX

By Shawn Livengood

Like many a latchkey kid of my generation, I spent my lazy prepubescent afternoons within the relative safety of a daycare center. My particular institution was called "The Learning Tree." You can still find it within the Town North Shopping Center on the outskirts of Whitesboro, Texas. Their logo is the green silhouette of an idyllic country scene: small children playing happily around a great oak tree. Of course, instead of actually playing happily among the band of trees bordering the shopping center, children were restricted to safer, more "educational" activities inside the center.

One particular activity that I found "educational" was the Good Guy Bucks program. An elaborate economic system was devised for our benefit. A form of currency was minted: the "Good Guy Buck." This money (for the sake of brevity, let's call them GGBs) was redeemed at an auction held every week. A cavalcade of juvenile delights was made available to our budding capitalist desires: candy, toys, and my own personal addiction at the time, baseball cards.

So how did one obtain these precious GGBs? Children at the center were encouraged to either start a business or join one that others had started. The ingenuity of these young entrepreneurs was actually quite impressive. A coven of girls churned out shoddy arts and crafts projects for sale and dubbed their business "Designing Women," after the popular sitcom of the day. One particularly successful young man rented out his video games for one-hour periods. He made the most money of all. Even the dimmer children were able to partake in this remarkable windfall of cash by becoming employees of their more intelligent friends.

Unfortunately, I was left behind in this economic bonanza. My prospects of employment were bleak. I had no idea for a successful business (mostly because no one would pay me to lecture them on how much smarter I was) and I had no friends that I could successfully leech off of (see above comment). I had nearly given into despair when I finally discovered a job that called out to me.

A ragged band of misfit children had opened a catering business! And they had an opening! I had a passing fascination with cooking at this age: I loved to thumb through my mother's cookbooks and create bizarre concoctions with whatever I could find in the refrigerator and spice rack. I would then politely ask my mother to sample my creations. In ret-

spect, I think I was more enthralled with cooking because of the amusing contortions my mother's face would make when I fed her cayenne pepper-laced Velveeta than I was the actual process of cooking itself. But the prospect of a catering business seemed like something that was well within my grasp. And, like many other crappy jobs I've had throughout my life, I needed to work so I could have money to buy candy.

With a little childish charisma, I was able to weasel my way into their organization. I showed up for work on my first day, eager to prepare a sumptuous feast. And, more importantly, I wanted to rake in some of that sweet, sweet cash. I approached the table at the back of the day care center with a haughty stride.

"So, what's on the menu today, gang? Roasted duck? A three-tiered cake? Or should we just play it easy and grill up some nice juicy steaks?"

"Um... we're coloring."

"Coloring? What the fudge?"

I looked in horror as the other children illustrated some paper plates in greasy smears of blue and green. Meats and vegetables became abstract concepts, flattened into two dimensions and distorted into

unrealistic angles by the stubby fingers of six-year-olds.

"Wait a second," I said. "When are we going to make some food?"

"We are making food."

"No, stupid!" I smacked a box of crayons to the

floor in a burst of first-grade fury. "I mean, when are we going to cook some darn food?!"

"Teacher won't let us use the oven. It's too dangerous."

"Fudge this bullshit! I quit!"

Thus ended my fifteen minutes of gainful employment in the Good Guy Bucks economy.

I found myself in a most precarious position. After the first day, all of the job openings had filled up, save the one I had just gashed into the side of the local food coloring collective. And I wasn't about to go back to them. Still lacking any decent idea for creating a business of my own, I wandered hopelessly among the other children's projects, hoping that someone would give me some cash for just being me. This is a position I find myself in to this very day.

Eventually, I was noticed and pitied by our day care overlords. I was given a weekly allowance (a welfare check, if you will) of ten GGBs. A paltry sum, barely enough to win an auction for a piece of Dubble Bubble.

I scrimped and saved and went without. My goal was to save up enough to become the economic juggernaut of the weekly auction. With my savings I would buy the only thing that could possibly mend my broken, publicly assisted heart: a pack of Topps baseball cards.

But I showed them. Oh, yes I did. While the other children blew their profits on weekly infusions of Sweet Tarts and Fun Size Snickers, I scrimped and saved and went without. My goal was to save up enough to become the economic juggernaut of the weekly auction. With my savings I would buy the only thing that could possibly mend my broken, publicly assisted heart: a pack of Topps baseball cards.

The final week of the project came, and our final auction session was at hand. My little body was abuzz with energy. I fidgeted with my legs crossed Indian-style as I waited for the auction to begin. Today was the day I'd show these rich losers how I beat the system. I sat quietly as the preliminary auctions were won by the other, more successful children. A bag of Skittles for Jamie, a pouch of Big League Chew for Chris. Sugary trinkets splurged upon by kids with only a tenner of GGBs left over from their weeks of hemorrhaging their profits. None of this mattered to me. I was in it for the real prize.

Finally, my time to shine arrived. The final item in the auction, the pack of baseball cards, drew some lukewarm interest from a few boys left with a little money. Someone placed a bid for five, another made a bid for ten, maybe one for fifteen. There was no real enthusiasm. That is, until I piped up.

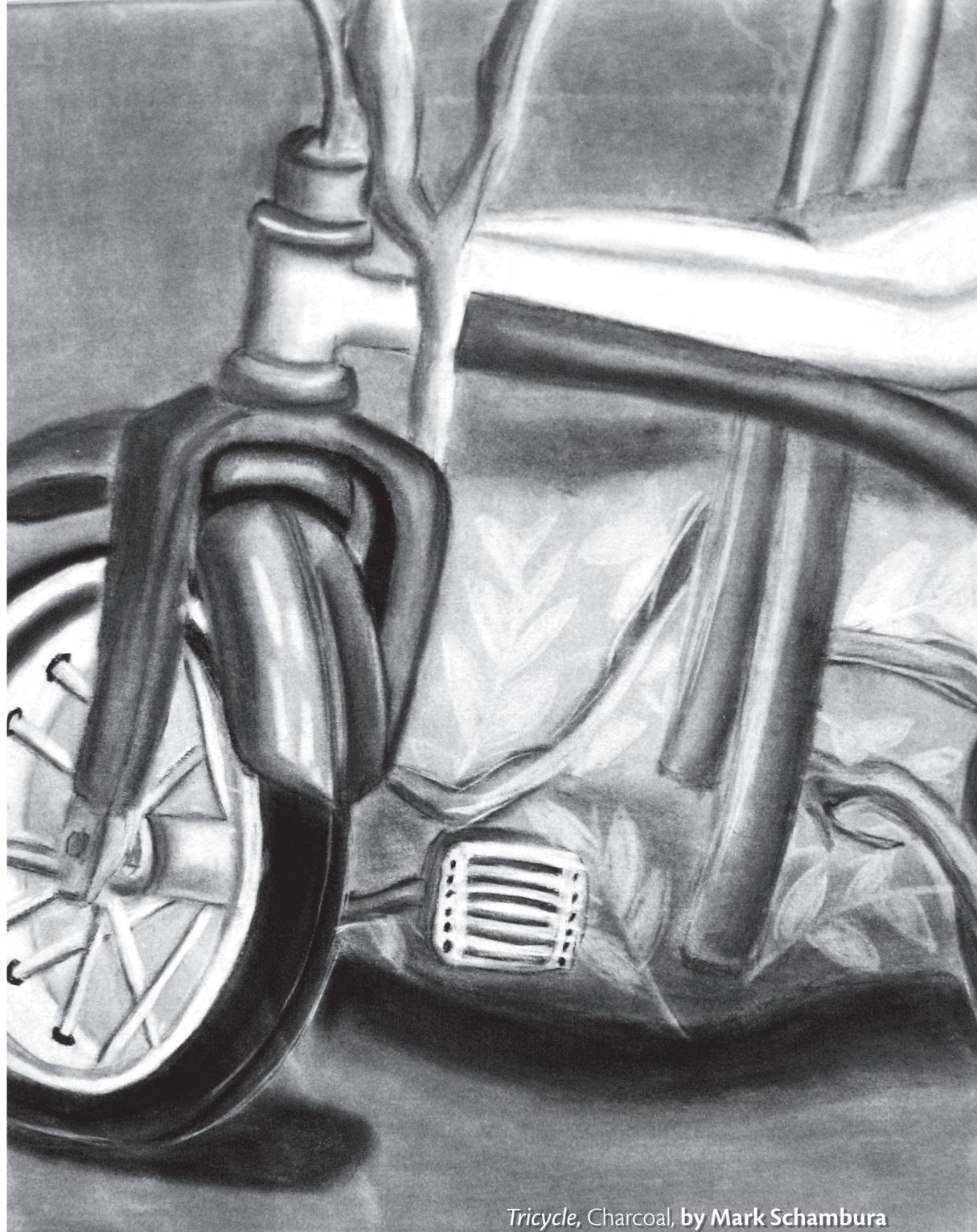
"FIFTY GOOD GUY BUCKS!"

My caretakers were stunned by my thriftiness. Or maybe they were stunned by the amount of decibels I was able to generate from such a tiny throat. Either way, I won the pack of baseball cards.

I could barely contain myself as I peeled open the plastic to gaze upon my cardboard bounty. My heart sank as I leafed through several cards that I already had. And then, I saw it. O Glory of Glories, it was the Holy Grail I had been searching for: the Nolan Ryan card. Card Number One in that year's Topps series. The Ryan Express himself. I felt weak in the knees.

Of course, I had to gloat... I mean, share my good fortune with my fellow students. I proudly brandished it above my head as I ran around the day care. I shouted my joy to the heavens, as if to spite the fickle gods of commerce. I had finally won.

Then another kid pushed me down and took my baseball card.



Tricycle, Charcoal, by Mark Schambura

So, in summary, here's what I learned from that little escapade:

1. Work sucks.
2. If you really want a good job, you're just going to have to make one up for yourself.
3. Look pitiful enough for long enough and someone will give you money.
4. An economy based upon children and candy is just inherently unstable. I'm pretty sure this is how the Soviet Union collapsed, but then again, I am no history major.
5. No matter how hard you try to get ahead in life, there will always be a bigger, meaner kid around to push you down and take your baseball card. In fact, it's probably better to just be that kid and go around pushing other people around and taking their baseball cards. Just ask the CEO of any Fortune 500 company. **CCW**

debtor's drama

By Laura Breaux

The ubiquitous beep sounded sharply in Sheila's headset, signaling the next caller was on the line. With a sigh, she punched the button on the console and gave the standardized greeting.

"Thank you for calling your Bank Card center. This is Sheila. May I have your account number, please?"

"You called me," came the gruff reply. "Who is this?"

"Oh, I see our auto-dialer did call the home of Mr. William Doyle about a Visa account. Are you Mr. Doyle?"

"Yes, that's me."

"For verification purposes, may I have your mother's maiden name?"

"Barrett. By the way, I think I know what you're going to say." The caller's voice faded away for a moment. Sheila reached for the phone box and adjusted the volume dial before she continued.

"Well, Mr. Doyle, I see you're sixty days past due on this account and you have a total of \$572 due by the nineteenth of this month. Would a payment plan help you bring this account up to date?"

"Only if the payment plan allowed zero payments. I have no money now. I lost my job three months ago and my former boss has reported me ineligible for unemployment benefits. If I pay my damn credit cards, I won't be able to make my truck payment. Without my truck, I have no transportation to look for work. Do you still think you have a 'payment plan' for me?"

Sheila squirmed in her seat; she really hated these "no money" calls.

"Are you sure you're ineligible for unemployment?" she prodded patiently. "I see you have Card Care insurance on your account that would make your payments for you for up to two years as long as you're collecting unemployment."

Mr. Doyle hesitated, "Well, I think." There was a brief but persistent click on the line that cut off the end of his sentence. Sheila rolled her eyes. Yet they can always afford caller ID, she thought.

"Can you please hold on for a just a minute, ma'am?" he asked with exaggerated politeness.

"Sure," Sheila replied. It wasn't like the conversation was very productive anyway. She briefly considered hanging up and then remembered her monthly monitoring had not been done yet. She didn't want to be caught hanging up on a call. Bored, she reached for a lone orange perched on the corner of her desk and began absently peeling it while she looked at the clock. Three more hours 'til this is over and

the weekend starts. Her mind began to mull over her weekend plans when her customer suddenly returned to the line.

"Lady, like I said, there'll be no unemployment, so I guess we don't have anything else to talk about. Unless. Say do you think that Card Care insurance would cover suicide?"

Sheila was taken aback. She set the orange down and quickly wiped her hands with a tissue.

"What? Well, I really don't know," she said uneasily. "You wouldn't, I mean, consider harming yourself, would you? I mean it can't be that bad, is it?"

"Depends on what you consider bad," Mr. Doyle muttered. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Sheila."

"Well, Sheila, not that you care, but it's like this. My wife and I divorced a year ago. Turns out she ran up three credit cards I didn't even know about. She got the house and the kids and I got all the marital bills plus child support. The only thing I had left going for me was eighteen years with a solid company and I lost that three months

ago when I was wrongly accused of theft. I can't find any decent work, I can't pay my bills, and the electric company's supposed to come by this afternoon to shut my power off. So, yes, Sheila, it really is that bad."

"Mr. Doyle, I don't know what to say," Sheila stammered.

"Can you hold on while I talk

to my manager about putting your account on a deferral plan for a couple of months?" She opened her lower desk drawer and removed a green plastic stress ball, which she began squeezing rhythmically as she listened.

"Oh, don't bother trying to get me special consideration, Sheila. I'm already on a deferral plan to hell. You know, I was just cleaning my gun about an hour ago and thinking my options over real carefully. I can see a clear solution to my dilemma, an alternate plan, you might say."

"Mr. Doyle, please! If you're talking about killing yourself, please don't! It's not worth it! Is there a friend or someone you can call to come be with you? You shouldn't be alone right now."

"Oh, I'm far from alone, Sheila. I've got my good friend Hank with me right now. He's clean, loaded, and good to go."

She heard a metallic click that sounded like a gun being cocked. Her pulse quickened and her adrenalin flowed as she nervously rolled the stress ball faster beneath her flattened palm. She decided to try a more firm approach.

"Oh, don't bother trying to get me special consideration, Sheila. I'm already on a deferral plan to hell..."

"Mr. Doyle, you listen to me. Stop playing games and put the gun down now! You don't want to do this. Think about your kids!"

"My kids are gonna get more from Social Security and my life insurance policy than they would get otherwise. I checked on my life insurance, you see, and it's gonna cover suicide 'cause it's an old policy, so my kids are gonna be just fine. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I've about got my nerve up."

"I'm not going to let you do this!" Sheila cried. "I'm going to call your local paramedics on the other line and get you some help. Hold on, Mr. Doyle! Don't do it!"

"Sorry you caught me on such a bad day, Sheila, and I'm sorry about sticking your credit card company with this shameful debt. Anyways, I've got the barrel to my temple now. You can hang up if you don't want the blast to hurt your ears."

"Look, Mr. Doyle. William. I'm begging you. Please, please, get a hold of yourself and..."

Just then a huge bang sounded in Sheila's headset and sudden

tears sprang to her eyes. She sat catatonically for several seconds, blinking in disbelief at the computer monitor. Just as she reached for the outside line to call the paramedics, she heard the beep that warned her of the next call. The Doyle account disappeared in a flash and the screen was instantly populated with a fresh account. She had been so involved with her previous call that she had forgotten to write any information down; now it was gone. Shaking her head slowly, she took a deep breath and cleared her throat before taking the next call.

"Thank you for calling your Bank Card Center; this is Sheila. May I have your account number, please?"

Back in Morristown, Tennessee, Mr. William Doyle smiled broadly as he laid his old cap gun back on top of his bookshelf. The toy had sure come in handy since he discovered it in his attic a few weeks earlier. Sheila was the fourth creditor to be entertained by Mr. Doyle's homemade suicide drama and she'd reacted just like the others. *Those stupid headset jockeys never know the difference between a cap gun and the real thing. You just gotta build the drama and they'll believe it.* **CCW**

Chapter 7, Mixed Media by Teena Kabetzke



My Grandmother's Necklace

By Angela E. Vernon

When I came in from the kitchen porch, I saw my Grandma Mary sitting at the large oak farm table where she had spent most of her time over the last sixty years preparing family meals, and where most of our family's memories were made. She held a cool glass of water against her cheek and wiped perspiration from her forehead with her apron. Her silver hair was neatly pulled back in the same braided bun she had worn every day of her life.

"Grandma, you need to slow down and get some rest. I'm worried about you."

"All of this stuff won't pack itself," she said.

"You look tired. Go lie down; I'll take over here. Do you have any more newspapers?"

"I think there is a stack of old newspapers in the mudroom."

"I still can't believe you are being forced to sell the vineyard and the house. I can hardly bear the thought of never coming here again."

"We will always have our wonderful memories," she said, smiling and taking my hand in hers. And unfortunately a few bad ones, I thought to myself. This family has had its share of troubles throughout the years. But the worst of all was the day my Grandpa Joe collapsed in the winery. He died doing what he loved. But a part of this family's spirit died, too, the spirit that kept the family business thriving for fifty years. Everyone Grandpa Joe did business with admired and respected him. It was hard, even for his sons, to gain that same level of respect and admiration.

"I'll go find those newspapers, Grandma; you go rest for awhile."

While I watched her leave the kitchen, my mind wandered back: wonderful memories of scampering among perfect rows of grapevines with my cousins, our tanned bodies weaving in and out of the leafy vines to hide from one another. Then we would make a mad dash back to the house where our Grandma Mary would treat us to some freshly baked Italian pastry.

But my sixteenth birthday stands out above all the rest. We had an elaborate party with all of my aunts, uncles, cousins, and close friends. The aroma of baked ziti filled the air throughout most of the house. We all enjoyed Grandpa Joe's private collection cabernet, and champagne for toasting. Aunt Theresa baked her special Italian cream cake. Beautiful flowers filled every room in the house. It was the perfect birthday.

I can still hear Grandma's voice in my head like it was yesterday: "Sofia, come with me, I have something I want to give you."

"Here I come, Grandma," I said, trailing behind her up to her bedroom. I remember how elegant her bedroom looked that afternoon. Golden rays of sunlight pushed through the huge windows, illuminating her room in a brilliant amber color. Massive French doors opened

out onto an enormous ivy-covered terrace adorned with white antique wrought iron furniture from Italy.

My grandmother walked over to her mahogany vanity and opened the center drawer. I watched her remove a small gold box.

"Sofia, let's go out onto the terrace," she said.

We walked out onto the terrace and sat together on a hand-carved oak bench that had been in our family for generations. The terrace overlooked the vineyard, one of the largest in the Napa Valley. The air was crisp and cool, perfect climate for the grapes.

"Look, I can see Sal and Michael down in the vineyard. 'Hey guys,'" I shouted, waving to get their attention.

"Sofia, I want to give you your gift before someone interrupts us." I watched her aged fingers gently lift the lid from the box. She removed a gold necklace from the dark purple velvet lining. It sparkled in the



John's Window, Acrylic, by Shirley Griffin



“I would like some time to think about this. I promise to get back with you as soon as possible; I don’t have much time to decide.”

members could manage part of it, but not the whole amount. I knew what I had to do.

The next day in town at the antique jeweler’s, I nervously waited while the owner of the shop showed my necklace to the appraiser. The story that my grandmother finally shared with me about the necklace kept going around in my head. She had told me that her three brothers would often sail from Palermo, Sicily, to Nigeria, Africa. They posed as fishermen but their business had nothing to do with fish, except for those unfortunate souls who ended up sleeping with them. Her brothers had smuggled the necklace out of Africa on one of their business ventures. They brought it back to Palermo and gave it to her on her sixteenth birthday.

“Miss, I think we can help you. Are you still interested in selling your necklace? We are definitely interested in buying it from you,” said the owner of the shop. I stood there feeling like my heart was stuck in my throat. I thought, am I doing the right thing?

“Miss?”

“My name is Sofia.”

“Sofia, this obviously is very sentimental to you. If you need some time, our offer will stand,” said the owner.

Handing me back my necklace, the appraiser said, “Your necklace dates back to the 1800’s. I believe it is Turkish. The crescent moons and stars are like those on the Turkish flag. I also think it is a Christian artifact, extremely rare. I would like to do further research even if you decide not to sell it.”

“I would like some time to think about this. I promise to get back with you as soon as possible. I don’t have much time to decide.”

“We understand. This is a big decision,” said the owner of the shop.

Several days later, I went to visit Grandma Mary and told her what I wanted to do. She said she was proud of me and together we thought up a wonderful idea. We dressed in our finest party dresses, and I wore the necklace. A photographer came to her house and took our picture together out on the terrace where she had given me the necklace.

The next day we sold the necklace, and kept the vineyard and the house. For years to come, our family would keep on making memories and, most importantly, our family traditions would continue for generations.

Right before we sold the necklace, my grandmother said, “Sofia, the necklace is a precious and beautiful thing, but it is just a thing. This vineyard is our life.” **CCW**

sunlight. I had never seen anything like it before. The chain was so unusual. “I have been saving this for you. I always knew you were the one I would pass it on to.”

“Oh, Grandma, it’s so beautiful, thank you,” I said, throwing my arms around her neck.

“There’s a reason that I waited until now to give you the necklace. It was given to me on my sixteenth birthday.”

The chain was made of tiny pink gold locks, crescent moons, and stars. In between each lock and moon was a yellow gold ornate bead. Hanging from the chain was a gold cross.

“Sofia, look at the teeth marks on the back side of the cross. A long time ago people would bite the gold to check if it was real. Gold is much softer than other metals.”

“How old is the necklace?” I asked her.

“No one knows for sure.”

“Where did it come from, and who gave it to you?”

“I’ll tell you the story someday,” she said softly, placing the necklace around my neck. “Right now we better get back to your party.” I wanted to know more about the necklace, but I did not pressure her to tell me the mystery of this precious gift.

Still lost in my thoughts, I suddenly became aware of my Uncle Frank entering the kitchen.

“Sofia, when did you get here? You seem to be in some sort of trance. Is everything all right?”

“I was just day dreaming. I’m worried about Grandma. I still can’t believe she has to sell the vineyard. Why can’t all of us together come up with the money she needs?”

“Frankie, what are you doing here?” My grandmother said, entering the room.

“I came to check up on you, Ma,” he said.

“Grandma, you’re supposed to be resting,” I said.

“I tried to sleep, but there’s too much on my mind. Frankie, open a bottle of wine. I’ll fix us something to eat; you both look so thin.” The three of us drank some wine and ate bread with cheese, olives, and some left over Italian sausage from last night’s meal, then laughed and reminisced about the past. That evening I found out how much money was needed to keep the vineyard and the house. It was a large sum of money; some of the family

Connections, Photograph, by J.L. Hunter

UNCLE JOE'S HOBBY

By Sarah Steinbach

I wasn't sad that Uncle Joe had died because I barely knew him and the last time I saw him I was a little girl. When Uncle Joe's lawyer called to tell me of my uncle's death, I was shocked to learn that Uncle Joe had left me his entire estate. The day I heard this I drove to Hot Springs, Arkansas, without stopping.

Quincey T. McClellan was a folksy country lawyer and his office resembled a hunting lodge. It was decorated with fierce looking game animals I assumed he had killed over the years. After Mr. McClellan asked about my drive and offered his condolences, we got down to business.

"Your uncle was a rich man. He left you some valuable stocks and bonds which have matured well over the years. He also left you several hundred acres of prime land in the Ozarks that developers are clamoring to buy, and several safe deposit boxes. He left you his cabin and taxidermy business, too."

"Uncle Joe had a taxidermy business?"

"Oh, I wouldn't call it a business, really. It was more of a hobby. Your uncle was the best taxidermist I've ever seen. In fact, he did every animal in here." McClellan gestured to his monstrosities. "He was an artist."

"I'd like to see the cabin now."

As I followed McClellan to the cabin, I thought back about mine and Uncle Joe's last visit nearly twenty years ago. When I was five years old, he had tried to give me a huge jackrabbit he had killed and stuffed himself. Jackrabbits aren't like bunny rabbits; they can grow to nearly two feet tall and the one that my uncle tried to give me was at least that. The jackrabbit scared me so bad I cried and wet my pants. I remember how angry he had gotten and how he called me an ungrateful brat because I hadn't liked his gift. I never saw him again after that, and I hadn't thought about the incident in a long time.

We drove farther from civilization and deeper into the wilderness and it was dusk by the time we reached the dilapidated cabin. We got out of our respective cars and McClellan turned to me and smiled. "This is it," he said, handing me the key. "The cabin

and everything in it's yours."

I couldn't be sure but I thought the lawyer might be amused by the situation. "Uncle Joe lived here?" I asked.

"For twenty-two years. There's no running water or electricity and he didn't want them. He died a wealthy man, but he sure didn't live like one. I guess you could say he was eccentric but, boy, did he love this place." He gave me his card. "We'll be in touch." He got in his car and drove off, leaving dust in his wake. I took a deep breath and walked carefully up the rotting cabin steps.

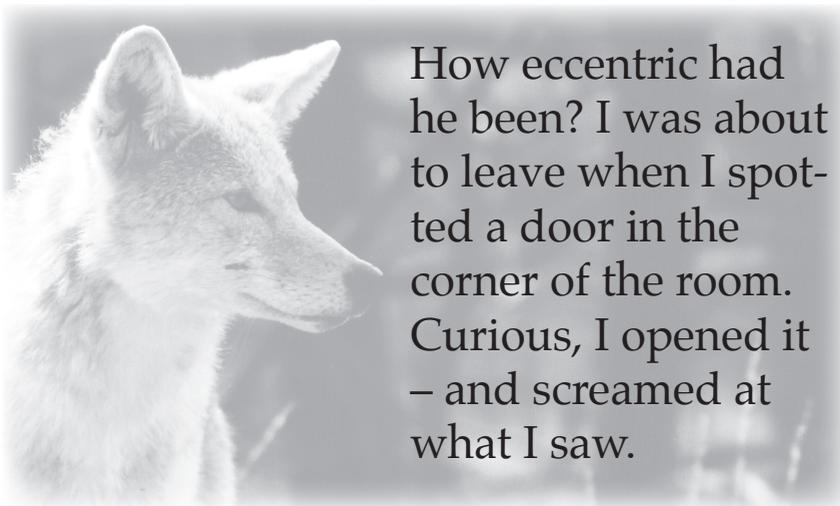
When I first entered the cabin, I felt for a light switch and remembered the cabin didn't have one. In the gloom I saw an old-fashioned lantern and some matches nearby. When I lit it the shadows leapt off the wall, and I gave a startled yelp at what I saw.

The front room of the cabin was cluttered with stuffed animal carcasses of every sort imaginable. I saw mounted deer heads, raccoons, foxes, skunks, and a gigantic black bear. There were cats and dogs of all sizes and a parrot on a perch in the corner. There was even a gorilla and a huge timber wolf with two of its pups. Every animal in my uncle's disturbing menagerie had its face arched into a fierce snarl and their glass eyes shone in the lantern light. I hurried into the next room.

The other room had been my uncle's bedroom. It was sparsely furnished with only an army cot, a wooden crate, and a battered chest of drawers. The contrast between the two rooms was startling. On the crate sat a photo album, so I picked it up and opened it.

To my surprise, the album didn't have any pictures in it but newspaper articles instead.

As I read the articles (there were about a dozen in all), I noticed they were all about the same thing – the kidnapping of an heiress. The kidnapers had demanded a ransom of two million dollars. Before the ransom could be paid, the heiress escaped. She gave a description of her captors to the FBI and soon they discovered who the two men were. The criminals' pictures were posted in newspapers all around the country but the two men were never found. My uncle had the men's pictures in the photo album and they looked sullen and mean.



How eccentric had he been? I was about to leave when I spotted a door in the corner of the room. Curious, I opened it – and screamed at what I saw.



Coyote, Photograph, by Song Guoning

I closed the book and wondered why Uncle Joe had kept articles about a kidnapping from so long ago. How eccentric had he been? I was about to leave when I spotted a door in the corner of the room. Curious, I opened it and screamed at what I saw. I knew then that Uncle Joe hadn't just been eccentric. He had been insane.

Two men were propped up against the wall of the closet and they were dressed in full hunting gear. One held a rifle and the other held a huge jackrabbit that looked all too familiar. I slammed the door shut. Although their faces were unrecognizable, it didn't take a genius to figure out that the macabre mannequins in the closet were: the two kidnapers from the articles in my uncle's scrapbook. He had stuffed them like animals to preserve them for this moment.

I was frightened but I was also angry at what my uncle had done. He must have known he was about to die, so he made sure the cabin would be ready for my arrival. He left the photo album out where I couldn't miss it, and he knew that when I explored

the cabin I would find the two bodies. To make the experience more horrifying, he put the jackrabbit that had terrified me when I was a child into one of the arms of the dead men. Had he done all this because I had scorned his gift all those years ago? It was the only reason I could think of. He had pulled my strings like a puppet, but I was through being played.

A taxidermist works with formaldehyde and luckily Uncle Joe had a lot of it on hand. I went through the horrible cabin and saturated it with the flammable fluid, paying particular attention to the bodies in the closet. When I was finished, I ran to the front door of the cabin and threw the lit lantern against the wall. The room burst into flames.

I ran outside and stood for a minute, watching the flames leap high into the night sky. The sight was hypnotic and I might have watched longer, but the stench of formaldehyde and burning fur was too much to bear. I didn't think Uncle Joe had expected me to do this. I got in my car and sped off, leaving the inferno behind me. I felt better than I had all day. **CCW**

The Hitchhikers

By Thomas J. McMahon

The young couple huddled together on the shoulder of Route 66 just south of Chicago. The early April wind tugged at their thin jackets. Anna was an orphan who lived with her elderly aunt. Mark lived in a pretty brick house with his attorney mother and accountant father. He was the star of the high school football team, she was a cheerleader. They were in love.

Mark's parents did not like Anna and tried to keep them apart. Anna wanted to run away and get married. She badgered Mark and bribed him with sex. Last night Mark's father told him he was forbidden to see Anna. When Mark told her of his father's decision, she gave him an ultimatum – leave with her or he would never see her again. The next day after school their friends drove them and their two little suitcases to Route 66.

They extended their thumbs in the traditional hitchhiker position, but only one pickup had stopped in the last hour. Finally, a large two-door sedan pulled off on the shoulder. Quickly, Anna and Mark grabbed their suitcases and jogged over to the car. "If this asshole tries to run off when we get there, like that pickup did, I'm going to throw this rock through his window," Mark said, as he pocketed a fist-size stone.

"Quiet, we need a ride."

When they arrived at the car the passenger side door was ajar. In the fading light, the smallish, bald driver smiled at Anna. "Where you guys going?"

"California," Anna replied and pulled the door open.

"That's a long way; I'm only going to Albuquerque."

Anna slid into the front seat as Mark put the suitcases in the back and squeezed in beside her. "Let's go," she said. The car was warm; they took off their jackets.

"I'm Carl, what are your names?" the driver said and reached over Anna to shake Mark's hand.

"She's Anna and I'm Mark." As he spoke, Mark watched as the driver's elbow brushed across Anna's breasts as he moved his hand back to the steering wheel. Mark sat up in anger. "What the hell do

you think you're doing?"

"Mark, it was an accident, be quiet, get some rest," Anna cooed.

She put her hands behind her head and stretched slowly, exaggerating her pouty young breasts. Carl almost ran off the road. His head swiveled between Anna and the darkening highway. Anna smiled as she took her hands down from behind her head and, to Mark's shock, cupped her breasts in her hands and started to gently massage them. The driver stared straight ahead, his breathing heavy.

Mark pulled away from Anna and looked out the side window; he was angry. Carl licked his lips nervously and kept glancing at Anna. She sat quietly letting her head fall forward as if dozing. A smile played around her mouth.

Twenty minutes down the road, Carl let his hand touch Anna's shoulder. No reaction. His hand slid down her chest. He gently squeezed. Suddenly Anna's hand shot out knocking his away.

"No free feels, Carl."

Mark sprang up from his seat and tried to reach Carl. "You asshole, I'll..." Anna grabbed his shoulders and pushed him back against the door.

"Mark," she hissed, "shut up and listen to me. We need this ride and we need money. Just be quiet and everything will be fine and later I'll do that

special thing you like. You know how much you like it." He looked into her face then turned away.

After a few more miles Carl touched her shoulder. "I'll pay for a feel," he said softly with a fearful look toward Mark.

"He's asleep, and he'll stay asleep, until I tell him he can wake up. It's going to take a lot of money, Carl."

"I've got plenty; I just got my Air Force separation cash."

"How much is that?"

"Enough," he said warily.

Anna pulled up her sweater and unclipped her bra, exposing both breasts. Carl stared and Mark flinched as if punched. He started to move and she kicked him. With clenched fists he turned back

WShe put her hands behind her head and stretched slowly, exaggerating her pouty young breasts. Carl almost ran off the road. His head swiveled between Anna and the darkening highway.

toward the window.

"Money, Carl," she teased, as she lifted them both toward him. Struggling to stay in his lane, Carl pulled out a wad of bills. He peeled off a fifty and tossed it toward her and started frantically groping her. Anna leaned back into the seat amused by his clumsy efforts.

After a few moments she pushed his hand away. "Carl, do you like my tits?"

He didn't answer. Anna moved closer to him and placed her hand between his legs. "Oh, you do like them."

She whispered into his ear without removing her hand. Carl didn't speak as she settled back in the seat and pulled down her sweater. Carl moaned quietly. They drove on for a few minutes.

"Yes, yes, I'll pay, but where are you gonna do it?"

"Pull into the next rest area."

At the rest area, Anna directed Carl to a dark corner with some picnic tables. They all got out of the car. Mark tried to pull Anna with him. "Please, Anna, let's get out of here."

"Let go of me, go take a walk; this shouldn't take more than ten minutes. Come on, Carl, there's a picnic table."

Cursing violently, Mark stormed away. After pacing a few minutes he turned around to look at them. Anna was seated on the table's bench. Her sweater was pulled up to her neck. Carl was standing in front of her, his pants down around his ankles.

Mark started running toward them. The rock he had picked up earlier slapped against his leg. He took it out of his pocket and squeezed it in his right hand. Anna saw him coming and started to yell. Carl turned and tried to run, but his pants tied his ankles together and he fell backward onto the dry grass.



Loneliness, Mixed Media, **by Kapil Dixit**

Mark pounced on him and raised the rock over his head. Anna tried to stop him, but he smashed the rock into Carl's face and head, over and over again. When he finally stopped, Carl's head was caved in and his face was a shapeless bloody mass. Mark crawled away vomiting. He fell down on his side, pulled his knees against his chest, and started sobbing.

Anna took the roll of fifties from Carl's pocket and grabbed her suitcase. She watched Mark for a moment and then walked toward a line of idling trailer trucks. **CCW**



The Mobster & the Musician

By June Pratt

S

uddenly, arpeggios thundered up and down a piano keyboard, somewhere in the neighborhood.

They took Ruffo's breath away. They reminded him of exciting police chases in the past, his men diving in and out of alleys and side streets to evade the cops, always outmaneuvering them. He sat up in bed, digging his elbows into his knees, rocking back and forth.

"I can't stand no more," Ruffo said to himself, shaking his head.

"Those beautiful piano songs are killin' me."

He put his legs over the side of the bed and slid out, not wanting to wake Angelina. Wearing just his pink silk pajamas, he reached for his shotgun and black fedora sitting on the bedside table and tiptoed out of the house.

Climbing into the black BMW sedan in the driveway, Ruffo cruised slowly down the street of his neighborhood, past one and two-storey clapboard houses.

"All night, every night," he said, yawning for the third time. He craned his neck around, speculating on which house the concert was coming from.

"Who's the jerk think he is?"

He saw light streaming from the front windows of one of the bigger houses, and he could hear a torrent of notes. Then, suddenly, a hesitation in the music, a short pause, and then one single note like a raindrop touching a blade of grass.

He pulled up at the curb. Sighing, he leaned over the steering wheel and wrapped his arms around it.

"When the jerk plays eight notes down, the same ones up, then again, I have to listen and start countin'. Why are they in my head day and night? They're killin' me."

He knew each note by heart, how it should sound, how long it should linger. For some reason, he had to hear them.

Suddenly there they were — a simple musical scale.

"It's that damn tune."

Ruffo grabbed the shotgun off the car seat, strode up the sidewalk, and struck the front door with the butt of the gun.

The door opened and a tall, lanky red-haired young man stood there and stared, his mouth dropping open.

"What the hell?" Ludwig said. He reached out to grab the barrel of the gun, but drew back. He gasped for breath, looking at it aimed directly at his chest, and the pudgy little man pointing it.

Ruffo gulped, but kept his finger on the trigger. The former college basketball star towered over him at six-foot-five, but Ruffo's solid muscular shoulders compensated for his rotund five-foot-seven frame.

"Since when do pianer players plunk away in the middle of the night? It's two o'clock!" Ruffo said. "I don't sleep no more. Back up, meathead," he said, lifting his chin in the air.

He dug the barrel of the gun into Ludwig's left shoulder and reached up, pushing him in the chest and backing him into the music room. He kept Ludwig's frame off balance, until his waist hit the curve of the sleek, black concert grand piano behind him.

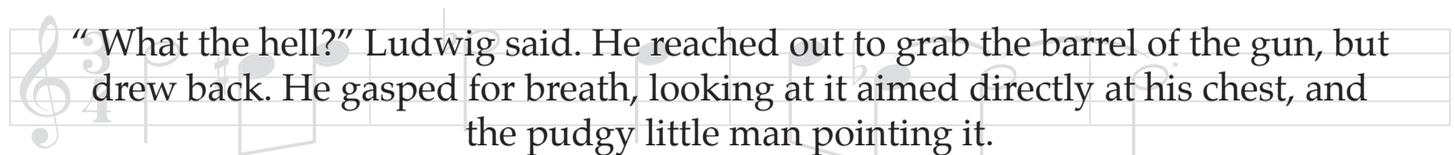
Pushing him harder, Ruffo splayed Ludwig's tall frame into the open labyrinth of silver metal wires and red felt hammers. Ludwig's head and shoulders hit them hard, creating a drawn out ripple of loud discordant sounds.

Pinning him down, Ruffo dug the point of the barrel deeper into Ludwig's left shoulder, making him wince with pain. Keeping his finger on the trigger, Ruffo eased himself around to the keyboard side, let his eyes wander.

He couldn't believe the size of the thing that had been keeping him awake at night. It was huge — nothing like the baby grand at his party for the mob outside Toronto years ago.

The magnificent instrument yawned and stretched, almost touching the framed doorway leading to the room beyond.

His gaze caught the brilliant red, green and purple abstract drawings of concert grand pianos on posters, publicizing international piano competitions in Philadelphia, Salzburg and Prague. Ludwig's girlfriend, Madelia, collected them and displayed them on


"What the hell?" Ludwig said. He reached out to grab the barrel of the gun, but drew back. He gasped for breath, looking at it aimed directly at his chest, and the pudgy little man pointing it.

the walls of the music room.

Behind the piano, electronic recording equipment and speakers sat on metal shelves. The only space left was for a comfortable soft chair in purple slipcovers beside the piano.

"Anybody here wit ya?" Ruffo asked.

Ludwig lay there with a splitting headache. He refused to let panic get the best of him, and was calculating the risk of going after this nut case wearing pink pajamas and a black fedora.

"No," he said.

"OK, meatball, no funny stuff," Ruffo said. "Sit down and play me some tunes."

Ludwig wrestled himself out of the piano and stumbled around to sit on the piano stool. Drops of sweat fell off his forehead onto the keyboard. He could hardly lift his arms, let alone try to control his fingers.

But judges at piano competitions who watched his every move at the keyboard or basketball opponents who lunged at him on the court had taught him to keep his head, no matter what.

Ludwig brought his powerful, sweaty fingers down on the piano, running them over the keys without making a sound. But then, with all the strength and force he could bring to it, he made the instrument erupt like a volcano, his fingers pummeling the depths of the bass notes, with dominant, then diminished seventh chords in a fortissimo that shook the piano top.

Nothing mattered to Ludwig — nothing — except music slipping through his fingers.

Ludwig wanted to scream.

"You don't know it, Buster, but nothing, not even your gun, will stop me from getting to the piano competition today," Ludwig muttered to himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he looked at Ruffo sitting beside him in the purple chair. He was listening intently, his shotgun aimed directly at Ludwig's right temple.

"You're nuts and I'm going to stick it to you — a performance even the judges would drool for," Ludwig swore under his breath. He exhaled and steadied himself. He sat completely erect, his back straight. His arms, muscular and strong from athletic conditioning, began to move at lightning speed up and down the keyboard, or seemed to float effortlessly over the keys, light as feathers.

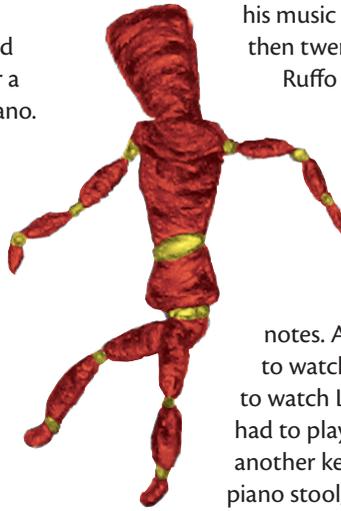
His long, expressive fingers brought out the joyous, serious, triumphant, or mournful passages in the music with lyrical tenderness or deep intensity.

Except for strands of stringy red hair that kept falling over his forehead, he imparted an image of perfect control. He knew he had a commanding presence. The hushed expectancy of his concert audiences was always palpable, whether they numbered in the hundreds — or now, just one. Ruffo caught himself closing his eyes. He had never heard music like this.

Ludwig was steaming inside. Dammit! How'm I going to lose this guy? Philly plane 6:30, Ludwig said to himself. Counted on this practice time for the Intermezzo. Pretty dull stuff for him, but here goes.

Ludwig closed his eyes and his fingers articulated what those eight notes should sound like. He put his head down over the keys, drinking in the opening melody of *Brahms' Intermezzo, Opus 117, No.1*.

Ruffo was paying rapt attention now. He recognized the music. Ludwig knew this delicate beginning passage was crucial to his performance. He must draw his audience into his musical being and never let them out of his grasp. He wanted them to remember



his music long after the concert was over. Ten minutes went by, then twenty.

Ruffo leaned forward, and taking his left hand off the gun, started biting the nail of his index finger and squirming in his chair.

But Ludwig was lost in concentration. He tried every nuance of touch, modified the phrasing and changed the pedaling effects.

Accustomed to hours of practice to perfect his technique, he relentlessly repeated the eight notes. All of a sudden, Ruffo lowered the gun and leaned over to watch Ludwig's fingers as they caressed the keys. Ruffo used to watch Little Leo's fingers when he practiced his piano lesson. He had to play eight notes up and then eight notes down in one key, another key and another. The brothers would sit together on the piano stool, whispering about what they were going to steal at a Nu Value department store.

The cops gunned down Little Leo in a gang raid a few years later. The sound of that gunfire never stopped reverberating inside Ruffo's head.

"Play, play," Ruffo said to Ludwig suddenly. "Don't stop. I can't stand it. It's in my head, in my blood. I can't get Little Leo's little tune outta my head."

His head fell back against the soft cushion of the chair, knocking his fedora off. The gun slipped off his lap, sliding to the floor with a cracking thud. He wanted to sleep. Every bone and muscle in his body ached for sleep. He had to sleep. His weary body began to relax for the first time in a week. His head fell to one side and his mouth dropped open. Ludwig leaped off the piano stool and bent over to grab the gun when the doorbell rang. "Not again," he said, and shoved the gun behind the shelves of recording equipment.

He heard a woman's voice outside and opened the door. The woman stood there smoothing down her ruffled, black-dyed hair with one hand and clutching both sides of a raincoat together with the other.

"Ruffo here?" she asked.

"Who are you?" Ludwig asked, putting his right index finger to his lips. "Angelina," she said.

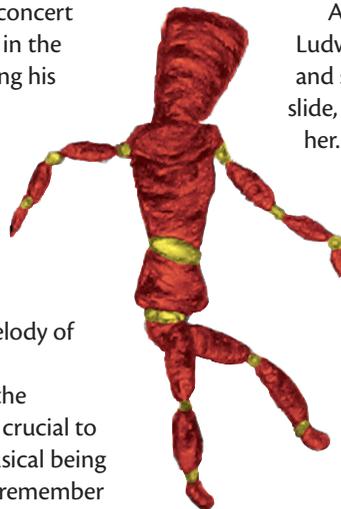
Spying Ruffo on the other side of the piano, she rushed in toward him. Ludwig followed and yanked her back, revealing bare skin and breasts beneath her raincoat. "For Pete's sake, don't wake him up. He just fell asleep," Ludwig whispered.

She pulled her raincoat together and looked at Ruffo. The hard lines around her eyes and mouth softened. "Wha'cha doin' to him?" she said, louder than Ludwig wanted her to. "He's gone soft. He's not workin' anymore. You've corrupted him, that's what you've done."

Angelina craned her neck backwards, looking up at Ludwig, and one of her black artificial eyelashes came loose and started rolling down her cheek. Ludwig watched it slide, then cupping his right palm, caught it and handed it to her. "How come you think you can play all night and keep everybody awake?" she said.

"Didn't you get some earplugs, Angelina?" Ludwig asked. "My girlfriend handed them out to all the neighbors."

He looked at his watch and then pointed to the poster with the red grand piano on it. "See that, Angelina? I'm going there to play," Ludwig said. "Do me a favor? Stay with Ruffo." Before she could react, Ludwig wheeled around, grabbed the gun from behind the shelves and ran to the door, slinging his raincoat over his shoulder, managing to hold onto a briefcase



of music and a wardrobe carry-on sitting in the hallway.

He sprinted across the lawn to Joe's, the next-door neighbor, and struck the front door with the gun. Joe appeared in red shorts, rubbing his eyes and pulling out a plug from one of his ears.

"What gives, Wiggy?" he asked, squinting at him.

"Joe, take this gun, and give it back to your crazy neighbor, sitting in my music room," Ludwig said. "The guy's nuts about my music, Joe. Don't call the cops. Just shoo 'em out and lock the door."

Just then a yellow van pulled up in front of his house, and Ludwig ran to it. "Thanks, Joe, and wish me luck," Ludwig said, looking back and waving.

~§~

Excitement was high for the concert pianists performing at The Academy of Music for the Tenth International Piano Competition in Philadelphia. Ludwig played with an eloquence of artistry he never ex-

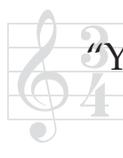
pected and the audience went wild. They roared, clapped and cheered.

Yet, when he got up to bow, he couldn't help feeling but for a moment that one of the judges had had a shotgun aimed directly at his right temple.

When the audience finally let him go, Ludwig made his way to the lobby of the stage door. Ludwig grinned and looked down at more adoring fans, when he felt a hand tighten around his left upper arm. Someone said, "Ruffo sent me."

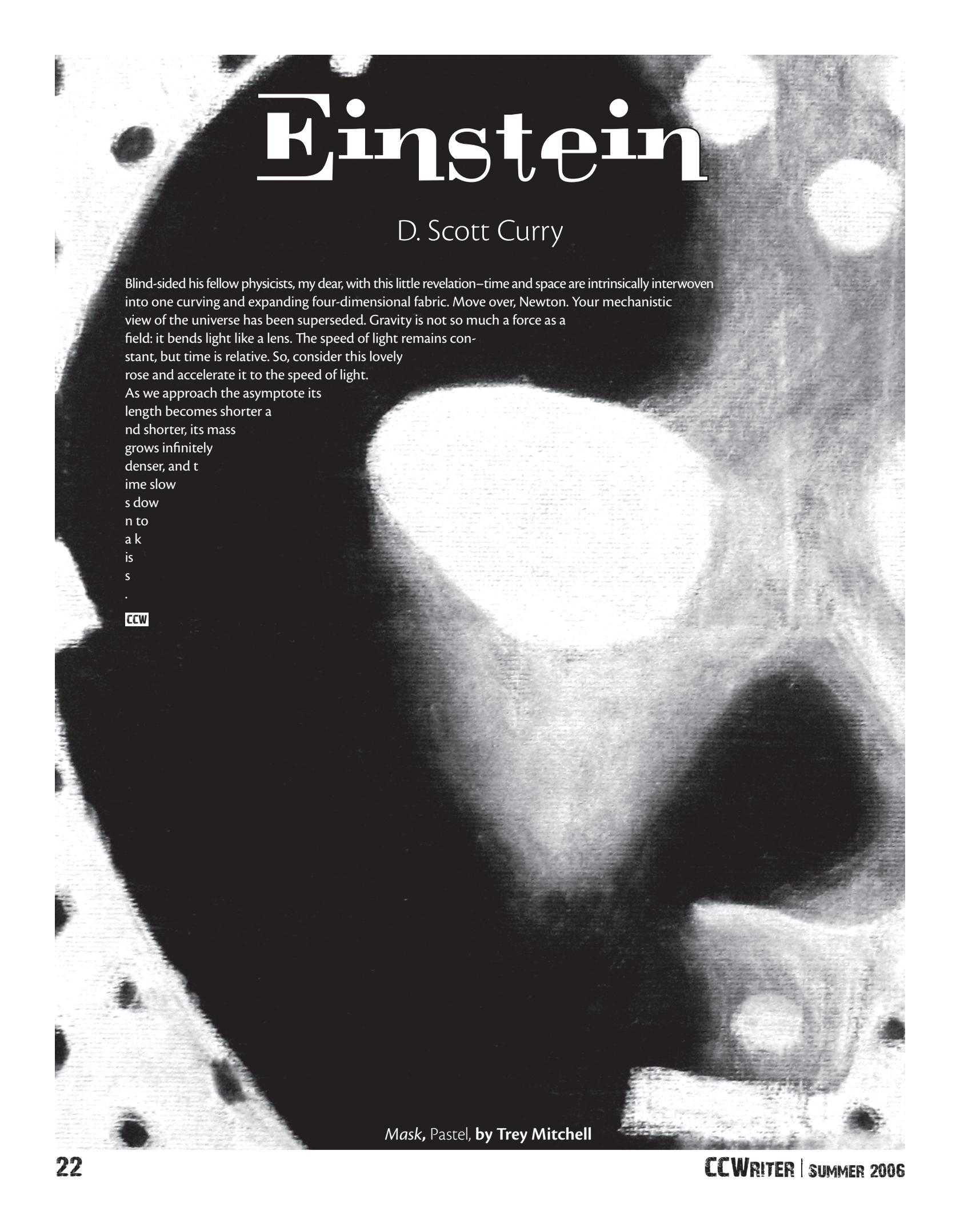
Before he could object, Ludwig found himself whisked out the stage door to a black stretch limousine at the curb, its windows tinted and darkened.

The rear door opened, and all Ludwig could see was a shotgun, sitting across someone's knees. Without hesitating, Ludwig got in, bent over, and kissed the butt of the gun. Then he backed out, closed the limousine's door and it pulled away, leaving him standing on the curb. **CCW**

 "You don't know it, Buster, but nothing, not even your gun, will stop me from getting to the piano competition today," Ludwig muttered to himself.

In Orange Light, Pastel and Charcoal, by Casey Chung





Einstein

D. Scott Curry

Blind-sided his fellow physicists, my dear, with this little revelation—time and space are intrinsically interwoven into one curving and expanding four-dimensional fabric. Move over, Newton. Your mechanistic view of the universe has been superseded. Gravity is not so much a force as a field: it bends light like a lens. The speed of light remains constant, but time is relative. So, consider this lovely rose and accelerate it to the speed of light.

As we approach the asymptote its length becomes shorter and shorter, its mass grows infinitely denser, and time slows down to a crawl.

CCW

Mask, Pastel, by Trey Mitchell

The Professional

By Shawn Livengood

Ned Anderson gurgles as I tighten my grip around his neck. He is a spindly little insect of a man, just half my size. A pair of glasses hangs crookedly across the bridge of his bloody nose. Common courtesy dictates that I should feel bad about using my excess bulk to bully him around. However, I am not a courteous man.

I throw Ned to the ground and stomp my foot on his chest, pinning him to the floor. It would be a bad idea to let him get out of my reach. Not very professional. He flails around wildly.

"Where is the money, Mr. Anderson?"

"I swear to God I don't know what you're talking about! You've got the wrong guy!"

It's pitiful. These deadbeats never get creative; they just spout the same bullshit over and over again.

"No excuses, Mr. Anderson. The money.

Now." I smash my heel into his face for emphasis. His glasses skitter across the floor.

Blood trickles from the new cut on his cheek. He is sobbing uncontrollably now, and I can barely understand his pleas. He keeps repeating, "I don't know, I don't know," in a whiny, nasal voice. Rivulets of blood and snot are congealing into a sticky beard on his face.

"All right, Mr. Anderson. Have it your way. I'll just have to make an example of you." I

wrap my fingers around Mr. Anderson's throat again and use my other hand to grab his belt. His wild eyes scan my face, looking for some faint trace of sympathy. He finds none. Mr. Anderson quivers, terrified of what I'm going to do to him next.

The sliding glass door shatters into a thousand sparkling shards as I throw Mr. Anderson's battered body through it. His feet stumble a bit as he struggles to find traction on the smooth concrete of the balcony. After a few clumsy slips, his back hits the railing. The sturdy metal bar is much thicker than Ned Anderson's spine, and I hear the familiar crack of a man's vertebrae shattering. He pitches over into the backdrop of the city skyline. I can see his hands thrust out in a desperate attempt to clutch something, anything, and stop his inevitable twenty-storey drop. In his panic, he misses and grasps empty space.

I can see him twist his head to the side to take in the gravity of the situation. He screams into the cool night air. It will be the last thing Ned Anderson ever does.

"It's not the fall that'll kill you, Mr. Anderson," I whisper. "It's the sudden stop at the end."

Mr. Anderson's scream gets a little quieter each second as he speeds straight to the ground. Twenty floors beneath my feet, I hear the brakes of cars screeching as drivers swerve to avoid a new obstacle in the street.

I light up a cigarette. A billow of smoke escapes my lips, and I replace the smoke in my lungs with a bite of the crisp autumn air of the city. In a few minutes the cops will be up here, standing in this mire of blood and glass as they assess the damage. One rookie will probably let out a low

whistle as he peeks out over the balcony and remarks on how far a drop it is.

I step out onto the balcony through the new opening in the glass door. Pieces of glass crunch under my boots. I am careful of my footing as I walk through all the blood and debris left behind on the concrete. It would be a bad idea to lose my footing and clumsily slip off the balcony. Not very professional. I lean over the railing to inspect the pile of red meat on the pavement that used to be Ned Anderson.

My job here is done. It's time to leave.

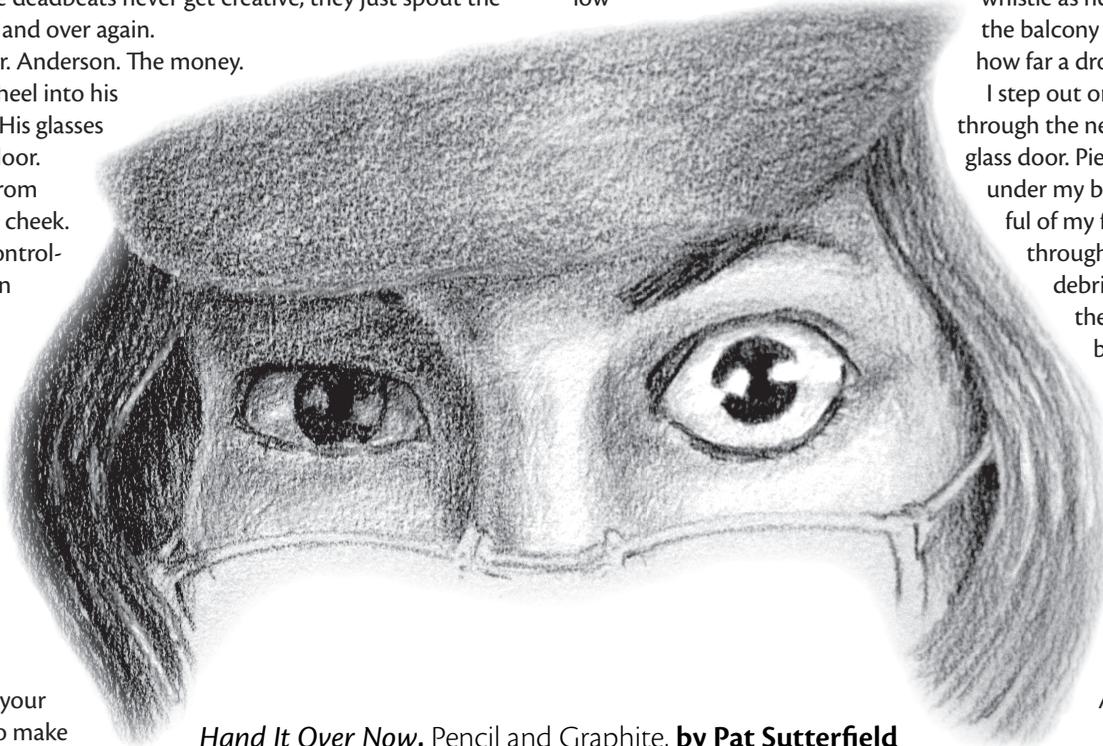
I flick my half-smoked cigarette into the night sky and move inside to wipe my bloody soles on Mr. Anderson's expensive carpet. It would be a bad idea to leave bloody footprints all over the place for the cops to analyze. Not very professional.

As I am digging my heels into the shag of Mr. Anderson's luxury apartment, I notice a stack of unpaid bills on a glass coffee table. I guess Mr. Genovese wasn't the only one who Ned owed money to. I lean over to read the names of Ned Anderson's other creditors.

All the bills are addressed to Ned Anderton.

"Ned Fucking Anderton," I mutter to myself. "Goddammit."

For once, somebody wasn't lying when they said that I had the wrong guy. Just one letter off. I could kick myself for making such a stupid little mistake. It's just not very professional. 

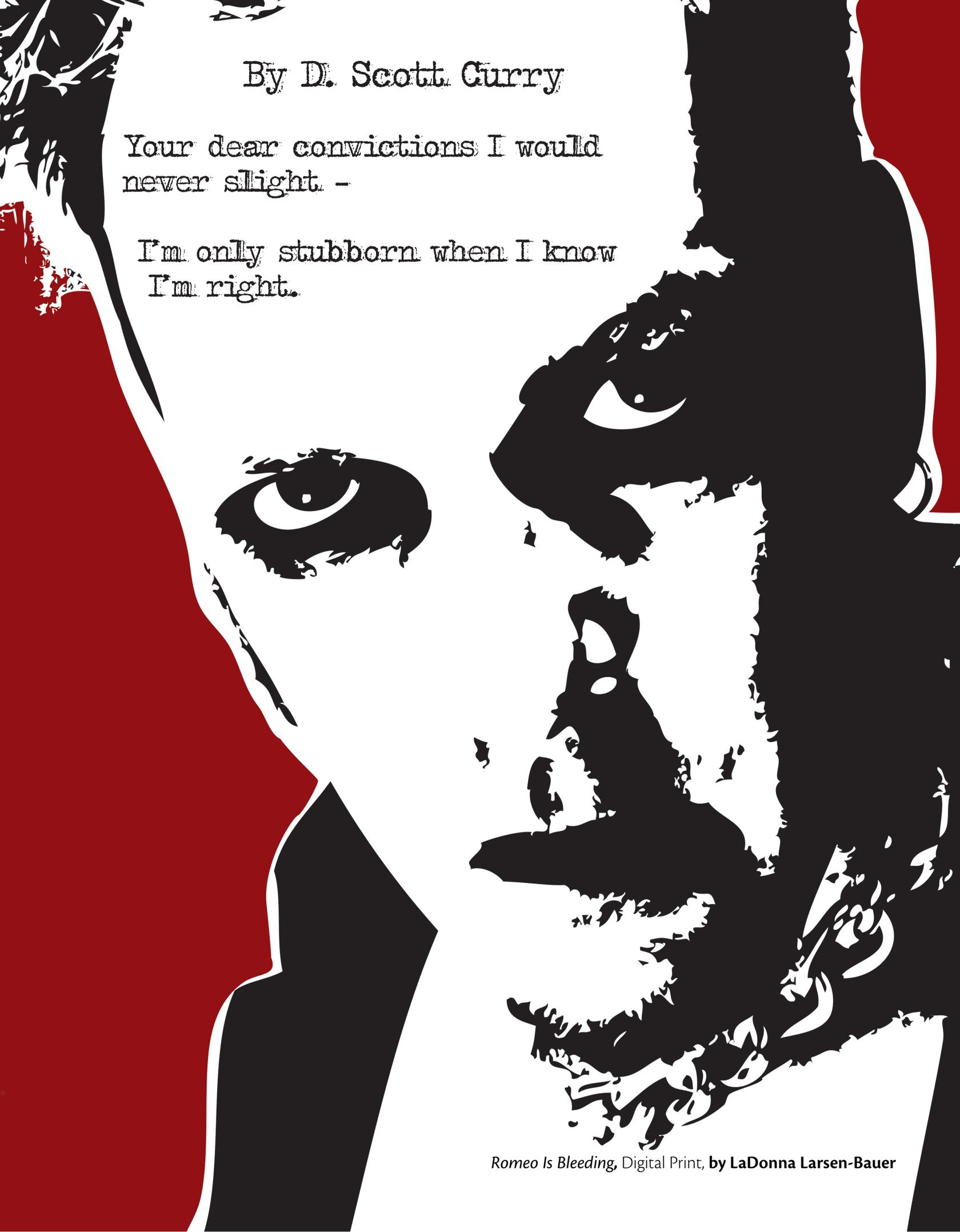


Hand It Over Now, Pencil and Graphite, by Pat Sutterfield



Lesson

in Tolerance



By D. Scott. Curry

Your dear convictions I would
never slight. -

I'm only stubborn when I know
I'm right.

My NAME IS FROGGY LAYTON

By Lucien René Nanton

I took a nap and woke up crying. I'd been doing that pretty often recently. I knew why, but I didn't want to think about it.

My name is Froggy Layton. Aunt Libby called me Froggy because as a baby I didn't crawl, I hopped. Or, anyway, that's what Uncle Ray says. Uncle Ray was my momma's baby brother and he was there, so he should know.

Papa Lester says Aunt Libby called me Froggy 'cause I looked like one.

I rolled off my cot in the back room and stretched. My skin was sticky from sweating in my sleep. I'd slept away half the day, like a fool.

Aunt Libby was in the kitchen cooking something or other; it didn't smell too good, but at least she wasn't burning it. She had her back to me, so I hooked an apple from the barrel and scooted for the door. She turned around lickety-spit, and swung her spoon at me.

"Froggy Layton! You put that back! It's gonna spoil your supper!"

I slipped past her and banged out the screen door into the sunshine. Supper was gonna spoil my supper, not no apple.

"At least put on a shirt!"

Shirts and shoes were for winter, when you had no choice. Summertime I was free: no school, no rules. This was gonna be my last year of school anyhow. Uncle Ray figured that I didn't need no education past the sixth grade. Next year I would start working in the mines with him. He said it would make me a man.

But that was a full year away, so it wasn't important. What was important was that I made it down past the creek to the meadow in time. I wanted to be there when they were choosing teams so I wouldn't end up playing with the dregs. I liked the feel of the grass under my feet and the way the creek sung as it flowed over large, round rocks. If I hadn't slept so long, and had some string, I might even have been able to snag a trout for my supper. I could have roasted it on a long stick. I knew how to make a fire without matches, just like an Injun.

I'd missed the first and second games of the day, but they didn't matter. They were just warm-ups for the third game. We called it the Deal-Breaker. Yes, sir.

Sometimes it got real rough, but that's when it was funner. One

time we had to carry Tommy Wilson a mile and a half home with a broken leg. That was the best game ever.

I'd knocked a possum out of one of the trees near here with a rock. I would've cooked it, too, but when I grabbed it by the tail it turned around and bit me. I've a scar between my thumb and pointer finger to show for it. I'm real proud of that scar. It meant that I had been in a battle and survived. I couldn't quite claim to have won; that possum licked me fair and square.

I STOPPED DEAD WHEN I REALIZED IT WAS A GIRL. A BLONDE GIRL WITH RED RIBBONS IN HER HAIR AND A PINK DRESS WITH WHITE TRIM. SHE EVEN HAD ON SHOES!

Then I was out from under the trees into the sunshine. I always liked that, coming from the darkness into light bright enough to make you squint. I thought that was what it musta been like being born. I tried not

to think that too long, though, because it would just make me sad.

Dandelions and bluebonnets stretched as far as the eye could see. The grass was waist high everywhere 'cepting the baseball diamond. The grass there had been trampled underfoot to the point where you could slide into home and scare up a respectable dust cloud. Yes, sir. I rubbed my hands together and trotted towards the noise. I could hear 'em yelling all the way from here.

They were all there, Little Johnnie Walsh, Big John Edwards, Thirsty McGee, Earl Ray Jenkins, everybody. Plus one. Someone new.

I stopped dead when I realized it was a girl. A blonde girl with red ribbons in her hair and a pink dress with white trim. She even had on shoes! I scratched my head, trying to figure out what a girl was doing way out here two miles from town.

She glanced at me; she had big blue eyes and freckles.

So that was what the ruckus was about. I stuffed my hands into my pockets and kicked at a rock.

She walked right over and frowned at me. We was the same height, which ain't saying much. I'm small for my age.

Uncle Ray says that's on account of me having pneumonia as a baby. He says that it shoulda killed me. The doctor had said that it would, but he figures that when Death came a'calling I traded my height for some extra years. He said that I owed it to my momma to make something of myself, something decent.

"They won't let me play," she said.

I shrugged.

"What's your name?"

"Froggy," I mumbled, looking at an ant crawling over my big toe. I wondered where it was going.

"What?"

Big John Edwards stepped right next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. She shook it off. Big John looked down at me; at fourteen he was almost the size of a man grown and was real proud of it. "His name is Froggy Layton."

"Froggy?" She said it like she couldn't believe it.

Big John smirked. "Yeah, Froggy."

She looked back at me. "Is that your real name?"

My palms were sweaty. I wiped them on my jeans. "I guess so, I ain't never been called nothing else."

She frowned at me and put a balled fist on her hip. "Froggy, huh? So if I kissed you, would you turn into a prince?"

The fellas all hooted and made catcalls. Big John glowered and tried to put his arm around her again.

She stepped away from him, closer to me. "Why you been crying?" she asked.

"I ain't been cryin'." I tried to puff out my chest and look as grown as Big John.

"Yes, you have. It left tracks in the dirt on your face." She cupped her mouth with her right hand. "Maybe you should wash your face more often," she whispered.

"Froggy's been cryin'!" I heard someone yell. Then the worst thing in the world happened. They all started to laugh at me. I had nowhere to go; nowhere to hide. So I stood there and took it. I figured they had to stop sometime, and they did. Eventually.

Then it was back to business. The business of choosing up sides. That's when the trouble really began. Turned out this girl wanted to play. Big John tried to explain that this game wasn't for girls, it was a man's game. It was the Deal-Breaker, for Pete's sake!

"Anything a boy can do, I can do better!"

I shook my head at this fool business.

Big John looked at her and smiled. "You think so?"

"Yes!"

Big John laughed and winked at me.

"Can you write your name in the snow?"

"There's no snow now so it don't really matter, does it?"

Thirsty started to laugh, but Big John just looked at him. Thirsty found something else to do.

"This game is kinda rough." I hadn't known I was going to speak.

She looked at me. "You play it."

I nodded. "There's only the one rule..."

There she was, tapping that foot. "Well, what is it?"

"Win."

Her eyes got large, but she didn't back down. She turned to Big John. "If Froggy can play then so can I!"

Big John grinned, showed all his teeth. "You do have a point there. If a Cry-Baby can play, why not a girl!"

For the second time everyone was laughing at me. I shoulda stayed at home.

Big John tried to put his arm around her shoulders

again (I guess he figured third time's the charm). She ducked under his embrace. "You can play on my team," said Big John, "I'll protect you."

She shook her head, her pigtails danced 'round her face. "I wanna play on Froggy's team."

Big John turned red. He stared at me like I had done something. I stepped back. Nobody makes Big John mad. Nobody living, anyways.

She pointed at me and said it again. "I wanna play on his side."

Big John had a mean look to his eye. "Stop talking nonsense and come on over here."

"No. I'm on Froggy's team."

I think everyone but Big John and the new girl were holding their breath, waiting for the explosion.

Big John nodded. "All right. Me and Froggy are team captains. Froggy, you picked first —"

"I did no such thing!"

"Yeah, you did, Cry-Baby; you picked Sophie." Big John picked Little Johnny Walsh and the ruin went on from there.

I got stuck with Thirsty and the rest of the lame or blind. Oh, and a girl. What a team. Well, Papa Lester always says if life gives you lemons, suck 'em.

Big John walked over to me with a penny in his hand. "Call it," he said.

"Heads."

Big John nodded. "That's good, because yours is gonna roll before the day is over."

"I didn't do nothing!"

"Don't matter, I'm gonna give you another reason to cry." He flipped the coin.

I watched it going end over end up into the sky. There were a few white puffs up there, but no chance of rain to save me. The penny came down and rolled in the dirt. Everyone jumped back from it.



Breaking Through, Clay, by Monica Winters



Verdant Symphony, Photograph, by **J.L. Hunter**

It finally settled to a stop. Big John shouldered his way through the crowd and looked down at the penny. Then he snatched it up and said a grown-up word. He stomped toward me, looked down, poked me in the chest. "It's heads. What you gonna do? Bat or field?"

Nobody's ever accused me of being simple; short, yes, but never simple. The choice was obvious. "Bat."

Big John gathered up his team and went to the field.

I turned to my team and looked at them. My heart sank. We were going to get creamed. Whoever heard of letting a girl play? They were all looking at me, especially her. I looked back at her. "Can you hit?"

She nodded her head. "A little."

"Well, I'm gonna need your best game today." I turned to the rest of the team and called out names for the batting order.

Sophie frowned at me and grabbed my arm as we were all walking toward home base. "Why am I batting last?"

I sighed. "You're not batting last, I am."

"But —"

"But nothing. The stronger batters go first. I don't know how well you hit, so you're far back in the batting order."

"But you're last."

I grinned. "I never said I was a strong hitter."

She grinned back.

Four innings passed by the time her turn to bat came around. We

were bruised, bloodied, and just plumb tired. Big John's team was out-hitting us, out-fielding us, and plain out-fighting us. We hadn't scored. Not once.

"Sophie," I said. I wanted to spit, but I knew my manners. "Just bunt. Try to get on base."

She gave me a look.

"That's what I'm going to do."

She shook her head. "We can't win, can we?"

"No."

"So let's go out swinging."

A smile spread over my face. I gave a whoop and turned to my team. We all grinned at each other. We were going to lose, and lose big, but we would go down swinging.

I handed Sophie the stick. "Go get 'em."

Sophie grinned and stepped up to home plate. I hadn't thought that things could get any worse.

Big John gave a yell when he saw Sophie at the plate. He was playing first base. He trotted over to his pitcher, Earl Ray Jenkins, and they put their heads together.

"Hurry it up! Time's a'wasting!" I yelled.

Earl Ray headed toward first base. Big John stayed on what we called the pitcher's mound, but it was actually a hollow in the ground.

"What's going on, Big John?" I asked.

"Just playing by the rules, Cry-Baby."

Sophie looked over at me.

"There are no rules," I said.

She nodded and took up her position. She held the stick right, like she had played before. Truth to tell she was a better player than me.

Big John wound up and let fly. She didn't have a chance. The ball hit her in her ribs, knocked her down.

Big John laughed. I didn't like him very much.

Sophie got up and looked back at me. There were tears welling in her eyes. "Do I get to walk now?"

I shook my head. "Go ahead and give up the out."

She bit her lower lip and shook her head. "No, we're going out swinging." She stepped back up to the plate, and put the stick back on her shoulder.

Big John hit her seven more times. The last time he hit her in the head. She laid there, dirt soiling her pretty pink dress. I heard her sob, just once. It was real soft, but I heard it. I saw her gather herself, and knew she was going to get back up.

Big John knew it, too. He left the pitcher's mound and stalked toward home plate, his big hands clenched into fists.

Sophie was using the stick as a crutch to get back to her feet. Big John kicked it away. Sophie gasped and fell back to the ground. Big John stood over her. "Stay down," he said. "Just you stay down."

Sophie shook her head no and tried to get up again.

Big John swore and kicked the hand she was using to support her weight. Sophie hit the ground hard. She held her wrist and whimpered.

Everyone was silent, still. We stared at the two of them, appalled and fascinated by both.

I didn't know I'd moved until I had stepped over Sophie and stood in Big John's shadow. I think if I had known what I was going to do I wouldn't have done it. I would have been too scared. But I didn't

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think, not really. I mean, I thought about my momma and wondered if she was looking down on me, if she would be proud of me, if she would think that I had finally done something worth her giving her life for. I thought of Uncle Ray telling me to make something of myself, something good, for my momma's sake. I thought of all those things, and nothing. I looked into Big John's eyes, his little eyes that glinted in the sun.

"You hadn't ought've done that," I said.

"Stay outta this, Cry-Baby, or I'll —"

"You'll what?" I said, stepping right up to him. He was a full head taller than I was, and meaty across the shoulders. "Hitting her with the ball was within the rules, but kicking her sure ain't."

"I —"

"You had no right, Big John. No right." I pointed my finger at him.

Big John looked down at me, then a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He cracked his knuckles.

Thirsty stepped up beside me. "You had no right, Big John," he said.

Then Douglas McAllister, Spoon Lewis, Gerald "Head" Hedley, the whole team was standing beside me.

Big John wasn't smiling anymore. He looked confused. He looked over his shoulder for his team but the field was deserted behind him. They had left him to fend for himself.

I thought we were going to have to fight him. He thought about it for a while, I guess he was figuring the odds, and decided against it.

He didn't say anything else; he just turned away and started walking toward town. He never played ball with us again.

I let out a huge sigh and felt my knees knocking. I wanted to cry and laugh all at the same time.

I turned around and Sophie was standing behind me. I've never seen anyone look so good with a shiner.

"Come on," she said. "I'll walk you home."

The guys clapped me on the back. "Later, Froggy," said Thirsty.

"Yeah, later," said Head.

Then they were all gone and it was just Sophie and me and the dandelions and bluebonnets in the meadow. I felt awkward.

Sophie rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on," she said. She grabbed my arm and pulled me along.

After I was going under my own steam she took her hand off my arm.

We didn't talk, we just walked. When we got to the creek she took off her socks and shoes and waded it.

She walked me right up to my doorstep. I could see Aunt Libby, standing with her mouth open, through the screen door.

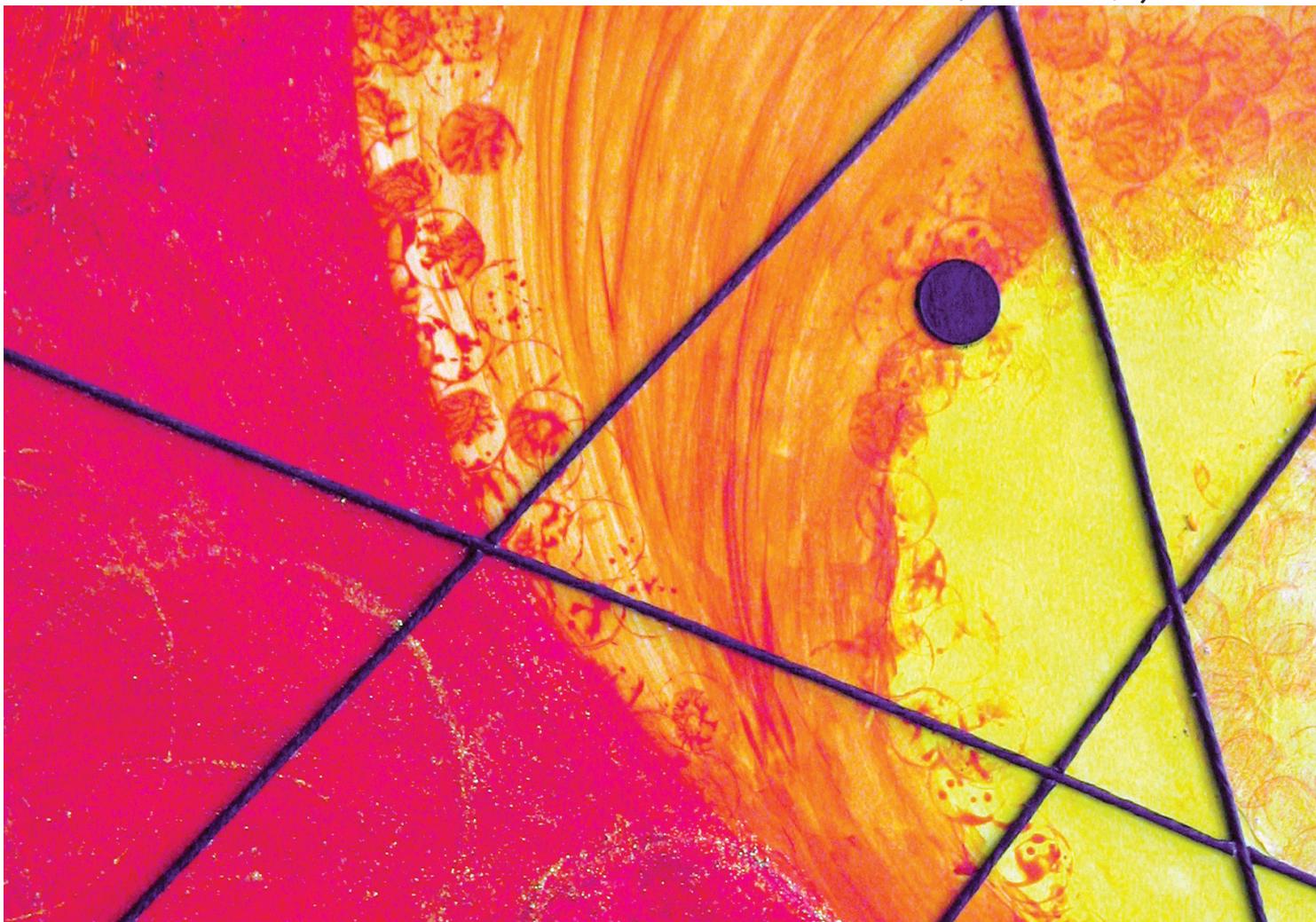
"Thanks for walking me home, Sophie." I couldn't think of anything else to say. I opened the screen door. Aunt Libby still had her mouth open.

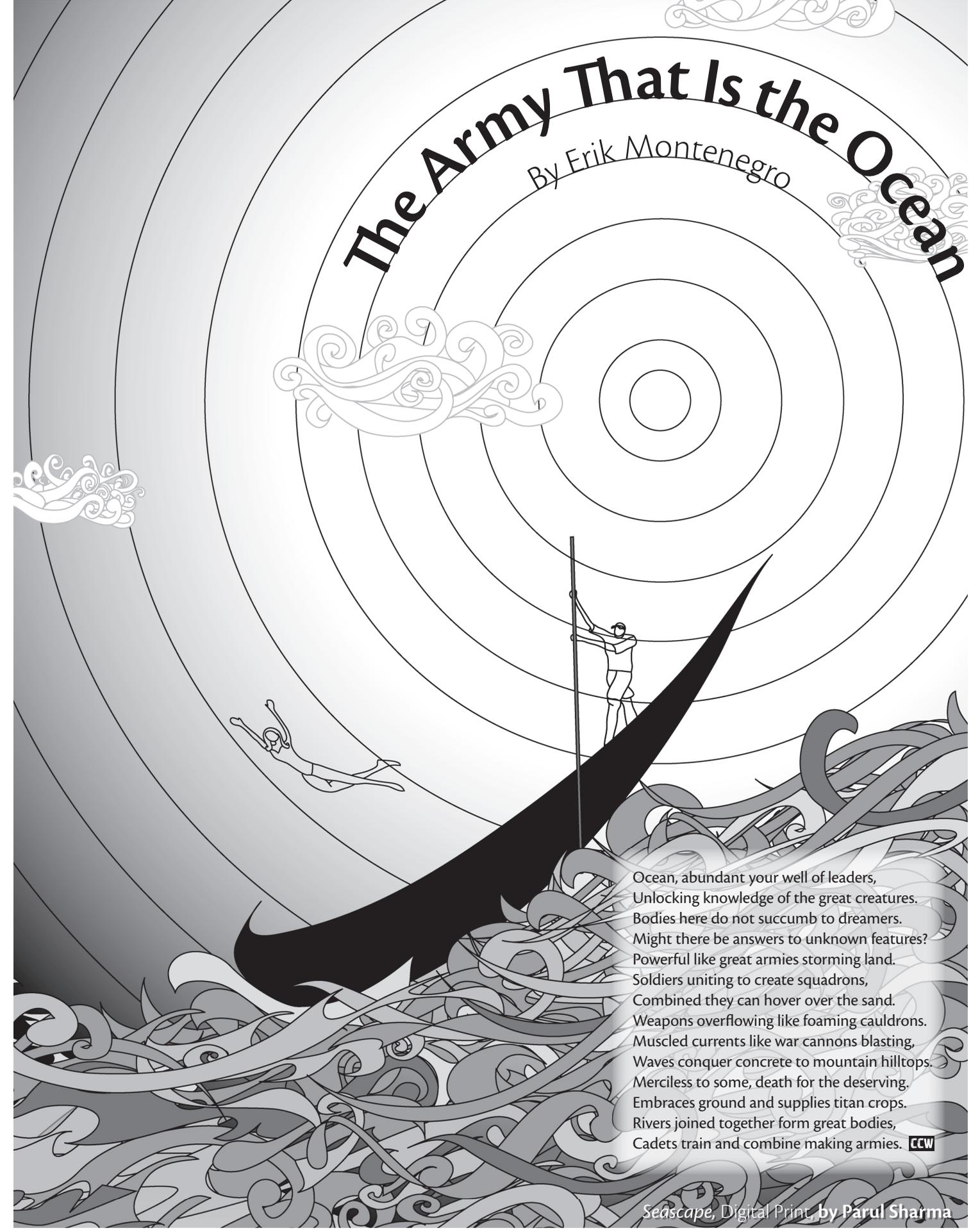
"Froggy?"

I turned around and looked back at Sophie.

"You'll always be my prince." **CCW**

Sun, Mixed Media, by Parul Sharma





The Army That Is the Ocean

By Erik Montenegro

Ocean, abundant your well of leaders,
Unlocking knowledge of the great creatures.
Bodies here do not succumb to dreamers.
Might there be answers to unknown features?
Powerful like great armies storming land.
Soldiers uniting to create squadrons,
Combined they can hover over the sand.
Weapons overflowing like foaming cauldrons.
Muscle currents like war cannons blasting,
Waves conquer concrete to mountain hilltops.
Merciless to some, death for the deserving,
Embraces ground and supplies titan crops.
Rivers joined together form great bodies,
Cadets train and combine making armies. **CCW**

Seascape, Digital Print, by Parul Sharma

Thanksgiving Breakfast

By Bryan Cepak

Francis seldom has trouble sleeping in boxcars. Nighttime brings relaxing chat or adventurous tales by his weary companions until the last conscious holdout is subdued by the constant sway and rhythmic beat of rolling stock¹ on the cold, hard iron rails. This night, however, Francis is sleeping alone. The cool autumn breeze for the past two days in Britt, Iowa, has been more than his faded denim pants and jacket can stave off. So before sundown, he had slipped aboard a dry, empty refrigerator car heading southbound with a Rock Island freight train.

His shoes are off and he is lying on his back with his hands folded underneath his head. His jacket is off, too, but it's pulled up to his neck like a blanket. He's star-gazing through the open roof-hatch as the steam train chugs along. He is thankful that tonight's overnight is well insulated. Traveling the country for the past six months, his litany of concerns before shuteye has become almost a benediction: "Will I lose my bindle² somewhere? Can I wash my clothes tomorrow? Will I find work to pay for tomorrow's supper?" He softly rubs his left ankle with his right foot to feel for the thirty bucks cash, his insurance policy he keeps hid out³ in his sock in case there's a need to disarm a hostile Pinkerton. He completes his nightly ritual by running through details he's learned from his fellow travelers to find curb or tree markers at the next stop. These painted markers let hoboes know that inside this house, or within that business, resides a warm, generous heart. Francis falls into a deep sleep.

A booming voice breaks through the roof-hatch, "Boss! Boss! Wake up, boss! Come on, you've gotta get up!"

Francis begins to stir. "Huh? Wha? What time is it?" He brushes his jacket off and wonders where the voice is coming from. "Ah, what time is it?" He runs his fingers through his hair. "I must have slept through the whole night. Hey, it's still dark!" The train makes a loud slam and a shudder as it moves into position at a meat packing plant. He sits up and reaches for his shoes.

"Never mind that, boss! You're about to die from a fresh icing!"

"WHAT? I gotta get out of here! Where's my shoes!"

"There's no time for that, boss! Here, throw them up to me, and your stuff!"

Francis feels around in the dark to collect his scattered belongings. The train makes another bang and a hard shudder and he stumbles into the wall. His compartment echoes with falling gravel-like noise from crushed ice being poured through the hatch of the refrigerator car ahead of his. He scoops up his shoes and small bindle and quickly wraps them in his jacket. He shouts at the faint image of a man at his hatch, "Here! Catch!" One toss, and a long arm reaches down through the hatch and snags it.

"Got it! Now come on! You ain't got much time!"

He grabs hold of the flat steel ladder and scurries his way up. Close to the top, the long arm reaches down again and jerks him halfway out the hatch. He gasps and is surprised by the stranger's brute strength. Before

he can bat an eye, the man has him by the belt and pulls him all the way out. Francis is dwarfed by the man's stature. Shaken, he faces him and stutters, "Why, you're a Negro."

The stranger murmurs, "So the man's got eyes." His tone changes to emphatic whispers. "Now listen, we gotta run before we're seen up here. Hurry up!"

As fast as he can hurry barefoot in the dark, Francis chases the man off the train and across the tracks. He grabs his gear that the stranger tossed to the ground and stumbles down an embankment into the scrub brush. "We've got to stop here. I need to put my shoes on." The train slams and shudders a third time. He looks back wide-eyed as his car moves beneath the ice chutes.

The stranger motions toward the north: "Once we make it to that road over yonder, we'll be all right. The road is just off the railroad property and it leads into town. We need to go!"

They make the road in no time and their pace slows to a lazy stroll. Francis walks up from behind and grabs the man by the arm to turn him. "You saved my life. You saved my life! How? How can I ever repay you?"

The stranger kicks at a rock, "Aw, shucks. It ain't nothin'!"

"No, really, how'd you even know I was in there? What's your name?"

The stranger stretches his arms out to yawn, then looks down at Francis and smiles. "I was two boxcars back, and in Britt when I saw you catch out⁴ on that reefer.⁵ I thought, man, oh man, he's lookin' for trouble. So I just had to watch out for things. My proper name is Benjamin, but all my friends call me Slo Freight."

"Slo Freight, there's nothing slow about you! You saved my life! Hot dog! My name is Francis, but my family calls me Fran." Francis walks down the road with Slo as if he has springs in his shoes. "Guess what, Slo. Today is Thanksgiving Day! Yes, sir, Thanksgiving. By the time we get into town it will be sunup, and we'll have a Thanksgiving breakfast!"

Slo kicks at another stone in the road. "What's this nonsense about Thanksgiving? By the way, I figure, today is November twelve. Besides, where are we gonna get this so-called Thanksgiving breakfast?"

"Slo, you're all worked up over details." Francis smiles. "We'll find a café in town and I've got money."

"Sleepin' in a reefer, and talking about Thanksgiving and money. Say, what kind of hobo are you?"

Francis deadpans, "An amateur."

Slo takes a good look at him and laughs, "You ain't kiddin'. So what are you doing out here anyway? You don't even look like you're nineteen."

"I'm an even twenty, yes sir! I left home six months ago. I told my parents about a good paying job in California and that's where they think I am now. So I've been to California, Washington, and New York City, too. You name the place and I've been there! I never had a good job lined up, though. Back home I felt like I was living in a box. You know, I just wanted to bust loose. I've been away from home for a while now and I miss my mother, so I'm heading home."



My Favorites, Acrylic, by Junko Otsu

Slo laughs again, "So you're a momma's boy, huh? Leav'en home to learn about life and it's time to come home."

Francis looks down at his sore feet and scratches the back of his head. "I don't know. I do all right on my own. Say, what about you? Where are you heading? Do you have family?"

Slo picks up a stone and throws it down a gutter, "My sister and I rode the rail together after our family broke apart. I suppose we also wanted to, as you say, bust loose. I've been out here now for three years and I love the freedom. I just love it! I did find a steady gig up in Chicago, though. I was makin' one buck, two bits a day cleaning brick from building demolitions, but my sister, well, she got real sick last winter. All my money was goin' to the doctor, and it bothered her so. I told her that's all right, but she up and left. Snuck away. She left a note sayin' she's on her way down to Tallahassee. Hopped on a freight train and was gone. Tallahassee's where she was born, you know. With that cough, I sure hope she's all right. Anyway, my job finally ran out and so did my money, so I'm catchin' my way out to find her."

Francis loosens his collar and runs his index finger around his neck. He puts on a smile and taps at his temple. "Don't forget. Today is Thanksgiving Day!"

The two men stroll into town and come across a small railroad diner. He leads Slo up onto the front porch and motions him in. Slo glances at a familiar sign above the doorway. "Nah, Fran. You go on ahead. I'm all right. I'm not hungry anyway."

"Not hungry! Are you bughouse? I've been hearing your stomach growl for the past hour. Let's eat, man!"

An off duty waiter stops Francis in his tracks. "Where you boys think you're going?"

Confused, Francis scratches his head and looks at Slo, and then back at the waiter. "We're here to eat breakfast."

Arms crossed, the waiter holds the men at bay. "We don't need any panhandling hoboes around here. You boys just go on and beat it before the owner finds out you're here."

Slo pipes in, "Everything's all right, Fran. I'm not hungry. Let's just keep on down the road."

The two men smell the cooking food wafting from the roof vents

and Francis hears Slo's stomach growl again. He scowls and pulls the cash from his sock. "We've got money and we're eating breakfast!"

The waiter's eyes roll crossways to look at the wad of bills stuck in his face. "Well okay, but just you. Your Negro friend has to wait outside."

"WHAT?" Francis shouts.

The waiter points to a plaque above the door, "Read the sign. Whites only."

"You don't understand! That man SAVED MY LIFE!" Francis crumples the bills in his fist. His head drops. He slowly straightens his money, slips it into his pocket and turns towards Slo with a sad look. With all his Thanksgiving talk, he completely forgot about old man Jim Crow.

"Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute." The waiter unfolds his arms and looks over Francis and Slo. "Tell you what, the boss isn't here yet. He never gets out of bed this early. Why don't you boys just make your way around back and we'll set up a table for you in the kitchen."

Slo laughs softly, rubs his hands together and whispers, "Do you hear my stomach, Fran? Let's eat!"

The off duty waiter makes arrangements with the cook to ensure that Slo and Francis are treated like kings. Their table is made in the corner of the kitchen away from the stoves. It's covered with a fresh, crisp white tablecloth with extra utensils. Slo and Francis are seated. Water, juice, milk, sugar for their steaming cups of fresh brewed coffee; nothing is held back. Then come the plates with heaping mounds of sizzling bacon, eggs over easy, toasted bread with butter, grits smothered with honey, pan-fried potatoes. There's no disruption in service either. It all keeps coming. Francis watches Slo breathe deeply through his nostrils to savor the aroma and wonders how long it's been since Slo's eaten so well. Both men have a look of contentment on their faces. Slo leans toward Francis, smiles and whispers across the table, "Yes, sir, today's Thanksgiving Day."

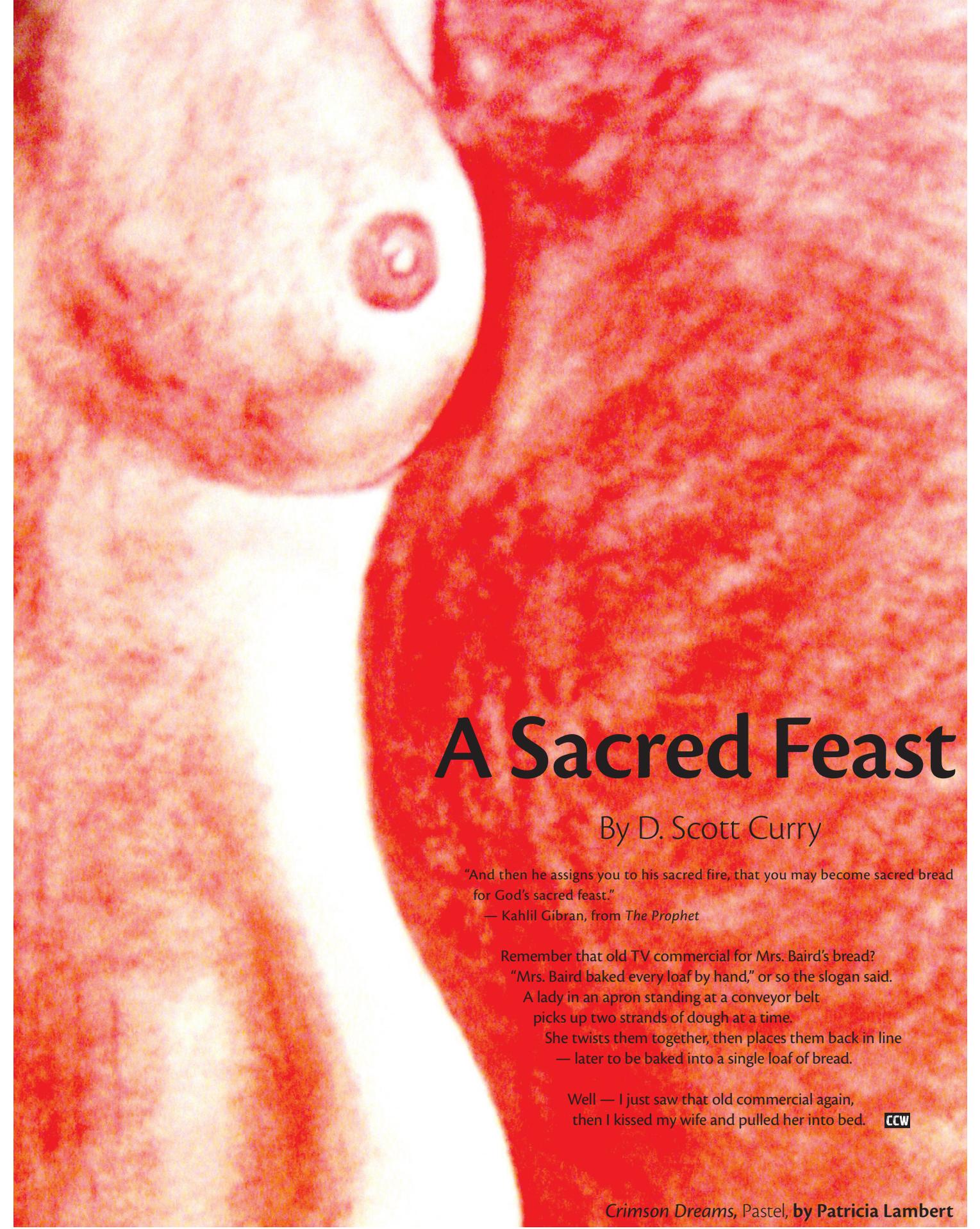
¹ Railroad vehicle (car) that is not a locomotive.

² Hobo backpack.

³ Hobo slang for valuables hidden for emergency use only.

⁴ Hobo slang to stow away.

⁵ Railroad slang for refrigerator car. **CCW**



A Sacred Feast

By D. Scott Curry

"And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God's sacred feast."

— Kahlil Gibran, from *The Prophet*

Remember that old TV commercial for Mrs. Baird's bread?

"Mrs. Baird baked every loaf by hand," or so the slogan said.

A lady in an apron standing at a conveyor belt
picks up two strands of dough at a time.

She twists them together, then places them back in line
— later to be baked into a single loaf of bread.

Well — I just saw that old commercial again,
then I kissed my wife and pulled her into bed.

CCW

Crimson Dreams, Pastel, by Patricia Lambert



Spanish Harlem: 2:30 a.m., Photograph, by Richard Sharum

LOU KRUMP AND THE CASE OF THE ZOMBIE PLANT

By Brian Oi

It was a dark and stormy night. The kind of night in which the rain washes away the meanness and stench from the ugly beast we call a city, but just barely. The kind of night that chills a man to the bone and leaves him crumpled on the sidewalk in an alcohol-induced coma. It was the kind of night where an ounce of booze and a dollar bill will get some lucky fella's lap warmed up by a spicy gal named Kandy. Yeah, it was that kind of night. Only it wasn't raining and I didn't have any dollar bills.

The squat wooden building I occupied was located smack dab in the middle of the wharf. Its neon signs reflected off the water's edge like some surrealistic sunrise. It was surely a true marvel of architecture. The flaking sign on the battered door read "Mickey's Bar," but it really should have read "Lou Krump — Private Investigator." That's me, the famous Lou Krump, private investigator to the stars and important government officials. Well, I was anyway. That is, until she abandoned me and left me the empty shell of man I once was. But that's another story.

It was about ten o'clock on a Friday night. I was nursing a 300-proof vomit special and eating a rutabaga with limburger sandwich when suddenly a dark figure emerged. Framed by the empty door-

way, the moonlight gave the figure an eerie yet waif-like appearance. It gracefully sashayed over to me, bent over, and whispered breathily into my ear.

"I'm not wearing a bra, Lou."

"Uhh, neither am I, Walter."

"Don't lie, Lou, I know you are."

"Oh, shut up."

That's Walter my assistant. He was also my sister Olga Peyton's pride and joy. Man, sometimes I could just scream, but what could you do? He was family. All I could do was give him my sternest look.

"Jeez, unc, you look terrible. Whatcha do last night anyways?"

"Well," I replied, "I spent a quiet night at home, if that's any of your business. Hic! Hic!"

"Uhh, yeah, dude, whatever you say. But, hey, the reason I came here is that we may have a case. It seems there's been an incident at the local nuclear power plant. Are we taking it?"

"Nah," I said. "I'm gonna take a nap. You go home now."

~§~

It was about two o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon when I arrived at the Sunnyvale Happy Fuel Power Plant. The manager, Jan Michel

Vicario, a green-faced and gaunt man in his forties, met me at the gate. His body was covered in scabs and his stringy hair obscured his eyes so I couldn't tell if he was looking at me or not. Jeez, he could take better care of himself.

"So can you tell me what the problem is?" I asked.

"Oh, we just have a few minor items missing, some containment rods, some enriched uranium, nothing to worry about really," Jan Michel replied, as he absently plucked a loose flap of skin from his forehead. "I don't know why we called you."

"Me either. I think I'll go home now. That'll be five hundred dollars." I wasn't joking. Well, actually I was, but he didn't know that.

"Oh, wait. There is something. Apparently some drunken idiot got in last night and raised a ruckus in the control room. He got away, though, before the guard could catch him. Say, do you smell something?"

"Uhh, no, what does it smell like?"

"I don't rightfully know," he practically drooled, "but it sure smells good!"

"Stop looking at me like that; you're giving me the creeps. Go away, I have work to do."

I brushed quickly past him and went into the drab concrete building. I walked around for about an hour looking at nothing in particular. Maybe I should've asked Jean Michel where the control room was. Nah, I'd find it. I was about to give up when I bumped into a large metal entryway. I pushed hard and the rusted door squeaked open.

Large black snakes as thick as my neck twisted out of the shiny metal boxes that lined each wall of the darkened room. In the midst of this area, the enormous cables converged on a narrow console as if they were devouring it. My eagle eyes scanned the room and I slowly made my way to the console. Hmm, very peculiar. A large flashing red button on the console caught my eye. It looked as if it had been pushed in. There was something oddly familiar about it. A ten-by-ten-foot sign overhead read "Nuclear Facility Auto Destruct Switch, whatever you do, do NOT push this button!" Very peculiar indeed! As my view dropped from the sign I caught sight of something very beautiful but also very disturbing. Was that a... no! It couldn't possibly be! A half-eaten rutabaga with limburger sandwich!

Oh, man. Was it hot in here? I couldn't breathe. It felt as if a half-ton monkey was dancing the cancan on my chest. My feet started moving even before my eyes locked on the door. I had to reach it. I had to get out of here! I had almost reached my salvation when some unknown force slammed me to the ground.

"Awww, dude," I yelled in my highest pitched girly voice. "Get offa me!"

Jan Michel only responded with a grunt. His unfeeling eyes glazed over with the kind of look bar patrons have at closing time.

"Get off! Aaaagh! Are you trying to give me a scalp hickey?? GROSS! Hey, look I'm all for everyone doing their own thing, but I'm just not that way. I like women! Now lemme go!"

With all my might I shoved Jan Michel's decaying body away from me and he landed on the floor with a loud dry crunch. His head had completely twisted around. Panting, I patted Jean Michel on the back, or front, or whatever it was now, and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Damn, that was too close.

After taking a few moments to rest I concluded that this was, indeed, a job well done. It was obviously Jan Michel's fault. I reached into his coat pocket for my payment, when a bony green hand reached out and grabbed me. Oh, crap! I left old Happyville running and screaming like a wild man.

On my way past the gate, the phone rang and I answered it. "Uh, yes, this is Jan Michel," I said. "Well, no, no, it's really not a good time to visit."

"Well, yes. They're doing a spectacular job. Uh huh. Especially that Lou Krump guy. He is really something else!" I said, my eyes darting around. "But remember, if anything goes wrong it's all my fault. Really, I take full responsibility."

The voice on the phone continued for a few more minutes and I finally replied, "Yes. Yes, thank you Mr. President, sir. You, too. Goodbye now. I really have to go."

~§~

"Here's your drink, sir," the pretty blonde waitress said as she gingerly placed the mai tai next to my outdoor recliner. "Will there be anything else for you?"

"No, this is just fine. Could you turn down the sun a little maybe? You just gotta love the Bahamas."

She smiled and turned to leave. Oh, man, how I loved to see that gal walk. In the background I could hear all the television anchormen in an uproar.

"Sunnyvale Happy Fuel Power Plant overrun by zombies!... President stands by Sunnyvale manager Vicario... mysterious rutabaga sandwich found! Chief Vicario tries to eat President's brain! Vicario fired!"

Exhausted, I turned to the chair next to me and asked, "So what do you feel like eating for dinner tonight?"

"Ahhhh, grrahhhh," was all Walter could manage. His eyes just stared blankly in the direction of the pool. Poor Walter had followed me to the power plant and, well, you get the picture.

"Okay, we eat later," I replied. "Just remember to wear lots of sunscreen, k?"

Man, that Walter could be a pain sometimes, but he was family. Whattya gonna do? 

Dancing Skeleton, Graphite, by Mark Dungan

William Carlos Williams

By Larry Koebernick

People say I'm plain, and I am.
I don't embellish. Why should I?
Whatever you need to know,
You can know through the senses.

I live in Rutherford, New Jersey,
My home town,
Twenty miles outside New York City.
I'm a doctor there.

I'm a proud American.
And unlike Eliot or Pound,
My poetry is grown from native soil.
On the land of innovators and builders,

I build poems from the things I've found.
The only universal is the local.
Little things are timeless.
It's about the little things — you know,

And why say more than you can see?
Stay with the images that you feel.
I distrust the dressings of imagination.
There are no ideas but in things.

A doctor sees life brought into this world.
An ageless process that constantly renews.
I seek to create a new beginning for the word,
To reveal in things, again, their mystery.

I make a simplicity for personal speech
With a flat language and nothing else beneath.
My images construct a dance
And make a music that delights the sense,

Much like the rhythms of a good walk
That allows a changing pace,
A stop and start, and then turns
Easily and quickly without the balance lost.

It's not what a poet says that counts
But what he makes that lives,
Like a red wheelbarrow
On which so much depends. 



Concentration, Ink, by Jennifer Ciaccio



Night Life, Photograph, by Les Crader

THE NEW OLD WEST

By Thomas J. McMahon

The stranger ambled through the swinging doors into the Blue River Saloon. He pushed his hat back on his head and hooked his thumbs in his gun belt. His .44 revolver was tied down like a gun fighter.

Silence spread as the stranger stared down each cowboy. He tossed his Gold Card on the bar: "Whiskey for everyone."

Pushing and shoving, the dozen patrons stormed the bar to get their free drinks.

"Thanks, stranger," said Dusty Rose, the bar owner.

"Least I can do, seeing as how I just come into a lot of money."

"Did you hit a rich gold vein?"

"No, I sold my condo for –"

Blackie Harowich burst through the swinging doors and surveyed the bar. "What in the hell is going on?"

"This here stranger just bought the house

drinks," Dusty explained.

"I don't give a damn about that. I want to know whose red SUV is in my spot."

The bar became very still. The word spread; Blackie was pissed off. Turning from the bar, the stranger looked at Blackie with a crooked grin. "I didn't see no sign with your name on it."

Blackie faced the stranger; their eyes locked. A cell phone rang near the bar. Its terrified owner frantically jabbed at the off-button to silence the offensive ringing.

Blackie's hand moved closer to his 9mm. Dusty Rose stepped between the two men. "Boys, I don't want trouble in here. If there's going to be gunplay, take it over behind the 7-11."

It was too late.

Blackie grabbed his 9mm and swung it up level with the stranger's chest and pulled the trigger. The expected explosion didn't come; he'd forgotten to lever a round into the chamber.

The stranger was slower, but more effective. The .44 leaped as the first round blasted across the small distance between them and smashed into Blackie's heart. Twice more the big gun barked, unleashing hot lead into Blackie's stomach and head.

"Shit!" Dusty yelled before the body hit the floor. "Andy, get a mop and bucket. Hurry, the blood is going all over the new hardwood floor. The rest of you get Blackie's body out onto the street before the sheriff gets here."

"Dusty, shouldn't we wait for the CSI crew before we move the body?" asked the bartender.

"Shut up and get back behind the bar."

The stranger finished his drink and handed Dusty a note. "This is my email address; tell the sheriff that's the best way to contact me."

The crowd parted and the stranger walked out, got into his red SUV and drove off into the gathering dusk. **CCW**

ATALANTA AND THE GOLDEN APPLES

By Bonnie McClellan-Swank

Since Meleager killed his uncles (both)
For the sake of your pretty face,
You've set aside your silver bow
And traded hunting for the race.
The man who wants you to wive
He must take up the chase.
But what prize to win?

your pretty head, your blushing hide
the land, the cash, the pride
that will dower you.

Ah! but if his grasp this fleet maiden miss?

No blushing bride he'll own
but pay his debt to Dis.

If only they had the sense to leave well enough alone...
you never wanted this.

Still they've come –

stand pawing at the starting line like Phoebus' horses
primed to haul the weight of day across dawn's broken rim.
You flash a pitying glance at them
then gird your softer self with iron will
to win -

"What idiots," you think,
"would gamble death for lust?"

You set aside your cloak and stand;

slender virgin, lily pale, in your running dress
fringe grazing your thigh
as you play teasing rabbit
to their panting hounds
but rabbit is swifter than breath
and dogs will die.

Will you stay to watch the executions
By your father duly meted out?
No, you've seen enough of death,
The Boar, Meleager and his kin, and now these fools
Who traded life for the chance
To own your glowing skin.

But who is this? Striding willow light and straight

Across the field like Eros unwinged;

face as gentle, fair, and blue eyes just as bright.
It's Hippomenes! the boy who, standing at the finish,
Called your foot first across the line.
Now, enchanted by your fluid grace,
He's come to offer challenge

You see it in his face though he's still six steps away.

You want desperately to press your soft fingers to his sweet lips, saying:

"Hippomenes — No! My thigh, my breast,
my blushing cheek — no part of me
can be worth this!"

But it's too late,

The words escape, he taunts:

"What, no trouble for you to outrun
that rack of tortoises? All clatter and no meat!
I think that I could win you running, as I can,
like Zephyr's sigh and twice as fleet!"

"Proud as a lion," you think, admiring.

Still the oracle's warning like a tocsin clangs:

"Atalanta, do not marry; it will be your ruin...
and his."

and so you say:

"I'm ready when you are — Tortoise!"
shaking your head, wondering which pazzo god
has willed this youth to death.

Is he speaking to this god now, eyes up, head tilted
and what is that in his hands?

But now they've called the start

And you are running hard out...

but still, he's managed, somehow
to catch
you

up!

What's this he's flung aside?

glowing golden in the grass —
an apple like a jewel of heaven?
But wait! Now he's far ahead

and you must panting run to nip
his heels again!
From the laggard's place you see
his legs are strong,
now closer,
the golden curl against his neck...
his foot strikes the ground
no firmer than a feather.

He flies but you fly faster!
quick, quick! he casts again —
what now! does he have another?
Your foot falters in consternation and
in fear:

What god's game is this,
played with magic fruit?
Who is meant to win?
Who is meant to lose?

Ach! Damn, he's ahead again!
You run,
you run,
you see that he's begun to lose his wind!
The goal is near; you register the terror on his face
The prayer in his eyes though he's looking through you,
past — at something else...
his arm
his hand
he drops the final golden treasure
at your feet.

You stop dead
in shock
and then it's done
in that one
brief intake of breath
he's beaten death,
and won
the race.

With it comes your hand,
and, unknown to him, your unlucky fate.

But you're not thinking of that now.
You're thinking that he's beautiful;
Strong and slender, perhaps a hand's breadth
Taller than you — perhaps, he will make a fine husband?
Together, a matched pair
both swifter and lighter
than air.

Sweaty, your muscles stiff, you hold the unnatural apples in your hands,
gamely hoping they are a blessing...
Hippomenes comes to kiss his prize;
You are tired, his arms are warm.
As you lay your cheek against his own
you hear, for the first time,
the roar of the crowd — they sound

like lions... **CCW**

Eye Told You, Acrylic, by Junko Otsu

Another Runaway

D. Scott Curry

Under blue-white lights, nurses cry for help. "Get a doctor here, stat!"

"Sweet Jesus! Hang on, honey. Don't you die — you hear me?" They tear apart my blouse and apply leads to my broken chest. I lie flat under blue-white lights. Nurses cry out, "Have radiology standing by! The bastard raped her, too."

A gentle pat.

"Sweet Jesus, hang on. Honey, don't you die on me!" I make no effort to reply.

I can tell, although they turn their backs, under blue-white lights nurses cry for me.

One stays close. She tells me I should trust in heaven.

"There's mercy in the cross that sweet Jesus hung on. Honey, don't you die.

"Now, keep your eyes open... Open your eyes!"

But already I'm slipping into black.

Under blue-white lights, nurses cry.

"Sweet Jesus! Hang on, honey — don't you die!" **CCW**

Women Free, Mixed Media, by Richard Widener

Mrs. Hansby's Cats

By Sarah Steinbach



Cat Eyes, Sketch, by Marina Mozhayeva

Mrs. Hansby wasn't always the crazy cat lady of Rolling Glen Terrace. She had friends and a family once but that was long ago in another life. Now she was a lonely old woman who had outlived most of her loved ones and had been forgotten by the rest.

One day about six years ago Mrs. Hansby was working in her yard, back when she cared about such things, when her first cat wandered up to her. She decided to adopt him and named him Beethoven. Days later another cat came to Mrs. Hansby and she took in this cat, too, and named her Buttons. Not long after Buttons's arrival, a litter of six kittens was born. More cats came to Mrs. Hansby and kittens were born almost daily. In no time at all the old woman had around fifty cats living in her house.

It was impossible for a frail elderly woman to clean up after so many cats and after a while she simply gave up. Every surface of her house was covered with a thick layer of cat hair and the carpet was

crusted with coughed-up hair balls and vomit. Her furniture was clawed up and the stuffing spilled out onto the floor like abandoned cotton candy. The worst thing was the smell. The stench of cat piss and feces was so strong it stank up the whole block. Although Mrs. Hansby had several litter boxes strewn around her house, her entire house served as the cats' litter box.

It was no surprise that the neighbors hated the old woman. They complained of the terrible smell and of the health dangers her cats posed. Many of her cats had crusty, open sores, none had their shots, and some of them swiped at anything that moved. The neighbors threatened to call the SPCA. Deep down they felt guilty for bullying an old woman and Mrs. Hansby used this to her advantage. "These cats are like my children," she would plead. "They're a part of me. Please don't take them away from me, they're all I have." After hearing this, the angry neighbor would slink off, defeated. The cats weren't going anywhere.



Modigliani Fusion, Sketch, by Marina Mozhayeva

One spring morning Mrs. Hansby awoke to the sounds of tiny mewing at her feet. After lying down for so long, her joints had stiffened and she struggled to get up. When she finally did, she saw that a litter of five kittens had been born at the foot of her bed. Their mother, a Himalayan named Sissy, was licking her offspring clean of the afterbirth. A large puddle of it soaked in the quilt.

"Oh, I have myself five new babies," cooed the old woman to the slimy pile of kittens. "I'll have to think up names for each of you."

As she walked from her bedroom to the kitchen, dozens of cats swarmed around her legs. Some meowed plaintively, some hissed, but all of them were hungry. When she got to the kitchen she dragged out a twenty-pound bag of cat food and her weak muscles shook under the strain. She opened it and scooped some into a large pot. Then she began walking around the house tossing out nuggets like a farmer tossing feed to his chickens. "Here, babies, come get your breakfast."

Some of the cats scurried to where the food was thrown. Other looked at their elderly caretaker with disinterest.

After the cats had been fed, Mrs. Hansby went to her recliner. Before sitting she brushed away a few dried-up cat turds on the seat. It was almost time for *Guiding Light* to start and she hunted for the remote control. Her search didn't turn up the remote, but a

dead tabby instead.

"Oh, Tabitha," wailed Mrs. Hansby. The cat was stiff with rigor mortis and she noticed it was partially eaten. She hugged the dead cat to her chest and went to the backyard to bury it. The old woman had a large backyard that was like an oasis at one time. She had taken pride in maintaining it once, but now, like the rest of her home, she abandoned its care for her cats. What was once a thick, green carpet of grass was now sun-scorched stubble. The flower beds that had grown prize-winning tulips and elephant ears were now weed-choked and filled with a variety of nasty creatures.

The only part of the yard that Mrs. Hansby went to with regularity was the far back corner where she buried her dead cats. With a shovel that was leaning against a disintegrating fence, she dug a hole and placed the cat reverently in the grave. She would like to have dug deeper but her old back wouldn't allow it. She covered the cat with dirt and said a short prayer. Then she went back into the house, crying as she went.

The next day when the old woman went out to the yard to pay her respects to her dead cats, she saw an unfamiliar cat sitting by the makeshift cemetery. "Ooooh, who are you now?" cooed Mrs. Hansby, and the cat stood and stretched, showing his full size. He was easily the size of a bobcat. His markings were unique: a tri-colored calico. Male calicos were rare and a tri-colored one was unheard of.

He was big and elegant, almost regal. She had the perfect name for him: King. Over the next few weeks she tried to domesticate King. She invited him into the house to mingle with the other cats but he wasn't interested. The large cat was content to lie in the yard and sunbathe like a lion on the Serengeti plain. Her attempts to feed him Meow Mix and Fancy Feast also failed. Since King wasn't eating the food she gave him but he obviously wasn't going hungry, Mrs. Hansby wondered where he was getting his nourishment.

The other cats seemed to hold the large cat in awe and one by one Mrs. Hansby's cats began spending more time outside with King and less time inside with her. The smaller cats lay around King like a faithful harem. Afraid her cats might prefer the large cat over her, she banished him from her home.

After King's exile, things seemed to get back to normal. Then Mrs. Hansby noticed some of her cats were missing. Several of them disappeared before she noticed anything was amiss. All of the cats that had disappeared were old, sick, or very young. The old woman was mystified.

Early one winter morning Mrs. Hansby awoke with a start. She had heard something outside. She listened hard and she heard it again. An unearthly yowling was coming from her backyard. She shivered under her thick quilt. The yowling continued and she thought it sounded like lost souls crying from the depths of hell.

When Mrs. Hansby reached her backyard, she found the strong, healthy cats that hadn't been eliminated sitting in a straight line. The light of the full

moon reflected in their eyes, giving them a demonic glow. They were as still and cold looking as statues, and suddenly the old woman was afraid of her cats, her children. The morning was icy and when she took a step back she slipped and fell. She felt her hip break and lay in a broken pile in her backyard. She was totally helpless.

Mrs. Hansby heard King approaching before she saw him. Then he

He was big and elegant, almost regal. She had the perfect name for him: King.



Closet Owl, Photograph, by Chiharu Seoda

looked her in the face and their eyes locked. The old woman knew she never stood a chance against him, that the cats she loved and cared for were now his. The other cats came up behind King. They stood there waiting. They didn't have to wait long.

King leaned his perfectly shaped head down to Mrs. Hansby's face as if to sniff her. Instead he opened his mouth and tore a chunk of

flesh from the old woman's cheek. She screamed, more in terror than pain. He took another bite and then another. The old woman tried to fend off the large cat but then the other cats joined in the feeding frenzy. The army of cats ate until the old woman's flesh froze.

Mrs. Hansby had always said her cats were part of her. Now she was part of her cats. **CCW**

King leaned his perfectly shaped head down to Mrs. Hansby's face as if to sniff her. Instead he opened his mouth and tore a chunk of flesh from the old woman's cheek.

A BUNDLE OF JOY

By Shawn Livengood

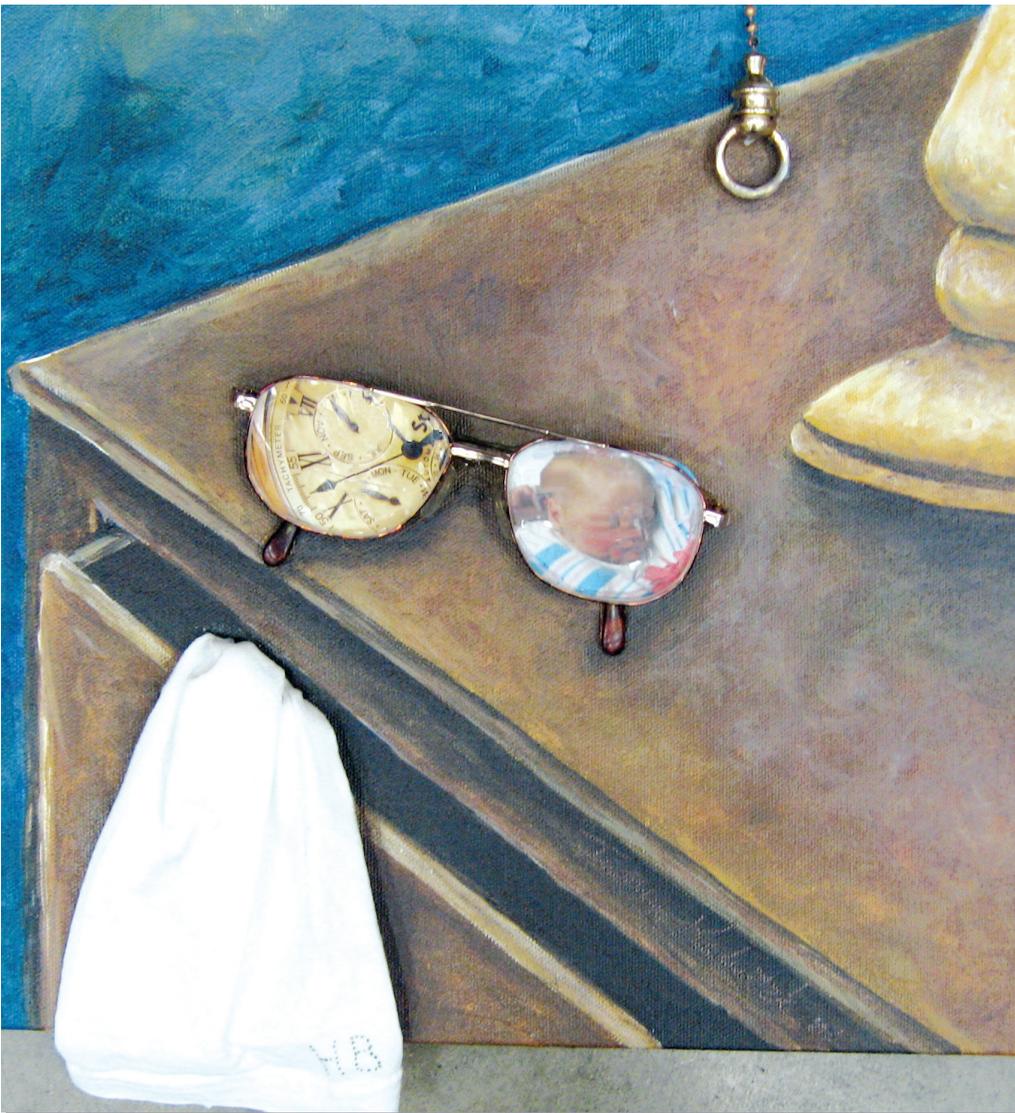
Rebecca wasn't sure if it was a wonderful sign or a sign of disaster, but she knew what the plus sign meant on the pregnancy test. In a way, she was relieved. At least now she knew. The easy part was figuring out if she had a baby growing inside her. The hard part was determining who the father was.

Rebecca gingerly wrapped the pregnancy test in a fold of toilet paper. Her thin fingers moved over the paper with grace, instilling a

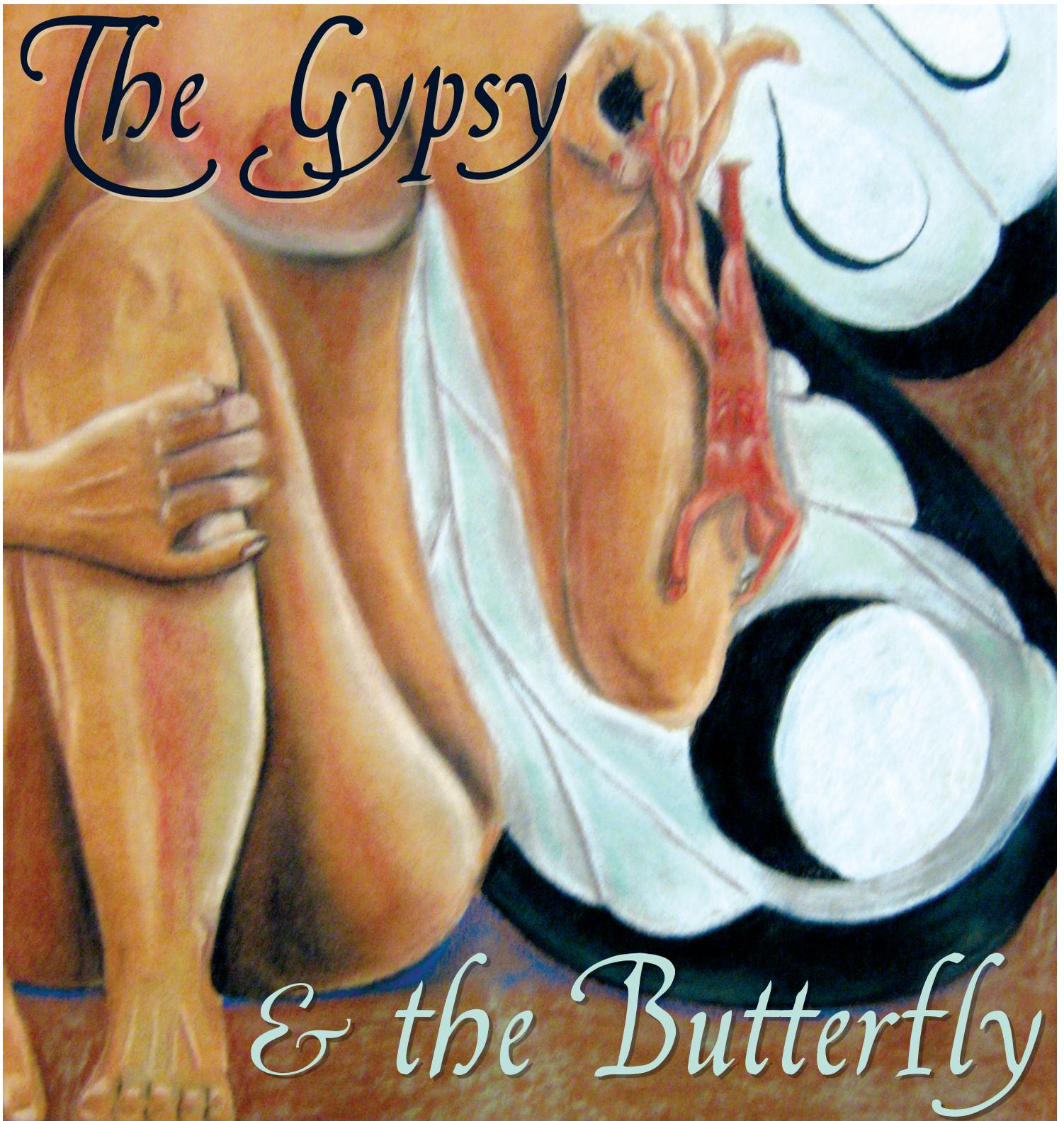
perfect order in each crease. Disorder made Rebecca nervous, and she could feel a warm knot forming in her stomach right now. Did this revelation mean she would have to tell her husband about Jacob, about that one rash, foolish moment? She could always keep quiet and assume that the baby was legitimate. It would be easy to keep her life folded up into a neat little package if she kept the awful truth to herself. But how long could she live with herself without knowing the truth?

The door slammed downstairs, telegraphing Isaac's return home from work. Rebecca swallowed hard as she imagined her husband walking into their house. Right about now, Isaac would be wiping his shoes on the doormat. Next, he would hang his jacket on the coat rack. Moments later, she heard the soft thud of his placing his briefcase on his desk. Isaac never deviated from his routine. His unerring predictability was one of many reasons why she chose him to start a family with. Rebecca clenched the tissue-paper package tightly in her manicured fist. Time would tell if this fragment of chaos would destroy their perfectly ordered life.

"Isaac!" Rebecca shouted downstairs. Her face twisted into her best impression of happiness. "I have wonderful news!" **CCW**



In Grandpa's Eyes, Mixed Media, by Teena Kabetze



She Disagrees, Pastel, by Patricia Lambert

By Liese Sherwood-Fabre

Business was dead. I scanned the streets for someone, anyone, standing on the curb, arm outstretched asking for a ride. Moscow in the heart of winter. The bitter January wind had trapped most inside. Only the desperate dared the twenty-below temperatures that freeze the tears on your eyelashes the moment you walk outside.

I had managed to pick up a fare downtown, a young man who had worked late, and taken him to one of the sleeping districts north of the Moscow River. I was returning, driving slowly through freshly plowed streets from one street lamp's pool of yellow light to the next.

I had been a gypsy cab driver for almost five years, ever since I lost my job as a secretary to a younger, shapelier woman. It didn't matter I

actually knew how to type, file, and keep my boss's schedule straight. I had aged and hadn't been willing to sleep with him to keep my job. I'd had enough of men after my husband had walked out on me six years ago. Good riddance to both, as far as I was concerned.

I spotted a figure up ahead. The blowing snow made a curtain between us, but I could make out a woman in a fur coat holding out a gloved hand. Good. I preferred women. They were safer. The coat suggested money, possibly a big tip.

I pulled to the curb and she opened the front door. "How much to the Metropol?"

I told her my price. She glanced back over her shoulder and nodded.

After shutting the front door, she opened the back and climbed in. She wasn't as young as I had first thought. The snow and wind had smeared her makeup, revealing a lined weary face. A man crawled in after her.

"I didn't know I'd be taking two," I said, looking at them in the rearview mirror.

His coat looked clean and imported; his boots, polished. They exchanged a few words in English, and she said to me, "We'll pay you double. Please, it's cold out there."

Double my price. More than enough for a tank of gas. I pulled away from the curb.

The couple immediately ignored me, talking loudly between them. The man opened the woman's coat and began kissing her on the mouth, the neck, and moving downward. It wasn't the first time I'd seen something like this, but it was the way he did it. With an animalistic devouring that pulled my lips into a grimace.

He took the woman's wrists and shoved them against the back of the seat, turned, and straddled her. His back hit my seat, throwing me forward. "Hey," I said. "Watch it. I'm driving. The road's slick."

He growled something at me.

The woman said in a strangled voice, "Please don't make him angry. I'll give you a tip when we get there."

His snarls and grunts resumed, like a pig attacking its trough. I turned my rearview mirror up and out of the way, keeping my eyes straight ahead.

Until he hit her.

It reverberated in the car like a gunshot. A second and a third followed. The woman groaned with each punch, but never screamed, as if she were used to taking it.

I turned in my seat. "Stop it," I said. "Stop hitting her."

He barked at me, turned, and slapped me across the face.

That did it.

I jerked the car's wheel to the right and pulled through an apartment complex's entrance to the dark courtyard beyond. Playground equipment and corrugated metal parking units formed humps in the snow. I stopped the car in a dark corner of the courtyard and pushed open my car door.

The wind sliced through my coat like a knife. With a gloved hand, I jerked open the door to the back seat, grabbed the man by the coat collar, and pulled. He wasn't as big as the coat made him appear. Maybe I had surprise on my side. Maybe the woman under him pushed him. Regardless, he fell to the pavement, hitting his face on the ice.

A dark pool spread out from under his head.

The woman extracted herself from the car and looked at him. I was

afraid she would scream or call for help. Instead, she pulled her foot back and kicked the man in his side with her boot's pointed toe. His breath expelled into the snow with a muffled grunt. She turned, took a few steps back, and ran back to him for another swift kick in the side. "Son of a bitch," she said.

A series of names accompanied her rapid-fire kicks. "Bastard. Son of a whore. Piece of chicken shit."

I watched as she spewed out her venom. In the man on the ground, I saw my ex-boss, my dead-beat husband, every man who had stiffed me on a fare. I cocked my foot back to add my own kicks. Thin puffs of white escaped from his parted lips with each blow. I caught the eye

of the other woman and lowered my foot. She dropped hers and stared back at me, panting a cloud about her.

"What are we going to do?" I asked. She shook her head. "I don't know."

"If he stays out here, he'll freeze to death."

She sneered. "He deserves it."

"Do you know him? Where he lives? Maybe we can just take him home."

"I never met him before. He was a friend of a client. Called me and asked me to meet him on the street. I think he lives around there, but I don't know where."

I understood it now. She was a night butterfly, a prostitute. An expensive one with her fur coat, leather gloves and taste for the Metropol, but still a prostitute.

"I think he has a family," she said. "My clients usually do if they meet you on the street."

"We've got to do something. You want to make his wife a widow?"

She shrugged. "Probably better off. If that's how he treated me, imagine how he treats his wife."

I shuddered, remembering the drunken slaps from my own husband. "All the same, I'm no murderer."

"Look, you're in this as deep as me. More. You're the one who pulled him out of the car, made him hit his head."

The wind gusted about me, piercing my coat. I shivered. "What if we called the police from a pay phone? Tell them where to find him?"

Her gaze searched the sky, and then turned to me. "We could do that. Make it look like a robbery. You have any vodka?"

I raced back to the car, slipping on the ice, to get the bottle I kept in the glove compartment to clean my windshield. When I turned around, she was going through his pockets.

She straightened up, holding a wallet. "We'll take this to make it look like a robbery. Hand me the bottle."

I held my breath as I watched her coldly pour some into his mouth and sprinkle the rest about his clothes. She definitely had some practice in this. After handing me the empty bottle, she opened the wallet and searched through it. She took out several dollar notes. All hundreds.

Counting out some, she handed them to me. "Your fare."

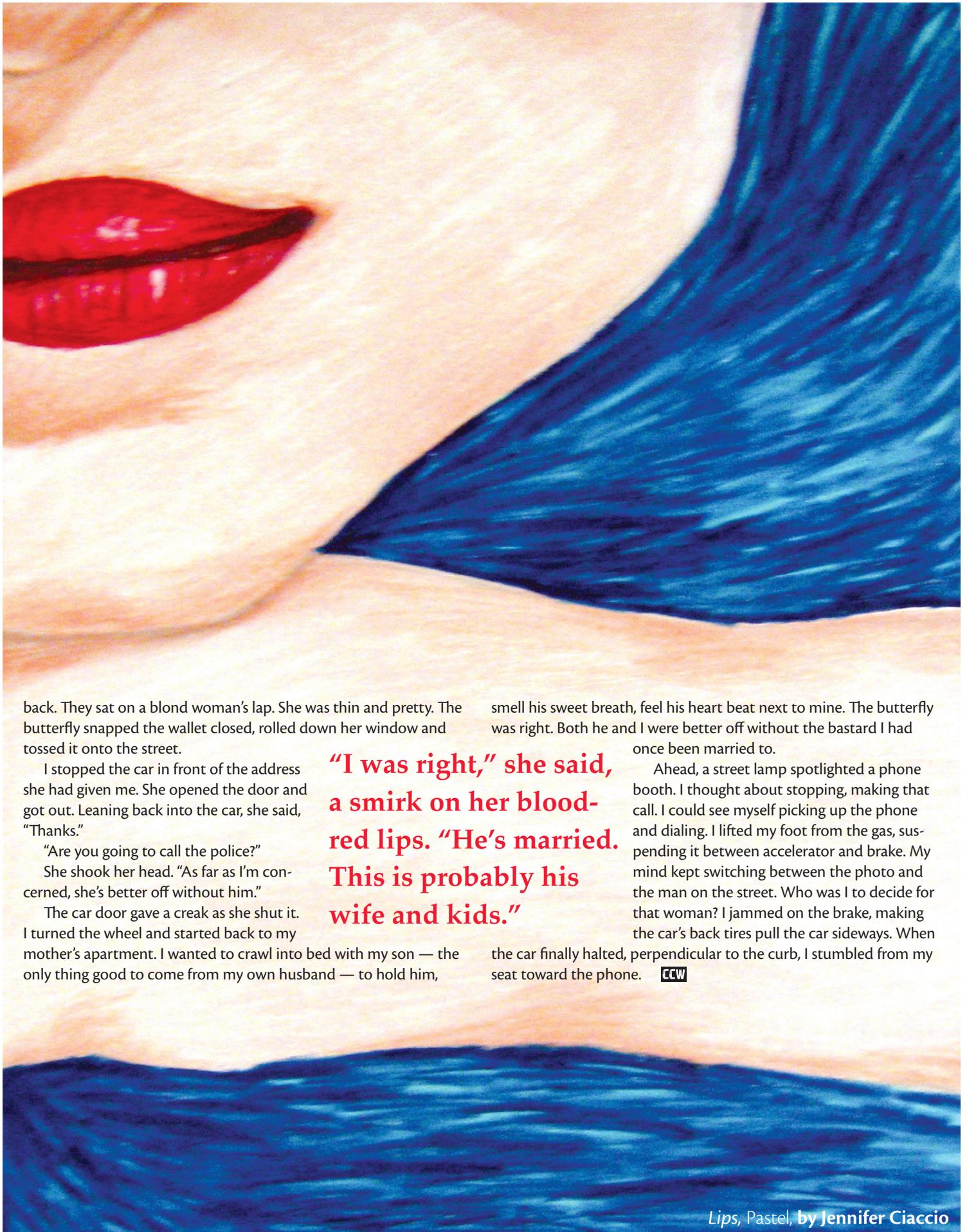
Four hundred U.S. dollars.

We got back into the car. This time, she sat in the front seat with me. She gave me an address in the downtown area.

While I sped from the yard and along the streets, she examined the wallet again. "I was right," she said, a smirk on her blood-red lips. "He's married. This is probably his wife and kids."

She held it out for me to see. A boy and girl, both blond, smiled

"We've got to do something. You want to make his wife a widow?" She shrugged. "Probably better off. If that's how he treated me, imagine how he treats his wife."



back. They sat on a blond woman's lap. She was thin and pretty. The butterfly snapped the wallet closed, rolled down her window and tossed it onto the street.

I stopped the car in front of the address she had given me. She opened the door and got out. Leaning back into the car, she said, "Thanks."

"Are you going to call the police?"

She shook her head. "As far as I'm concerned, she's better off without him."

The car door gave a creak as she shut it. I turned the wheel and started back to my mother's apartment. I wanted to crawl into bed with my son — the only thing good to come from my own husband — to hold him,

smell his sweet breath, feel his heart beat next to mine. The butterfly was right. Both he and I were better off without the bastard I had once been married to.

"I was right," she said, a smirk on her blood-red lips. "He's married. This is probably his wife and kids."

Ahead, a street lamp spotlighted a phone booth. I thought about stopping, making that call. I could see myself picking up the phone and dialing. I lifted my foot from the gas, suspending it between accelerator and brake. My mind kept switching between the photo and the man on the street. Who was I to decide for that woman? I jammed on the brake, making the car's back tires pull the car sideways. When

the car finally halted, perpendicular to the curb, I stumbled from my seat toward the phone. **CCW**

Lips, Pastel, by Jennifer Ciaccio