

# SAGA Literary Journal



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Volume Two

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2017

# SAGA Literary Journal Volume Two

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The Marian Sims Baughn  
Center for Literary Arts



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## Foreword

THIS is *SAGA*, a collection of poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction penned by the students of Long Beach City College. Bound in this book of glue, paper and ink are the imagination, the heart, and the soul of our institution. The stories and poems within capture the very essence and creative spirit of the college.

Endeavoring to offer a voice to the creativity abounding here on this campus, Patrick Shaffer, Professor Jason Casem, the English Majors and Minors Club (EMMC) and the Creative Writing Committee released the first volume of *Saga* in 2016.

This is our second volume. Without the continued support of the Creative Writing Committee and our dedicated group of student editors comprising members of the EMMC, *SAGA* volume two simply would not have come to fruition, and these excellent works would not have been delivered to your hands.

It is my hope that this anthology serves to move and delight you. Please enjoy.

Edward Jones

Chief Editor and President, EMMC 2016-2017



**Mama Chenda**  
by Samuel Carillo

Those days we would visit you abuelita,

I'd play near you.

In my imagination, I would climb the trees that surrounded us.

I'd scale the statues of saints that guarded your home.

Ma told me I had to have respect, but I knew you didn't mind

"Let's take your Mama Chenda some flowers," Ma would say,

So I would walk proudly to where you lay, and place the flowers  
down.

We would talk to you about our lives and how much we loved you:

"Let's say a Padre Nuestro," Ma would say,

I would lead and sometimes my mother would finish.

Before we left we would glance at you with loving eyes,  
always leaving a part of our spirits with you.

**Medicine Everywhere**  
by Amy Valenzuela

*Salco*, we said. Native tree.  
Roadside scrub really,  
thriving in those rock-strewn arroyos  
along numbered freeways  
where nobody looks,  
even in gridlock.

There were old people  
who knew how to gather the berries  
and pound a tincture, or mash a salve  
for sore lungs.  
Elderberry, then.  
I know this because my father  
told me, because his grandmother  
told him, and this is what we have left.

They are more like black beads  
dripping under sulfur flowers,  
small bullets pelting  
cardboard roofs  
of homeless people  
whose blue shanties crowd  
the trunk pecked at by crows  
and passing kingbirds,  
migrating tanagers masking gold  
breasts in fluffy dun.

Not everyone puts down roots

but I do, caught in my father's  
tracks, under the web of cables  
and wires that hem our new Tongva sky,  
circling back on foot  
to the old trails  
running in thin ribbons

to the rim of this ancient wash  
with its steep concrete walls,  
a sluice we now call river.

## Knife Play with God, My Father

by Robert Shockley

When I got home late from fourth grade that day, I could see it was going to be a night to remember, or at least one I'd rather forget, if I could. My father was seated at the dining table, jammed between the gas stove and the refrigerator in our tiny, cramped kitchen. He was eating some dinner disaster he had cooked up: spicy and greasy, both at the same time. He had a stack of old 45 rpm records playing on his little vintage, brown-and-gold plastic RCA record player. Steve Cropper's famous, biting guitar riffs were belting out of the middle of "Green Onions" by Booker T. and the M.G.s, causing the corners of the kitchen to bop and jump with early 60s Muscle Shoals soul. Our German Shepherd, Sport, was facing down a bowl of my Dad's concoction on the floor next to my father. Sport's lip was curled back like Elvis Presley used to do and he was slowly backing away from the bowl, growling, like it was dangerous. Mom was nowhere to be seen. This was going to be an evening with whichever version of Dad was present; he had the family curse—bipolar affective disorder, so his moods were unpredictable at best.

"I can always tell I've screwed up dinner good when even the dog won't touch it," Dad said, exhaling a wisp of tobacco smoke with each syllable, his cigarette in one hand, the two-thirds empty, Thunderbird bottle in the other.

"Yeah, he's doing that Billy Idol thing with his lip again." I said.

"You mean Elvis, right?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. Same thing, different side of the face. What is that stuff, anyway?" I asked.

"It's canned octopus soup I spiced up a little too much, I guess. Want some? That's dinner. Your mom is off hiding in the bushes or something, again," Dad said, taking another long swig of the cheap, fortified wine, causing its sickening sweet odor to fill the room.

"Naah, thanks. I already ate at school," I lied, my rumbling stomach belying my words.

"Yeah? You sure, Jimbo? That's what we got. It's that or nothing. I didn't get a chance to go to the grocery store. They had this on sale at that Filipino liquor store, thought I'd try it out. Your choice," Dad grumbled. "Hey, Jim, you ever think about the nature of

of God?" he asked, turning his scruffy face up at me, as he slurped up some of that god-awful, steaming liquid in his bowl with his favorite, tarnished silver spoon. It looked like a Japanese horror movie—pieces of rubbery tentacle with still-attached suckers floating in greasy broth with bright red speckles of Tabasco sauce. The whole mess smelled like hot mop water. "I don't mean that Popish pap your mother believes in. That's just for the Catholic sheep. I mean the true nature of the Deity," he said, grimacing a little, as he slurped up some more vile soup, gnashing on chunks of tentacle.

I had no idea where this was going, but my stomach was still rumbling, now edged with a tight, nervous anticipation, just turning to empty nausea. Dad had obviously been reading philosophy again on his day off from the State Hospital. He had figured out years before I was born that if people thought you were crazy, the best place to hide was managing the other crazies, so he and my mom had trained to be nurses for mental hospitals.

"Come on, son, have a seat here with your old man and let's converse for a while," Dad slurred. Sport, sensing imminent violence, slinked off to probably hide under my bed. He already knew the game too well by that time.

It was then I realized my father had some frightening and obscure lesson planned for the evening, like back when he had been a screw on death row at the local pen. One night he had decided he was going to teach me real, down-and-dirty martial arts, like the guards were taught, not the formal tournament Karate he already had me taking at the ex-marine's dojo, where nobody pulled their punches or kicks—ever. I kept getting the pounding of my life from the older kids every Friday night after an hour of mandatory Zen meditation.

Then had come the night of Dad's own private lesson. After Dad's little martial arts demonstration had begun simply enough, Dad, drunk as ever, soon had me pinned to the old, peeling kitchen linoleum. He kept yelling, "Come on, Jim, do something. If this were real, you could die." Believing he was going to kill me, I had wiggled my arm free and poked him a good one in the eyes, making him holler in pain and surprise, letting go just long enough that I had escaped and stumbled through the mud and dark, driving rain over to my best friend's, Billy Casablanca's house, where they hid me for the night, despite Dad's drunken yowling on their front lawn.

On this night, a year later, I saw the setup he had prepared for me, as I sat down in the cheap, red plastic and steel chair. My back was

crunched up against the refrigerator, with Dad's huge frame blocking the only escape route. There before me were all the knives we had in the house, propped bladeside up between nails he had hammered into the tabletop to keep them upright. It was just like something out of a Kafka story.

"Jimmy, we're going to investigate the nature of God tonight. Do you know who God is, boy?" Dad whispered right up close to my face, blowing warm booze breath at me. "I'll tell you. We should all know this one. It's not an ecclesiastical riddle, or anything, like 'How many angels can you fit on the head of a pin?'" he said, smiling crookedly, I guess seeing my look of terrified bewilderment. I was ready to sell the Buick right then and there, but held it back, my digestive juices burning the back of my throat. I knew interrupting his demonstration could have dire consequences for me, though that blade lineup looked menacing enough. "This is serious metaphysics and science we're discussing. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and such," Dad finished.

"Dad, I wanna go to bed. I'm tired. This isn't fun. I don't get it," I said, hiding my terror and holding back my tears, nearly unable to breathe in that tight space.

"Jimmy, you don't need to cry. We're just going to arm wrestle, son. Grab my hand, you know how this works. Push with all your might, all your faith. So will I. Like when you were learning checkers, I won't let you win. If you win, it'll be because you've honestly won. Before we go, here's a clue. I AM GOD." At this point, I was pretty damned sure he was the other guy, as I stared at him with his Faustian beard and goatee. Then we locked arms, preparing for wrist combat. The pressure increased slowly from Dad's huge paw, poised unevenly above my small hand that gradually arched over towards the horrific knife array, as I mustered all the strength an unathletic, bookish nine-year-old boy was able, awaiting the slicing pain. It never came. Instead, the pressure from his side lessened. "But you're God, too. We all are," he pronounced with the solemnity of a minister, my hand mere inches from the knives.

Dad looked away, releasing my hand, leaning back precariously in his chair, so he could grab his bottle behind him and finish it off. I saw my opportunity and knocked him over backwards out of his chair, running for the back door. From the floor, he yelled up at me, "Come back, Jim. You don't understand, everything's fine. It always is."

I ran to Billy's house as fast as I was able, barfing along the way, fearing my old man had finally completely lost his mind, that I was going to wind up shark chum, or in a grisly photo layout in the National Enquirer. I don't really remember the escape clearly to this day, twenty-five years later.

Early the next morning, Child Protective Services came and took me away for a year to Juvenile Detention, as if I had done something wrong. Dad spent a year in county lockup. Every month all three of us—me, Mom and Dad—were brought before a judge, who finally just said, "Look, I'm sick of seeing you three. I'm letting you two out. Go home and try to live like a family." Mom, who had kept everything together financially while we two were locked up, seemed relieved. At her insistence, I went to live with my uncle after that.

My father, who never touched me or Mom again, only mentioned the incident once after that night. He concluded, "You know I came to realize, working in the bug house, that the people society declares insane are actually the ones who see reality with the greatest clarity." ❀

**Cattle in My Sink**  
by Robert Shockley

Awakening at dawn to tiny feet shuffling  
over papers left on the desk,  
I stumbled over to the sink.  
There, gathered around the drain,  
Wiggled a small herd of brown insect bodies,  
drinking at the old watering hole,  
like cattle in an American Western.

In my dreamy state, I stood and remembered,  
careful not to touch any cockroaches,  
my uncle's Hans Kleiber watercolor  
that hung many years in our living room.  
*Winter in Wyoming*—spotted cows shuffling  
through the early morning snow  
to the half-frozen creek to drink.  
How the Dutch love their cows.

Not being as fond of my urban cattle,  
I sent them swimming down the drain  
with a downpour of laundry bleach and water  
and went back to bed.

## Nirvana Demolished

by Robert Shockley

Last week, across the way  
from Cherry Street Park  
stood the Beach Nirvana Motel:  
empty asphalt parking lot and  
empty cinder block structure.  
Ten-years-deserted remnants of  
1960s air-conditioned summer love  
and heated winter despair.

Lanky Mexican canyon palms  
arch over in the soft late summer breeze  
like arboreal guardians,  
whispering of long ago  
afternoon rendezvous  
and drugged-out weekends  
above the sloppy, zigzaggedy,  
twisting cyclone fence  
thrown up hurriedly  
after the demolition gang  
had dragged away the last of the  
bumpy black macadam  
and crumbling concrete bricks.

In only three days labor, the Latin crew  
dispensed with forty years  
of passion and perdition,  
leaving only disembodied phantom sex reruns  
in the blue coastal ether—  
and the confused, scrambling insects  
that lived in its foundation.

A fenced-in museum exhibit  
of urban decay and renewal.

## Fate's Hand

by David Mann

“I can't believe you're sucking so bad at this.”

“I'm trying.”

“Seriously, you can go a hundred for a hundred shooting skeet yet you're letting a BB gun and little metal ducks kick your ass?”

“I'm trying. I swear, the barrel's crooked.”

“Come on. Stop the excuses and hit a freakin' duck.”

“Alright. If you think it's so easy, you take the last shot.”

Mark straightened off the counter, straightened his denim jacket, and handed the gun to Sara. Smiling, Sara took the gun and stepped up to the counter and pointed the gun down range. She pulled the stock as far back into her shoulder as she could, placing her left elbow onto the counter to steady her shot. Looking down range, she could see the endless loop of little metal ducks move along their pre-destined course of right to left. Stiffening her muscles, she took a deep breath and fired.

“Damn,” Sara said calmly when seeing she missed her target.

“Told you,” Mark said as Sara placed the gun down on the counter.

“Okay, you're right. It's rigged. Come on. Let's go get some lunch.”

Every year since they were children, Mark and Sara went to the carnival together: a tradition that stuck with them into their adulthood. What made this particular year special was that now Sara was done with college, Mark had put a down payment on a house, and they were living together. He had started on a new psych pill that was working well for him. The only thing was that this upset their parents as they weren't married yet. Sara didn't care. She knew the subject of marriage made Mark nervous and afraid.

After lunch, the two began walking amongst the boutiques when Sara caught sight of something. “Mark, check out that tent.”

Mark looked over and saw it. It was a small, purple tent, a wooden sign above the entrance with an eye painted on it.

“I don't remember that ever being here.”

“Me neither,” Sara shaded her eyes from the sun. “Looks like a psychic’s tent. Wanna go check it out?”

Before Mark could answer, Sara was already bounding towards the tent. He didn’t like it, but then again, he didn’t like anything that claimed to be supernatural. He started after her and caught up just as she made it to the tent. Sara grabbed hold of one of the opening curtains and smiled at Mark to do the same. Grabbing ahold of his side, they drew back the curtains and entered.

It was dark inside; the only illumination came from three candles in a small chandelier over their heads. There were small wooden crates lining the edges of the room, some of which were open and revealed tarot cards, astrological maps, and bones from what Mark hoped were chickens. In the center of the tent was a short-legged table and seated opposite them at the table was a frail, old woman. Her back was to Mark and Sara as they entered and she hadn’t heard them. They looked at each other wondering what to do when Sara decided to speak.

“Umm, excuse me”–

“Ah, you’ve finally made it,” the old woman said with strength that surprised them as she spun around to face them.

“I’m sorry,” Sara said flustered, “you were expecting us?”

“Well, you can’t open up shop without expecting someone to stop by, now can you? Won’t stay in business for too long that way.”

Sara couldn’t help but laugh. The woman was short and thin, with long, silver hair reaching down to the ground, and she had a crooked nose: exactly the image Mark had for a medieval witch.

“So, what would you like today?” the old woman asked. “By the looks of it you don’t need a love potion. And I would guess you don’t need help getting a hard one.”

Blown away by what the old lady was saying to them, Sara asked, “Can you see our future?”

“I can,” the old woman responded, “that I can. Mind you, tampering with the future can have drastic consequences.”

“What do you mean?” Sara asked.

“My dear girl, haven’t you ever heard of the Heisenberg Principle of Uncertainty?”

“What does science have to do with magic?”

“If only my predecessors thought such questions, then there’d be a lot more of us in this day and age. Bottom line, if you see into

your future, things will change from their normal course.”

“Such as . . .”

“Anything. You could make yourself a millionaire or you could kill yourself. If you’d like, I could tell you your future, but only one at a time.”

“Do you want to see your future?” Sara asked Mark.

“Sure, I guess,” Mark shrugged.

“Alright then, a future reading,” the old woman let out. “You first,” she said pointing at Sara. Sara looked at Mark and nodded for him to leave the tent. Mark took the nod and turned his back to the two ladies and left.

Upon exiting, the sun blinded him a bit. He looked up at the boutiques that lined the carnival ground. Looking at all the other people at the carnival, he couldn’t help but notice that nobody’s attention was drawn towards him or the tent. He got a surreal feeling about where he was standing.

Mark paced for ten minutes when Sara came out.

“Took you long enough.”

Sara adjusted her eyes to the sun. “We had a lot to talk about.”

“Oh yeah, like what?”

“Like our baby girl,” Sara said smiling.

“Our . . . our baby what?” Mark asked flabbergasted.

“Relax,” Sara said taking Mark’s hands. “She just said we would have a baby girl.”

“That was all? In all that time?”

“Well, she told me how to bet for the next five years on baseball, but the big news she gave was that we’d have a child.”

“Did she say when?”

“No, but what difference does that make? We’d have children anyway when we were ready. Her saying it just says we’ll be together to have children.”

“You sure?”

“Unless you wanna go home and try for one now? But there’s still one big thing I’d like from you before that happens,”

“Okay, just as long as it’s not now,” Mark said trying to reassure himself.

“It’s not. Now go in there and see what she says for you.” Sara pushed Mark towards the tent as he took hold of the curtain and entered.

“Alright,” the old woman said straight out as Mark entered. “Take a seat and we’ll get started. I did a palm reading for your ladylove out there. I hope you don’t mind using cards.”

“I was kinda expecting a crystal ball,” Mark said.

“Ha, too many people around this place to have an effective crystal ball reading. No, the cards should do fine.”

Mark sat down at the small table as she produced a deck from out of her robe. She shuffled the cards and then proceeded.

“Okay, let’s see here,” she said as she drew the first card. It bore a picture of a woman. “Not surprised by this.”

“Why not?” Mark asked, “What is it?”

“I’d be willing to put down a hundred that it’s your girl out there. The lady card? You put two and two together.”

Mark shut his mouth and let her continue.

“Okay, next we have . . .” the old lady laid down a card with a sword on it. “That doesn’t look good,” she said surprised.

“What does the sword mean?” asked Mark worried.

“When the sword appears later on it means something heroic. But when it appears early, it means trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Well, let’s find out.” She laid down a third card. The card depicted a monstrous, scarred head hovering over fire. “Oh no, this isn’t good at all.”

“What is it?” Mark asked.

“So far, according to these, there’s a woman in your life who will be brutally murdered by a monstrous figure.”

“What?” Mark said in shock.

“Calm down, we still have plenty of cards to go through. Though I will admit, after what I saw for your girl out there, I wasn’t expecting this.” The old woman pulled another card off the deck and laid it down. This card had a picture of a bird with a long, thin beak. “Okay, here’s what I was expecting,” the old lady said with a tad bit of relief.

“What’s this card?” Mark asked.

“It’s a stork, you nit,” the old woman shouted at Mark. “Didn’t she tell you I saw a baby in her future?”

“Yeah, but then you started predicting a murder.”

“I haven’t predicted anything. I’m just saying what I see. Now...” the old woman paused. “The stork card comes after the sword and monster, so it’s possible nobody will die.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Mark said sarcastically.

“Indeed, but there’s more to be said.” She picked the next card off the top of the deck. This card was of a hand colored red. “Ah, it looks like it ends here,” the old woman said.

“Why? What’s this?”

“This card is fate’s hand.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means that two paths have been placed before you: one with a gruesome death, and one with a new life.”

“And which one will happen?” Mark asked concerned.

“There’s only so much a future reading will reveal, but this says there are options.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, dummy, that how you choose to live your life will decide which of these two outcomes will happen.”

“So, you’re saying I get to choose my own future?”

“With limited options, yes.”

“Then how can I believe any of this is true?”

“Look,” the old lady’s voice got real stern. “It’s up to you whether or not to believe. But now that a couple of paths have been placed in front of you, the choices you make will prompt you to go down one of these paths simply because you know them. You’ve measured your future; thus, you’ve changed it. Just keep this in mind though,” the old woman pointed her bony finger at Mark. “As I told your lady, one of these paths was probably bound to happen already, but since another option was presented, choices you make can lead to that second path. Live your life right you’ll be fine. Live it wrong and you’ll play right into fate’s hand.”

It was a lot for Mark to take in, but he felt he understood the old woman. “Alright,” Mark said after a long pause. “How much will this all cost us?”

“Let’s see. A palm reading and a card reading, a ten spot should cover it.”

Mark reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet and a ten-dollar bill and handed it to the old lady.

“Sure hope it was worth it to ya,” she said as Mark left the tent.

As Mark exited, he saw Sara staring out at the boutiques. “You done?” Sara asked.

“Yep,” Mark said as upbeat as he could.

“And, what did she say?”

“She did mention the baby,” Mark tried to say enthusiastically.

“What else?” Sara asked seeing that Mark was holding back.

“She said,” Mark thought of how to best say this, “that if a birth doesn’t happen, there will be a murder.”

Sara laughed. “That’s far off from baseball results. She really wanted to put on a show for you.”

“What?” Mark asked, unsure of what Sara meant.

“It wouldn’t be much of a future reading without something bad happening. I kept waiting for it, but she chose to give bad news to you.”

“You think it was all just a show?”

“Come on, Mark. Of course it was just for show. That’s how these people make their money. Telling us we’d have a baby: our parents could tell us that. Nothing these psychic witches say can be taken at face value. She gave me the results of the next three World’s Series, but I’m not going to bet on any of them. It’s a scam. In this case, it’s a fun scam. Get it?”

“Sure, I get it,” Mark said trying not to look dumb.

“Great. How much did she charge?”

“Ten.”

“Ha, ten for that? Still beats the eight you put down for the BB gun game.”

They both started laughing as they walked back towards the crowd. As they walked, Mark couldn’t help but look over his shoulder back at the old lady’s tent.



A month went by when things began to get interesting for Mark and Sara. Sara had started getting stomach cramps and began vomiting. One morning, Sara went to the doctor’s while Mark was at work. When Mark got home, Sara was waiting for him in the living room.

“How was work?” Sara asked calmly.

“Same crap as always.” Mark put his jacket and carpenter’s belt on the rack and walked over to Sara. She was seated on the couch with

her hands in her lap. “So how was your appointment?” Mark asked sitting down next to her.

“Promise you’ll stay calm?” Sara asked.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

Sara took in a huge breath. “Babe, I’m pregnant.”

Mark heard what she’d said but his brain couldn’t process it.

“What, what do you mean?”

“Honey,” Sara said softly, “I’m pregnant.”

Mark was completely at a loss for words. Parts of his mind were telling him he had heard her wrong. Other parts wanted him to scream. Trying his best not to, he tried talking again. “You... you’re... what?”

“I’m pregnant, dammit!” Sara shouted.

“But . . . how? You’re on the pill.”

“Well apparently it didn’t work.”

Mark was dumbfounded by the news. What should have been a happy moment for both of them was instead a moment basked in horror. Mark had already forgotten the old lady at the carnival and was trying to piece together in his head how this had happened.

“Mark,” Sara said, “what are we going to do?”

Mark looked into her eyes and could see how scared she was. Not knowing what to say, he decided to wing it. “I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to go change into something nice, and we’re going to go out and celebrate.”

“What?” Sara said confused. “Mark, our parents are going to kill us.”

“We don’t have to worry about our parents. We’re adults, and we’re expecting. If anything, they can celebrate with us.” Mark had no idea what he was saying, but it sounded good so he rolled with it.

“Are you serious?” Sara asked. “I think you need to see Dr. Hammond.”

“And I will,” Mark said calmly. “But until then, I say that we have reason to celebrate. So how ‘bout dinner tonight at Southside Grill?”

“You sure?” Sara asked, concerned about Mark’s emotions.

“Absolutely.”

“You promise not to have any alcohol in the state you’re in?”

“As long as you can’t, I won’t.”

“Now I know you’ve lost it,” Sara laughed.



“*Who is that?*” Mark thought. He was standing at a table in a dark room. Everything around him was in shadow, save for what was directly in front of him. A small light bulb hung from the ceiling above the table giving partial illumination to a figure sitting in a chair opposite him. This figure was engulfed in shadow and Mark couldn’t make out the face.

“Who are you?” Mark asked the figure. The figure did not respond. He just sat there, his head facing in Mark’s direction.

“Hey, pal. I’m talking to you.” Mark tried to get this shadow figure to respond to him but to no avail. He tried a more direct approach. He put one hand down on the table and with the other reached out at the figure. His hand didn’t get far. Once directly under the light, Mark’s hand started to burn. He gasped, pulling his hand away.

The shadow figure grunted, from what Mark could make out. The figure then pulled something from out from his jacket pocket and brought it under the light. Mark could see a scarred hand with a denim cuff placed on top of a deck of cards. The hand grabbed the top card and placed it face up on the table. The picture wasn’t that of a deck of playing cards, but of a red hand. Mark stared at it; it was familiar, but he couldn’t think of why. His brain tingled as he tried to identify the card, and soon the tingling turned to shocks shooting down his spine. Struck with an incredible pain, Mark bent over, grabbing his head in a silent scream. The only sound produced in the room was another grunt from the shadow figure.

Mark woke up sweating. It was night, and he was in bed. Sara was asleep next to him. He was breathing heavily. The pain he had felt in his dream seemed so real. Now his head was fine, no tingling or shocks. It was the third night in a row he had such a dream, every night since Sara gave him the news she was pregnant. This time was worse than the previous two. This time there had been real pain.

Mark continued breathing, trying to get it back under control. Whatever these nightmares were, he would have to get over them soon.



“So, you’ve been having nightmares?”

Mark nodded to his psychiatrist.

“And while you’re having these nightmares, you’re feeling physical pain?”

“Yes.”

Mark had been seeing Dr. Hammond for two years now. He didn’t feel he was connecting with him like he did his childhood psychiatrist, but Dr. Hammond took his insurance, so he went.

“The dreams could just be a manifestation of your fears about Sara being pregnant,” Dr. Hammond said.

“I’ve considered that, but isn’t this new pill supposed to keep my mind from thinking things like that?”

“The pill is meant to stabilize your behavior.”

“Well, it’s not stabilizing my dream’s behavior.” Mark felt he was getting nowhere with this doctor. He just wished he could show him exactly what it was like having these dreams.

“Mark, the news you received was very impactful. I’m proud of you that you were able to take it so well. But your mind is still under initial shock. Give it a week and I’m sure the dreams will go away.”

“Can’t you give me something to help speed that up?”

“I don’t want to put you on anything more. Adding more could possibly do some serious harm to your body.”

“Great,” Mark said annoyed. “So, I just have to ride this out then?”

“It won’t be bad. It’s not uncommon for people in your situation to go through symptoms like this. I can give you a tape with meditative breathing exercises that could help.”

“Alright,” Mark said submitted.



For four months Mark continued taking his meds as his doctor ordered, and he continued having bad dreams. At first the shadow figure just dealt out his cards, but as the nights went on he changed his game. In the latest one, the shadow figure proposed to Mark to take the top card off the deck. As much as Mark resisted, the dream led him to doing it, revealing the red hand card; after which, the shadow figure laughed as Mark’s brain went into shock again.

One afternoon, Mark came home from work and Sara was waiting for him at the door.

“Good day at work?” Sara asked.

“Great,” Mark said as they walked over to the couch.

“Listen,” Sara said wanting to get Mark’s full attention. “Tomorrow we’ll be having dinner with friends.”

“Really?” Mark said pretending to be excited by the news. “Who?”

“Chelsea and Natasha.”

“Will it just be us four?” Mark asked.

“Probably not. Natasha’s been seeing someone. If you’re worried about the check, they’ll cover themselves.”

“I wasn’t worried about that, I just wanted to know how many people would be coming.”

“Oh, you’re so cute,” Sara said giving him a kiss. “You’ve grown so much yet you’re still sociophobic.”

“I am not,” Mark said defensively.

“And you still can’t lie to me,” Sara smiled. “I sure knew how to pick the father of my baby.”

“Gee, thanks,” Mark laughed.

The next night Mark and Sara drove to the restaurant they were meeting Sara’s friends at. After a five-minute wait her friends arrived. Sara hugged them as they introduced them to their boyfriends. Mark hugged the girls and shook hands with their boyfriends.

“Well, let’s go on in, I’m starving,” Sara said.

“So, what line of work are you in, Mark?” Tom, Natasha’s boyfriend, asked as they were eating their salads.

“Oh, um, I’m in construction,” Mark said. Really he was an architect.

“Interesting,” Tom replied slowly. “I’m in management myself. Commands a nice salary.”

“Where do you manage?” Mark said not thinking better to let the subject go.

“At Macy’s,” Tom said proudly.

“Nice,” Mark responded somewhat sarcastically, knowing he made more money than Tom.

“It is. A very nice check comes every week.”

“Wish I made a nice check,” Shawn, Chelsea’s boyfriend, said

entering the conversation. "I'm a clerk at Walmart."

"Well, it's something," Tom said.

"Wish it could be more."

While the men were talking, the girls were reminiscing about their time at school together. Mark didn't want to be there, especially listening to others talking about what jobs they had. Mark had a very financially secure job in which he was able to save enough for a down payment on a house while still in his twenties. To him, that was all he needed. Keeping the house and raising a family was going to be the true test.

"So, what are you going to name the baby?" Natasha asked.

"We haven't really discussed names," Sara said.

"Oh, come on. You have to be thinking of something. Do you know what it's going to be?"

"We do," Sara said with excitement. "We're having a girl."

Chelsea and Natasha bubbled with delight. The men, though congratulatory, gave sympathies to Mark.

"Maybe the next one will be a boy," Shawn said.

Mark started drifting off, but it wasn't long before something caught his eye. Sitting at the opposite side of the restaurant was a man staring straight at Mark. Mark carefully sized him up, trying not to let him know he was staring back at him. The man didn't seem old, but his skin was all wrinkly, almost scarred. Mark had a feeling he had seen this man before, but couldn't place where.

As he continued to throw stares at this man, he started feeling hot. It was as if he could feel all the ovens in the kitchen burning at once. He tried to fight this feeling by taking a gulp of his drink, but it didn't work. Slowly, but steadily, he could feel the temperature in the restaurant rise. At first it was uncomfortable, but it quickly became unbearable. Still feeling the gaze of the scarred man, Mark began twitching in his seat, trying desperately to get comfortable. Looking at the scarred man, he saw that the man was smiling at him.

"All right folks," the waitress said, snapping Mark back to the table.

She began passing out their entrees. He tried to do what he could to calm himself down, but nothing was working. Looking at the smiling, scarred man, Mark could begin to hear laughter. That was more than he could take. He stood up at the table and stared at the scarred man, knocking off plates at the table as the waitress was placing them down.

“Mark, what’s wrong?” Sara said in confusion at Mark’s sudden action.

Mark looked at Sara and was instantly snapped out of his rage and felt completely embarrassed, remembering where he was. He turned his gaze back to where the scarred man was sitting, but no one was there.

“I . . . was . . .”

“If you have to use the restroom, just go,” Sara said.

“Yeah,” Mark said trying not to look foolish. “I just need to use the restroom.”

Mark excused himself from the table and headed to the restroom. Inside, he went to the sink, turned the faucet on and slapped water onto his face. He looked at himself in the mirror, wondering what was happening to him. Breathing deeply, he turned his head back down towards the sink. He lifted his head back up, and in the mirror, standing behind him, was the scarred man. Quickly he spun around and saw nothing.



A week later, Mark was back at his psychiatrist’s office.

“Now I’m seeing the figure in person,” Mark said to his doctor.

“Mark, it’s stress related. As you said, you didn’t want to be at that gathering, it was just the build-up of stress while you were there,” Dr. Hammond tried to convince him.

“Well these ‘stress build-ups’ are becoming too frequent for me to handle.”

“You have full control over these images. Only you can make them go away. Your meds will help, but—”

“And that’s another thing,” Mark interrupted Dr. Hammond. “I’ve been on these pills for six months because you said they would help my mind work better. It’s gotten worse. Explain how that is?”

“I put you on these pills because you were complaining about your previous meds not being as effective as you’d like. These pills are stronger than your old ones. We could try you at a higher dosage, but I truly feel that the cause of your problem is stress from the news of the baby and a higher dose won’t fix that.”

“Let’s try it anyway. Unless you can prescribe a new pill for stress.”

“I don’t want to risk you being on anything else. I’ll go ahead and write a prescription for a higher dose.”

“Thank you.”



Mark was in a long hallway. It was dark, save for one light bulb. He looked behind him and saw a blank wall. Seeing as it was the only way to go, he walked down the hall to the doorway at the other end. Reaching the door, opened it, and proceeded to the other side.

Closing the door behind him, Mark stared down a long hallway lit by a single light bulb. Confused, he turned around to go back through the door he came in, only to discover a blank, empty wall. He walked down the hallway to the door opposite him, turned the knob and entered into the next room.

He was again in a long hallway with a single light bulb and a door opposite. Again, behind him was a blank, empty wall. Angry, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the box cutter he always kept on him. Pushing it open, he cut a line in the wall. After that, he proceeded down the hall, opening the door at the other end and entering the next room.

He was back in the hallway. Everything was the same as the one he just came through, except one thing. Instead of the line he had cut, “MARK” was carved into the wall. He was scared. Not knowing what to do, he used his cutter to carve the word ‘yes.’ He then continued down the hall and went through the door.

Again, he was in a hallway, just as the ones before. This time, where his name had been carved was now carved one simple word: ‘COME.’ Putting his cutter away, he continued through the next door.

This next room wasn’t a hallway. This room was a small, square room with a hanging light in the middle over a small table. An empty chair was positioned at the table on Mark’s side. On the opposite, the shadow figure sat in his chair. The figure had his scarred hands with denim sleeves on the table under the light, and in his right hand was a deck of cards. Mark calmly walked over to the empty chair and sat in it.

Keeping his hands off the table, he asked, "Who are you?"

The shadow figure let out a grunt and shuffled the cards.

"Who are you?" Mark said again.

The figure ignored him and dealt out two cards, face down, side by side. Not knowing what else to do, Mark reached out to the card on the left and flipped it face up. The image on the card was one of a lady. Mark felt that he had seen this picture before. "Is this card, Sara?" Mark asked.

The figure grunted and pushed the other card towards Mark. Mark reached out and flipped the card over. This card was of a red hand. Again, Mark could swear he had seen the card before. He stared down at both cards, looked up to the shadow figure and asked again, "Who are you?"

And in an eerily familiar voice that chilled Mark to the bone, the shadow figure replied, "Guess?"

The figure began to laugh. First, a small chuckle, then a whole, hearty laugh. The laughing echoed in Mark's head and began to hurt him. He grabbed his head, placing his hands over his ears, but nothing happened. The laughter rang unbearably. He fell out of the chair onto the floor, squatting. He closed his eyes and bit down, trying as hard as he could to get the noise out of his head, but the laughter just continued.



Mark awoke so violently it woke Sara.

"Babe, what is it?" Sara asked.

"Nothing," Mark said hyperventilating. "It's nothing."

"Like hell it's nothing," Sara said. "Come on, tell me. What is it?"

"It was just a bad dream."

"One hell of a bad dream. Tell me about it."

Mark shifted his body away from Sara. "It's nothing."

"You're still a horrible liar." Sara turned on her bedside lamp and faced Mark. "Whatever this is, it isn't new. You've woken me up a bunch of times like this since I told you about the baby. So tell me. What is it?"

Mark let out a deep breath and turned to Sara. “It’s dreams of this shadow man with scarred hands dealing out cards of a red hand.”

“That’s it?” Sara said confused. “What else is it?”

“After he deals the card, I start getting a pain that wakes me up.”

Sara paused at this. “Have you told your doctor?”

“He says it’s stress from the baby.” Mark turned his head away and let out a sigh.

“Babe,” Sara said softly, “it’s okay to be stressed out. I’ve been freaked out too. It’s something we can overcome. Let’s just be open with each other with this. Don’t keep this bottled up. We will make it through this together. Okay?” Sara tugged at Mark’s arm. “Look at me.”

Mark turned back to Sara. All he could see in her green eyes was the love she had for him. He felt so bad for keeping this from her.

“Okay,” he said in a whisper.

“You and me, together. Alright?”

“Together,” Mark responded as they kissed.

Sara turned back around and turned off the light, then laid her head down to go back to sleep. Mark stayed awake, thinking about what the shadow figure had said to him. It wasn’t what the figure said that scared Mark: it was the voice he said it with. He knew that voice as if it was his own. He turned his back to Sara and prepared to go back to sleep. Before he did, he caught sight of his pills on his nightstand. He reached over and picked up the bottle, examining it before dropping it in the wastebasket.



Another four months went by and Mark was feeling much better. The dreams had stopped, he had gotten a promotion and raise, and everything was looking better. He had seen his doctor several times since he quit taking his pills, but didn’t dare tell him. The time he had spent off his meds had been the happiest he had felt since before receiving Sara’s news about the baby. He did not want to ruin that.

“Going for your jog, babe?” Sara was watching TV.

“Yep,” Mark answered as he stretched.

“I really can’t believe this. I should have bet on it,” Sara said aloud to Mark.

“Bet on what?” Mark said confused.

“The Cubs. They’re actually in the World Series, just like she said.”

“Who said?”

“That psychic from the carnival. She said the Cubs would win this World Series.”

“Right,” Mark opened the door. “See you in an hour.”

As he started jogging down the street, he tried his best to remember the psychic. He remembered Sara telling him something about the next few World Series, then he remembered being told about the baby. Sara had told him first, then the psychic. But, he remembered, there was a catch. What was that catch, he thought.

He went on jogging for another five minutes and his curiosity could take no more. He started sprinting home in hopes that Sara would remember what the psychic had told him.

When he got home, a troubling sight greeted him: the front door was open. Waiting first to regain his breath, he slowly approached the house and entered. All he heard in the house was the sound of the television. Looking into the living room, he saw Sara wasn’t on the couch. Keeping quiet, he reached for the coat hanger and grabbed his carpenter’s belt. From it, he pulled out his box cutter, a hammer, and a couple zip ties, keeping hold of the hammer and placing the cutter and ties in his pocket. He then proceeded to the kitchen. Nobody was there.

“Sara,” he called out. No response. He left the kitchen and made his way to the hallway. There, he was greeted with a sight that frightened him. Standing in front of him, wearing a denim jacket, was the scarred man. The two stared at each other for a few seconds not moving, then the scarred figure smiled.

“Where is she?” Mark said in a soft, terrified voice. “Where is she?” yelling this time.

“Mark,” he heard Sara.

The figure started laughing, and Mark started feeling pain in his head and spine. Fighting as best he could, Mark lunged at the scarred man, knocking him down.

“Mark,” he could hear Sara shout out in terror.

“Where is she?” Mark screamed as he positioned himself to strike the figure with the hammer.

“Mark, I’m . . . ,” Sara was terrified, he could hear. Before she could finish, he struck the scarred figure in the mouth. Now with a broken jaw, the figure looked up at him and laughed harder. “Mark,” Sara whimpered.

“Where is she?” Mark shouted again as he continued to strike the man. The figure just laughed. He could hear Sara sobbing now, her calls to him grew weaker. Mark let out a shout of pain as he grabbed the scarred man’s wrist, pulled out a zip tie, and tied the figure to the bedroom doorknob. He turned around and headed for the hall closet. He opened it and pulled out his shotgun. Pumping it, he pointed the barrel straight at the figure’s chest.

“I’m going to say this one more time. Where is she?”

The figure stopped his laughing and looked straight into Mark’s eyes. “Guess.”

The figure began laughing again. Mark let out one final scream and pulled the trigger. The laughter stopped.

Mark let out a breath of relief as he saw what was left of the scarred man. His face was completely damaged from the hammer and there was a big hole in his chest. Mark dropped the gun and left the hall.

“Sara,” he said. There was no response.

He went back into the living room and saw no one. He went back into the kitchen and saw no one. “Sara,” he called out again. He made his way back to the hall to check the bedroom. Reentering the hall, his eyes were filled with a sight that left him horrified.

Where the scarred man, beaten, battered, and damaged had been, tied to the doorknob, Mark saw what was left of Sara. Her face was unrecognizable, and her chest was blown apart. Blood was everywhere.

“Sara,” Mark mumbled in shock. On unsteady legs, he walked over to her, pulled out his box cutter and cut the tie from her wrist, catching her body as she collapsed. Holding her, he then remembered what the psychic had told him: one path would create a new life, the other would end one. He thought that perhaps quitting taking his meds had led to this, and that the figure in his mind was waiting for him to do so.

He held her for an hour before the police arrived. His eyes were watering, tears rolled down his cheeks. But he didn’t whimper.

He didn't moan. He didn't say a word. He sat in silence, holding her until the police picked him up and took her out of his arms. He was led outside. Before they cuffed him, he looked at his hand, a red hand, red from Sara's blood. A hand that fate had dealt. ❧

**Efflorescence**  
by Ariana Cadena

You told me to speak less  
Passive girls are pretty girls  
Quiet girls are better

But I wasn't born with a mouth to keep shut  
Unless it was for your pleasure  
I don't have this fire inside of me to waste  
Nor to be put out by you

Kind is what you claimed to be  
You told me who I was and I, naive enough to listen  
I asked why cruel words escaped your mouth  
"Only being honest" was your response  
Until I had eyes that could see for themselves

You thrust your insecurities into me  
Afraid of what I'd become if I saw my potential  
They ate at my skin  
While you smiled in amusement  
Knowing I deserved better,  
Looking to me with open arms and a smirk  
While I fought your demons for you  
Instead of my own

Eventually, I freed myself of your cage  
Now I will use my mouth for my own pleasure  
Because you're the prisoner of its truth

I am a rose and a sharp blade  
Hard to keep and not easy to hold on to  
My heart does not lie in my chest  
For the sole purpose of being crushed by fools

I am me  
Who needs no one to be someone  
And now knows better than to allow you to try to dim the light within me  
and call it love

## Daydream Believer

by Melody McCants

The salty air in the quiet, little Southern California beach town was particularly pungent and breezy that evening. One would have needed no less than two layers to keep warm. The comforting smell of sugary sweets wafted from the door of the favorite bakery into the dim glow of the main streetlights. Sitting on a bench, disregarding the concerned stares from passersby, Hugh appeared bedraggled in his mumbling and cursing display. His skin was a deep tan, nicely juxtaposed against the caramel cinnamon rolls behind him in the bakery window. His face was peppered with wiry hair, and from his head grew a matted fuzz the color of milk chocolate. His grey t-shirt was torn and stained. A cardboard sign with the words “Homeless Please Help” rested against his legs, and a red Solo cup for change was wedged between his thighs. His hands shook as he mumbled to the unseen companions in his troubled mind.

From the bakery emerged an older, balding man with a guitar slung over his shoulder and a smile on his tired face.

“Hey Hugh,” the man said. He then handed him a Styrofoam to-go box.

Hugh’s shaking calmed as he looked around the dimly lit cobblestone streets and noticed that the night crowd of shoppers and diners had come to a slow trickle. A once possessed Hugh straightened up in his seat, ran his left hand through his hair, and grabbed the to-go box with the other, locking eyes with the guitar man.

“Hey George. How was today’s haul?”

Hugh scooted over on the bench, and the once deranged and pitied homeless man proceeded to have a completely sane and civil conversation with George.

“Oh, well I wouldn’t call it a haul. I feel it coming though. Summer is just around the corner.”

The two looked out into the quiet street as they ate their warm cinnamon rolls from Styrofoam boxes with plastic forks.

Hugh emptied one of his cargo pant pockets to reveal thirty-three dollars in ones, fives, and change.

“I agree. Today was pretty slow,” he said, and nodded towards George’s guitar. “I’m starting to think picking up an instrument

instead of acting like a lunatic might increase my income.”

They both chuckled. Hugh continued speaking.

“People are so damned afraid of me. I guess I could be taking the role too far. It sure feels good, though, to get lost in it.”

“Yeah,” George said.

The conversation slowed as they munched on their chewy desserts, leaving their thoughts to themselves. Hugh noticed if he could sit real quiet, he could hear the ocean waves crash along the shore.

Hugh’s phone buzzed in his tattered pants, accompanied by the harsh glow from his pocket. He noticed the bakery had closed and the workers were gone. His wife was trying to get a hold of him. The cellphone read “12:35 am.”

“Thanks for the treat, George. I think I should get going.” The two shook hands and parted ways.

The walk from the bakery to Hugh's van was about a mile and a half, but on late nights it felt to him like three. He had lost track of time, and it was now more than a half hour past his curfew, which had been recently instituted by his wife, Jean. Poor Jean, he thought. Hugh and Jean were high school sweethearts, but the love began to fade when the pair lost their third and youngest child, Becky Sue, to leukemia two years before. Jean's spark had died, and the way she had found solace had been through food. He could imagine his wife growing into the couch in the dim living room light, shoveling roasted peanuts down with urgency while surfing through shopping channels as the teenage living children slept.

His vehicle was parked in the bushy area of a street lining a park. The faded and splotchy minivan sat in the shadows of the bushes growing tall and wide beside it. The windows were tinted, and fast food trash rested on the dashboard. Hugh stopped and stared at the van and remembered a *People* magazine clipping of Brad Pitt in a glittering, black Cadillac that Hugh had torn out and pasted on the dream board he kept under his bed at home. He sighed and shuffled into the van.

Hugh had kept his secret from his family for exactly one month and ten days. Well into his thirties wasn't the best time to revisit his dreams of becoming a legitimate actor. But, late in March, Hugh had left his desk at Onisko & Scholz Accounting with what was on his desk: a coffee mug, a framed photograph of his wife and three children, and a plaque he had kept in the bottom drawer on most

days, and had displayed on the happiest. The plaque was glossy mahogany with a gold plate that read: "Recognition of Hugh Schaeffer, for his excellent lead performance in *My Fair Lady*."

Hugh could remember the ceremony where he had received his award at Huntington Beach High School his senior year. A slender and glowing Jean dressed in a pink frock had sat in the audience of the dimly lit theater with Hugh and his folks. The stage spotlight had been focused on fragile Mrs. London, the school's beloved drama teacher.

"And this year, well, I think you all know what I'm about to say!" She had peered out in Hugh's direction with a toothy grin.

"Each year, my confidants and I pick the student we feel out-performed themselves and their peers. Not to say you all weren't wonderful!" The crowd had chuckled and hummed.

Jean had been eyeing Hugh beside her for a minute now, and Hugh had finally noticed.

"Hey," Hugh had whispered to Jean, his eyes flitting back to Mrs. London, "what's the matter?"

"What?" Jean had smiled, "Oh, nothing. Just thinking about something I need to tell you later."

Hugh couldn't resist her smile. They had been dating for two years now, and he couldn't remember life before Jean.

"Tell me now!" he had whispered and kissed her cheek, making her giggle.

Mrs. London had continued doting on her students while the lovebirds chirped.

"Oh, fine," Jean had begun, "but before I tell you, remember what you said the other night? About forever?" Their eyes had met in the dim light.

"Forever together? Of course," he had said. Her hand had been in his, and he had kissed each finger.

"We're having a baby," she had whispered, with a coy smile.

Hugh's face had dropped and his thoughts had stopped, but time did not. Mrs. London had announced this year's excellent lead pupil.

"Hugh Schaeffer!"

The crowd had cheered, and his parents had hollered.

"Go on, baby!" His mother had beamed.

"I love you," Jean had said, doe-eyed.

Hugh had walked up to the stage, his mind reeling. I'm going to be a father? And Jean... He had looked back at her, and thought of

how she had mentioned on several occasions her dream of being a mother, the dream she had had since she was a child with her cherub dolls and toy kitchen set.

Hugh had reached the podium and the beaming Mrs. London. She had handed him the mahogany plaque and leaned in for a hug.

"I am so proud of you," she had said. "I just know you have a fantastic future ahead of you."

The crickets sang and the river coyotes howled in the distance. Hugh unlocked his glove compartment and took out a package of baby wipes. He adjusted the rear-view mirror so it pointed directly at his tired and tanned face. Hugh began his end of day routine by peeling away his facial hairpieces, first two wiry side burns, and then the beard. Next, the chocolate colored wig was removed and a damp head of thinning black hair was revealed. The pieces were placed in a plastic Ziploc bag and were set to rest in the glove compartment neatly next to his bottles of foundation makeup and setting powder, all in tanner shades than his own. There was a slender brown eyeliner pencil he used on his lower eyelid for dramatic effect. He felt it made his eyes pop.

He began to wipe away makeup and the light dusting of dirt from his face to reveal the fair-faced Hugh his family knew. A small pile of used wipes formed on his passenger seat. He made sure all the makeup was rubbed off, doing so in long and slow strokes. The soapy wipes burned his pores, leaving his skin a light pink.

Hugh paused for a minute when his face was bare and his hairpieces were tucked away. This is what I look like. The light in his car flickered but his gaze remained fixed.

Hugh slumped back in the driver's seat and deeply inhaled a mixture of stale car smell and his own B.O. from the day's work in the hot sun. He closed his eyes and saw the faces of pedestrians walking by, ranging from fear to pity, to disgust, and even to amusement. His most memorable performances took place on the pier, where he would lean against the railing, yelling, "I'm going to jump!" and then start to twitch all over. All in good fun, of course. His eyes would open wide and his arms would curl into his chest as he spoke to seagulls, light poles, and anyone brave enough to listen to his made-up stories about bar altercations or the Vietnam war. And the responses were the icing on the cake. "Get out of here!" men would scream. "Get away from my child!" a mother would whimper. He loved it. He was doing his

job and doing it well.

He loved it, but he knew he couldn't keep up his charade forever. One month and ten days of fictional workday reports to his wife and a thirty-dollar daily income needed to end very soon, before anyone close to him found out. Hugh had thought ahead and had saved up enough money for three month's rent and various bills before leaving his job. But time ticked on. Finally living his dream of being an actor—is that what I'm doing?—couldn't go on for much longer, and no one could know it had begun.

Hugh reached behind the passenger seat and pulled out a black trash bag containing a change of clothes. He then removed his raggedy clothing and replaced them with the neatly folded, clean pair of trousers and button-up shirt. The only light now was that of the moon and the street light across the way.

Hugh started the car, and crawled slowly through the sleeping neighborhood till he reached Pacific Coast Highway and began his twenty-minute ride home.

Hugh pulled into the driveway of his fixer-upper, three-bedroom, two-bath home. He shut the car door as quietly as he could, although he had a feeling it wouldn't have mattered if he slammed it. It was a quarter past one in the morning and he could see that the living room lights were on.

Hugh breathed in the cool night air while he stood next to his car, observing the house in the moonlight. He had painted that house, from blue to beige, and he had built the fence too, a white picket one. His wife had planted the garden, the roses and daisies. He could see the buds were beginning to bloom. He entered his home. Yellow light engulfed him and the house swallowed him up.

A high-pitched, hoarse voice spoke.

"Hugh? Where the hell have you been?" Ghostly images from the TV danced on Jean's wide frame, clad in a purple pajama set and nestled in the living room loveseat.

Hugh shut the front door and was met with Jean's questioning eyes and pursed lips. He set his briefcase aside and slumped into the living room recliner. The framed photos of family members on the walls seemed to stare at him, and the photo of Becky Sue stung him.

"Hello? Were you at work all this time?" A small piece of peanut fell from Jean's mouth as she turned the TV volume low.

Hugh thought back to the beach, the hot sun, the tourist's stares and glowing burnt skin, and the spare change.

"Yeah, I was."

"Why so late?" Their eyes met. Soft, purple circles rested under Jean's, and Hugh's were bloodshot.

*Think quick*, he thought. *She's reading you.*

"Oh, uh, George needed me to stay late. Tax season is coming up, you know."

"Who's George?" Jean popped a few peanuts in her mouth but maintained eye contact.

"I didn't tell you about George?" Hugh folded his arms and glanced at his briefcase. "He's the new guy. Damn good accountant if you ask me. He just needed a little help with how things work over there, with the filing." *Yeah. That's good.*

Jean let out a deep sigh and lifted the controller, clicking the TV off.

"Well," she said, "I'm going to bed."

More than twenty years had passed, but Jean had managed to retain her doe eyes. They made Hugh think of Mrs. London and the theater ceremony.

"Do you remember when I used to act? In high school?" Hugh asked and crossed his legs.

She nodded. "Sure. You were pretty good, too."

"Yeah." He paused. "I started acting again."

Jean sat up and scowled at Hugh.

"What?" she asked.

Hugh could never really know what would set Jean off these days.

"Just at the local playhouse. I think I'm getting my chops back,"

Jean chortled. "Chops. Good one."

"What do you mean by that? I got that award in high school, remember?" Hugh became flushed with furrowed brows, and Jean smiled.

"What's wrong? Everyone knew Mrs. London had a crush on you! Come on, Hugh." Jean began to sway back and forth on the couch, preparing for her ascent from the couch and then her trudge to the bedroom. She hobbled to her feet, but wasn't standing for long.

Hugh swiftly rushed at Jean and shoved her onto the tile floor.

"Hugh!" she screeched.

He grabbed her ample arms and put his face an inch from hers. He spoke through gritted teeth.

"Did you ever care? About what I wanted?"

Jean gaped at Hugh. Tears began to form on her plump cheeks as she whimpered. "What are you talking about?"

"High school? The pregnancy?" He was yelling now. "Did you do it on purpose?"

"Do what? It's a two-person deal, Hugh."

"But you never asked! If I wanted it!"

"It?" Jean was red. "By 'it' do you mean Charlie? Becky? Sarah?" Her voice cracked and she wriggled out of Hugh's grip. "Who are you?"

Hugh stood hunched over in the living room, breathing heavily. Jean remained on the floor.

"Get out," she sobbed.

Hugh's breathing eased and he closed his eyes.

"I will," he said. He grabbed his brief case and exited through the front door, leaving a crying Jean on the tile floor.

The lights flashed when he unlocked the van. The living room window glowed behind him.

Hugh opened the passenger side door and sat down. He unlocked the glove compartment revealing his well-loved disguise. He folded his arms around the bottles and hairpieces and swooped them into his arms. Hugh walked out of the car, straight to an opened trashcan, and let the paraphernalia float from his arms and crash to the bottom of the bin. He didn't pause for a second. Hugh made his way back to the car, slammed the passenger side door, and hopped into the driver's seat.

It was only when he adjusted his mirror that he paused. He zeroed in on his dilated pupils in his reflection.

Hugh opened his center divider, revealing crumpled receipts, change, and one folded piece of notebook paper with names and addresses scribbled on it. Hugh read the first name and address on the list to himself and entered it into his GPS without hesitation.

Creative Artists Agency. 2000 Avenue of the Stars, Los Angeles, CA 90067.

His phone came alive and spoke.

"Turn right onto Norwalk Avenue. Then turn Right onto La Jolla Diagonal."

Hugh's van lit up the driveway.

"Use the right two lanes to merge onto I-405 N. You will reach your destination at 2:45 am."

The van purred. Hugh pulled out of the driveway, and the light from the living room window vanished. ☹️

## The Craving

by Linda Shaw

My craving much like Edgar's raven  
intrudes my idle musings with a plague  
But the raven whispers one word  
on one location perched  
while my craving, omnipresent, bellows ideas  
pestering to be penned down

And how can I ignore the unrelenting urge  
that takes precedence over friends, who attempt  
to amend the hankering need to flee  
and bleed inky creations

Not that I'm complaining what a joy is found in taking  
ideas and stirring them around making an array of words  
not eating them of course but serving them in such a way  
that others crave to eat them for me

Stories, words both birthed to record a simple experience  
Both pulling hidden brilliance out of the dullest days  
Both seeping through the blinds like morning sunlight  
Both penning down uproars sparked by humans' downfall

Oh, beautiful craving! Similar yet stark from the raven  
It is your silence, not beguiling, that empties the mind  
and shallows the heart

Pester me, my pretty craving. Or I shall be but a meaningless mind,  
Confined to the myopic pit of ignorance—lifted, nevermore.

**Ghost Tree**  
by Kimberly Esslinger

I am full of listening.  
Brittle with more.  
Weak rooted. Rotted.  
Rot from the inside.  
Do you hear me when I stop listening?  
When it spills out.  
When it spoils.

Last night in the mountains the stars dimmed.  
It was clouds clouds clouds  
And I was wondering if you touched my hand  
would it be enough to stop the noise inside of me?  
The righteous chattering  
of caws and crows.  
The dry thin air pumping my heart full  
of nothing.

Eating dinner. Trying to find conversation.  
You took me to a corner in a crowded cafeteria and ate silently.  
Everything said.  
Unsaid.  
The life of the party. The silent wife.  
She says, "I feel like you want something I'm not giving you."

**Who Was John Lion? Or, Ozymandias of the Bathroom:  
An Evolutionary Fable**  
by Samuel Pflugrath

In the central African savannah, many, many years before any of us were even born, there once lived a very proud and powerful lion, like no other before him. His name was John, and for this reason he was known to all the other beasts of the arid grassland as John Lion.

John was an exceptionally beautiful creature, with a glorious orange mane and gleaming, golden eyes. He was also incredibly brave and noble and intelligent; or, at least, that's what he liked to say about himself and hear the other lions say about him. Whether he was entirely correct to believe this about himself didn't really matter, as all of John's pride-mates were much too afraid of him to ever openly question his self-judgement.

For John was also a very large and powerful lion: his claws were strong as knives and his roar echoed for miles. His mouth, full of long, sharp, white teeth, was always twisted into a cruel and laughing "sneer of cold command," to quote the poet. He feared no other animals—not even humans. John was (as he himself loved to say) "an objectively superior specimen of lionhood"; and no other animal ever dared to stand against him.

John and his pride lived in a dried and narrow little river valley, known to the locals as "Lions' Valley" for fairly obvious reasons. Because of how small and secluded it was, game in the valley was always scarce, and the river that had carved it was barely a trickle outside of the rainy season; but, for all that, they were also protected from hunters by the steep, rocky cliffs, and the isolation bred a sense of community and oneness among all of them. Well, almost all of them, at least.

One day, as the majority of the lions and lionesses were napping together in the hot sun and waiting for the coolness of the evening to arrive, John sat by himself in the shade of an acacia—brooding on the miserable state of the world he found himself in, as he was wont to do.

"All they ever do is lie there lazily," John said to himself as he lay there dynamically. "Oh, a few of them may go out later, and

together they might bring back a single measly gazelle to share amongst themselves, but the rest? Undeserving parasites—unfit to bear the name ‘Lion.’ Whereas I, kingly hunter that I am, could take down a full-grown bull elephant in musth and drag its carcass all the way back to Lions’ Valley, all by myself!

“Not that I ever would, of course,” he added, hastily and with a hint of bitterness, “because if I did, I would then have to share the flesh of my labor... with them.” He shuddered in disgust. “Therefore, I am forever forced to stifle my innate potential for greatness, so that I may continue to ‘coexist’ with their infernal mediocrity.”

John snorted angrily, when an idea crept into his mind. “If I were to kill them all,” he said to himself quietly, “or at least drive them all away, I would no longer have to bother sharing my meat with them. No longer would I have to provide for a pride full of shameful moochers! Why, I could have this whole valley all to myself.” Smiling, he rose to his feet, his voice rising as well: “Yes, let them all starve to death in the wilderness, like nature intended! Without them holding me back, I would at last be free! Free to achieve my true potential as the greatest lion—no, the greatest animal—the greatest living thing, in all of Africa—all the world—all the Universe!”

He roared that last line at the top of his lungs, and his words echoed through all of Lions’ Valley like the proclamation of a god—incidentally, waking all the other lions up in the process.

“Is something wrong, sir?” one of them asked meekly, and John leapt up onto a boulder overlooking them all.

“Yes, there is something wrong with this valley,” he said commandingly, “and I am looking down upon the source of that problem right now. You worthless and ungrateful wastes of fur have depended upon me for far too long! So, as the alpha male of this pride, I hereby decree that all other lions now living here are to be forever expelled from this valley immediately. If any of you refuse to leave, or if you ever try to sneak back in again, I will personally tear your throat out like the hyena you are and leave your carcass to the vultures. You all have until sundown to depart.”

“But how will we survive?” asked an elderly lioness in the back. “There is little food and water beyond the valley’s walls, and many of us are too young or too old to hunt!”

Like a titan, John shrugged dismissively at her question. “That is not my concern,” came his cold reply. “You should have all learned some self-reliance, lions, rather than relying on me. The time has come

for Almighty Nature to take its proper course with the lot of you. Now leave!”

With that, he let out one final roar of warning and then crouched down upon his perch, as if preparing to pounce on them all. Even though John was outnumbered, the others were much too afraid of his wrath to dare challenge his word. So, without any other act of protest, every last lion, young and old alike, rose up from where they had been sleeping; and sadly they began their long, slow trek up and out of Lions’ Valley.

“Oh, and one more thing,” they could hear John proclaim in the distance behind them. “Now that this valley is my exclusive property, it shall no longer be called ‘Lions’ Valley.’ No, from now on until the end of time, this shall be known to all the world as ‘Lion’s Gulch.’”

And so, saddened and afraid, the refugees fled out into the inhospitable savannah—searching for a new home. Eventually they came across a pride of Tsavo lions, roughly the same size as their own group and living about a mile south from their lost Eden. There, food and water were even scarcer, and now there was also the constant danger of hunters on the prowl; but nonetheless, they were accepted into the new pride as though they were kin, and together they all did what they could to survive.

Meanwhile, John ruled his private dominion with an iron paw. Free of the limitations placed upon him by living among inferiors, and at last able to develop himself to his fullest potential, John became a monster: a new Nemean Lion that no one short of a modern Heracles could have ever hoped to challenge. Because he no longer had to share his food with other, lesser lions, John gorged himself on zebra and water buffalo every night, stripping them to the bone just to spite the vultures.

After eating he would then lie for hours on end by the tiny, trickling stream, just so that he could stare, self-hypnotized, at his own reflection in the water—just so that he could stare at his powerful legs and slashing claws; at his gleaming eyes and dashing smile; and, most of all, at the brilliant nimbus of wavy orange fur that marked him as the true King of the Beasts. “What a glorious mane I have,” the lion would say of himself in awe.

Meanwhile, hushed word of him spread throughout the whole region. Even humans in towns and cities far removed from the secluded gulch that he alone ruled would fearfully ask one another the

enigmatic question: "Who is John Lion?"

It was only after about a year of such independence that John finally felt the urge to have cubs, so that they might inherit his greatness and carry on his illustrious line; and it was only then that he finally realized that having cubs was something he frankly could not do all on his own.

"No matter," he finally said after spending an hour or so cursing Almighty Nature over the tyranny of sexual reproduction. "I'll just leave Lion's Gulch for a time and find an acceptable lioness or two to mate with. What female wouldn't want an unquestionably superior mate like myself? And," he added with a self-consciously wicked grin, "On the off chance that they do refuse my advances, I'm sure that I could persuade them to reconsider."

He departed Lion's Gulch that very day; and he couldn't have picked a better time to leave either, since by that point he had already hunted down and eaten every single animal larger than a dung beetle within its rocky walls.

As he strutted through the tall yellow grass, herbivores everywhere running for cover at the mere rumor of his approach, John was already dreaming of the wondrous future he knew he was about to create: a brave new world where every lion on the planet would be a direct descendant of him and him alone. All other, weaker male lines, unable to compete against his superior blood, would be driven to extinction (one way or another), leaving only his offspring to inherit the earth; every last one of them possessing his strength, his beauty, his intellect, his courage; and above all, his sheer superiority to all other forms of life. Not even humans, he thought, would be able to stand against his progeny. "They will look upon the glory of my descendants," he said to himself, a joyful tear in his gleaming eye and a fang-filled smirk on his face, "and they will despair."

After a few hours of journeying southward through the grassland, John at last came across a very large pride in a clearing. They were all lying peacefully together in the midday sun, forming a rough semicircle around their cubs, who wrestled together in the middle. As soon as John emerged from out of the tall grass, however, all of them anxiously rose to their feet and gathered into a crowd to face him.

At first it appeared to John that the pride was made up entirely of lionesses, which pleased him greatly; but a closer look showed instead that all of the males either had no manes or were in

the process of losing theirs. Whether this was the result of inferior genetics or overzealous grooming he could not tell; but the sight of this made the hairs of John's own mane stand on end. "Objectively unnatural," he growled under his breath. "This will surely compromise my ability to find a suitable mate here."

Still, John had sworn before himself that he would not return to Lion's Gulch without at least one partner worthy of him. "Greetings, females," he announced proudly, affecting affability. "I trust you all know my name?"

"Of course we know your name, John," said one of them, stepping forward. "You banished a good deal of us from Lions' Valley, remember?"

John's eyes widened in surprise. "You're the ones that I drove away? Why, I would've expected all of you to have starved to death by now! Do you mean to say that you actually managed to survive this whole time without having me around to take care of you?"

"Somehow, we've managed to adapt to your absence," said another.

"Well then, perhaps I underestimated the lot of you," John replied, grinning predatorily. The sight of his smile made the cubs nervous, and they instinctively backed away from him. "Perhaps some of you are even worthy of helping me to continue my glorious lineage."

"I think most of us would prefer not to," said another.

John laughed politely and took another few steps forward. "Are you honestly saying that you would refuse the chance to bear the cubs of such an objectively perfect lion as myself?"

"Perhaps you are not as perfect as you think," said another.

John winced at that response. "But I am stronger, smarter, braver, and more beautiful than any of the so-called 'males' in this pride. And with your help, dear lionesses, there may even come a time when all lions will be just like me."

"That is a future we would never allow to happen," said another.

John was getting impatient: "Arguing makes no difference: I simply will not leave here until I have claimed a suitable mate."

"And just what makes you believe that you are entitled to a mate here?" said another.

"Entitled?" John snarled; he did not like that word. "This has nothing to do with entitlement!" he said, his anger simmering. "This

is about my right as a lion—as the greatest lion of all, no less—to find a proper mate so that I can then father cubs, as nature intended!”

“And it is our right, as your fellow lions, to politely ask you to look somewhere else,” said another.

Now he was through playing nice with them: “If you refuse to do as I say willingly,” John pronounced finally, “then I am more than happy to use force to achieve my goals.”

“And if it really has to come to that, then we are perfectly capable of using force against you,” said another.

By this point, the cubs had all retreated to the back of the crowd for safety, while their parents began huddling ever closer together, to better stare down the interloper.

John laughed again, significantly less amused than before. “You would resist my authority? You who I once drove into the wilderness without any resistance? None of you were this brave a year ago.”

“Survival means change, John, and we have changed a great deal in the course of a year,” said another.

“None of you have changed,” John replied, chuckling self-defensively; “You’re all still just... weak, weak little lionesses!” he blurted, “in desperate need of a proper male in your lives!”

This time it was the other lions who laughed at him; and John, shocked by their insolence, quickly scanned the crowd with darting eyes to see which of them had dared to openly mock him. He couldn’t find the exact source of the laughter, however, as there were far too many of them there.

“We have adapted quite well to life without you, while you have clearly not adapted to life without us,” said another.

John kicked up some dust with his hind leg. “Weaklings!” he scoffed. “You don’t stand a chance against me! None of you do!”

“Even so, we will not allow you to bully and threaten us in the service of your bloated ego,” said another.

“You dare talk to a natural superior like that?” John growled. “You’re all weak! Lazy, puny, effeminate: unfit for survival!”

“We all may be weaker, but there are still a lot more of us here than there are of you,” said another.

“That—that makes no difference!” John stammered angrily. “Nature has selected me, not you! I’m stronger than you in every way! My sheer will alone is greater than all of yours!”

“Your superior will is no match for our superior numbers,”

said another.

“My will transcends the laws of reality!!!” John screamed.

“Sure it does,” said another.

“You’re all asking for it,” John growled, huffing and puffing. He crouched down, refusing to back away while the other lions, several of whom had yet to even say anything, continued to calmly stand their ground. “I will not be defeated by inferiors!” he said.

“Face it, John: your victory here is objectively impossible,” said another.

With that John roared and pounced, and the other lions retaliated. Everything was engulfed by a frenzied haze of yellow dust, with flashes of fangs and fur and blood, like lightning bursts in a storm cloud. The cubs all scattered into the tall grass and watched fearfully from the relative safety of the clearing’s edge. Every other animal nearby—from the meerkats under the earth to the vultures up in the sky—fled from the scene of the battle, as roars of fury and whimpers of pain carried for miles.

The fight only lasted about five minutes—that it wasn’t over in seconds merely demonstrates just how powerful John truly was. Had there only been about half as many lions in that pride, he might have actually triumphed over them that day; although if that had been the case, he probably would have had to keep searching for a still-living mate.

When it was over, most of the other lions were wounded, some very badly; but remarkably, all survived. John did not emerge unscathed either: beaten and bloody like never before in his life, he finally abandoned his mission and briskly limped away, back into the tall grass from whence he had emerged. In spite of their injuries, the other lions celebrated their hard-earned victory with roaring cheers, while all of their cubs came pouring back into the clearing to join in the festivities and help their parents heal.

Soon, John returned to Lion’s Gulch. With his mane all tangled and filthy, and his typical grin replaced by a scowl of maddened anger, he looked a lot less like the King of the Beasts and more like an evil undertaker in a Brazilian horror movie.

By then night had fallen, and all of John’s dominion seemed barren and dead to him in the moonlight. Standing at its precipice, he stared down into the lifeless valley that now bore his name, and in his mind he could still hear the other lions rejoicing as he fled.

“I will not allow myself to be defeated by the likes of them,”

he declared defiantly into the night. “Either I shall return to Lion’s Gulch with a proper mate, or I shall never return again!”

Meanwhile, all of the zebras and wildebeest who had snuck back into the valley in his absence, and who happened to overhear this little affirmation of his, breathed a rather presumptive sigh of relief.

The next day, John returned to the pride of the other lions; and for many months thereafter, he could always be seen brooding on the outskirts of their territory. To his credit, he never did try to directly attack them again, as he was still much too smart for that. Instead, he would merely lie in wait for the day when their society would ultimately collapse (due to their own inferiority, of course), so that he could then step in to save them all from themselves. That day never actually arrived, but he was nevertheless certain of its inevitability.

Just to be safe, however, the other lions knew that, so long as John was around, it was a good idea to stay together and avoid separating from the group. They did all that they could to try and make peace with him: every so often they would send a small party out to offer him a place in the pride. All he would have to do, they explained, was agree to live peacefully among them like any other lion.

But, of course, John always refused their offer in the most contemptuous way he could. “I am no mere lion!” he would say, insulted by the very implication. “I’m not some lesser male without a mane! No, I am an alpha, and I demand to be treated as such! Why should I be made to pretend that you are my equals when I am your superior?”

And, every time he started talking like this, the other lions would simply roll their eyes and walk away, leaving him behind to rant at their haunches.



And then, late one afternoon, as the first full moon of October was just beginning to peek out over the horizon, a strange man came to the savannah. His name was Nimrod Sunjata—he was an exceptionally handsome man with glorious black hair and skin and gleaming dark brown eyes. He was the sort of person who liked to pose with his arms akimbo and his head cocked back, his eyes half-closed and his mouth twisted into a cruel and laughing “sneer of

cold command,” to quote the poet. He was dressed all in khaki with a matching pith helmet, and over his shoulder he carried a powerful rifle, upon the barrel of which was engraved the motto:

*“I am no deer, I have no fear  
Of any greater One.”*

Sunjata had travelled very far in search of a proper trophy worthy of him; as such, he knew almost nothing of the area he now found himself in. Also, for as fearless and as great of a hunter as he was, he had been having something of a bad luck streak all that day. He hadn’t managed to successfully shoot anything, and now he only had one bullet left in his gun.

He was just about to give up and begin his journey home, when he at last stumbled upon what appeared to be a pride made up entirely of lionesses. Sunjata considered shooting one of them, but he ultimately decided against it: “The head of a lion is a far superior trophy to the head of a common lioness,” he said to himself. “No one would be impressed to see one of these puny things mounted on my wall!” Besides, he wasn’t quite foolhardy enough to risk angering an entire pride of lions, female or otherwise—especially when he only had one bullet left in his gun.

But then, peering out over the savannah, he finally sighted the perfect target: a large and exceptionally beautiful lion. The beast was camped out on the edge of the clearing, well away from the main group—much like a hunter lying in wait for stragglers to pick off more easily. “Surely he won’t be missed,” Sunjata said to himself through a self-consciously wicked grin.

With herculean strength and coordination, he unslung his weapon and took his aim. Through the telescopic sight, he could clearly see the creature’s gleaming eyes and dashing smile, and the brilliant nimbus of wavy orange fur that marked him as the true King of the Beasts. “What a glorious mane he has,” the hunter said of his prey in awe.

And then he hesitated, because for just a brief moment, Sunjata almost felt a sort of spiritual connection with his quarry—as though the two of them were really somehow one and the same.

And then he pulled the trigger.

Sunjata was right, as it turned out; the other lions did not appear to mind.



This all happened many, many years ago, before any of us were even born. Of course, just about all of the lions that John expelled either had or went on to have cubs; and, when their cubs grew up, they in turn had and raised cubs of their own. And, naturally, they raised their children to be like their parents and grandparents, and not like John. Unlike him, they had learned the value of altruism and humility, and made sure that their children and grandchildren would carry those same lessons throughout their lives as well.

Even today, their descendants still live on—a lot of them don't have manes anymore (although some of them still do), and they all continue to live happily and peacefully together. A few of them even went and ultimately returned to their former home, which John had so kindly left vacant for them: that safe and cozy little river valley that had once and will for all time be known as Lions' Valley.

John, on the other hand, did not leave behind any descendants to inherit the earth, or even his good looks. All that he left behind was a pelt for Sunjata to use as a rug to rest his feet on at the end of a long day, and a stuffed head for him to mount alongside all of his other trophies.

Unfortunately, since the walls of Sunjata's parlor were already covered in heads, he had to find someplace else to put such an illustrious memento—someplace that he and his many friends and guests would always be certain to see it. Finally, after much consideration, Sunjata found the perfect spot to serve as John's final resting place: in his bathroom, directly over the toilet. Admittedly, this was probably an honor that John would have never actually coveted; but, after a lifetime of being such an objectively awful individual, it was an honor he had rightfully earned. ❧

**Jazz Players and Jugular**  
by Samuel Carillo

Let the jazz player drink the melody,  
the type that pierces throats like  
javelins against the jugular,  
sing with class and keep the  
momentum up,  
but lows are also base and balance,  
tap rhythmically on wooden floors  
as echoes slice into lobes  
of those who  
nod their heads casually.

**Confession: “My Name is Mary and . . .”**  
by Mary Hinds

I am a donut whore, a Krispy Kreme slut,  
a Dunkin’ harlot, a Little Debbie rut.

I get near a donut, and I lose all control.  
I’ll do most anything for a treat with a hole.

I crave crullers, fritters, twists and donettes,  
long johns, maple bars, and fancy cronuts.

I tingle for sprinkles, sugar powder and icing,  
coconut flakes, cinnamon crumbs, nuts fresh from dicing.

I dream of glazed, raised, filled with jelly or crème,  
devil’s food, sour cream, and cider supreme.

I throb for malasadas, beignets, brioche.  
Throw in a churro, and I give up the ghost.

I lust after Hostess, Winchells and on  
until every shred of dignity is gone.

Alas, there’s no redemption for this Jezebel.  
Just a sweet sugary pathway leading to Hell.  
Or the gym.

**2016 Transforming Experience into Words:  
A Personal Writing History Essay Contest**

*Who are you as a writer today, and how did you get to be this way? Transform your formative experiences as a writer into words. Explain and illustrate your personal writing history.*

First Place Award

**The Worst Story I've Ever Written:  
How I Found My Love for Writing**  
by Mahalia Ellison

Second Place Award

**World of Wonder**  
by Violeta Martinez

**The Worst Story I've Ever Written:  
How I Found My Love for Writing**  
by Mahalia Ellison

**M**y 8th grade English teacher was inspired by the book we were reading in our class—Elijah of Buxton by Christopher Paul Curtis. The novel is about a boy named Elijah Freeman who lives on a settlement in Canada for refugee slaves in the 19th century. It chronicles his adventures as a free black boy, and puts much emphasis on the fact that he is indeed the first person on the settlement to be born free. After we finished the story, our teacher gave us a writing prompt.

“I want you to write a story,” she began. “The story should be about a slave and their life living on a plantation. Whatever their fate is in the end is entirely up to you.”

When I first heard the instructions leave her mouth, I believed that the narrative would be an easy task. “I’m black,” I told my friends jokingly. “Of course I’ll know how to write a story about a slave—I grew up learning about them.”

I situated myself in front of one of the clunky iMac Computers we had in our classroom and sprawled my fingers above the keyboard. Drowned in my arrogance, I had this notion that I would submit a four-page narrative that would blow my teacher away. But that wasn’t the case. The only thing I typed up that day was my name. And this fact of being so undoubtedly idealess made me angry. “Is it really this hard to write a story?” I asked myself.

The next day, people in my classroom were already typing away, and I had nothing to show. So, I began with naming my character: Thomas Haverond. The moment I typed his name, I knew I had to create names for everyone else that he knew. So I did—Evan, James, and four other names that fail to appear in my memory. And after that, I created a family for Thomas and backstories for them as well.

When the school day ended, I realized I had spent an entire hour on the introduction. However, that didn’t discourage me—no, it encouraged me. I woke up the next day anxious to continue documenting the life of Thomas Haverond. I went through my classes waiting for the moment when I could begin writing again. I was unsure why I itched to be in front of a keyboard so badly. I had

written plenty of essays in the past, reiterating and analyzing a piece I had read previously, but nothing compared to the rush and the freedom of being thrown in front of a computer and being told to create something. And that's what I did: I ended up creating a twenty-something page narrative. And I'm shameless when I admit that it was an absolute literary train wreck. At the time, though, I thought it was worthy of publishing. I even titled it: *The Exodus of Thomas Haverond*. I thought using the word "exodus" made me sound smart, so I used it.

When my English teacher read over all twenty-something pages of my work during revision day, I stood behind her and watched her red pen hover over words, bear down on them like a scimitar closing in on a cornered thief, then shift to the next word as if she spared its life. I was slowly losing my mind with anticipation, and she was only on the first paragraph. It wasn't until the next day that Esme gave me her feedback.

"So Thomas made it off the plantation?" she asked, intrigued.

"Yeah, he did."

"What about his family? What happened to them?"

I stared at her, my mouth agape with the inability to answer her question: what did happen to Thomas' family?

"I don't know. I didn't...I didn't think of that."

"Well." Esme sighed. "Next time, work on adding in a resolution so your story has a fitting conclusion."

Esme walked away to continue grading papers. I sat at my table in shock.

"A resolution? That's it? That's all she has to say?"

Now, I know that she was only giving me constructive criticism. But eighth grade me? The girl who believed that her horribly written story could rival the works of Maya Angelou and Louis Sachar? She was not happy.

After that day, I couldn't stop. I pictured myself as the next J.K. Rowling or Stephanie Meyer with every plot twist I added into my stories. During every outline I made or every first chapter I wrote, I remembered Esme's words about a resolution. But I asked myself what else I needed? I asked myself what else I should utilize to make my writing the best it could be?

It became clear that writing was more than just a hobby to me. Years came and went; writing short stories on my phone has turned into sleepless nights in front of my computer typing out the most

crucial part of the 36th chapter in my fiction piece. Ideas enter my mind and lay down their ‘Welcome Home’ mats until I write them out. But despite the all-nighters, writer’s block, and frequent spurts of self-doubt, the routine never ends. And it isn’t a routine I dread one bit.

When I dwell on the 8th grade memory, I understand that I wouldn’t be writing the most crucial part of my novel at 3 in the morning if it weren’t for my teacher placing the idea of a resolution in my head. And I wouldn’t be molding any of my ideas into stories today if it weren’t for *The Exodus of Thomas Haverond*—the worst story I’ve ever written. ☹️

## World of Wonder

by Violeta Martinez

I remember the myriad hours I spent at the Alma Reeves library in Compton with my mother in the children's reading room multiple times throughout the week. When I was growing up, reading and learning were greatly encouraged by my mother even though she was not very fluent in English; nonetheless, she loved to read. At the time, my mother was enrolled in adult classes where she was attempting to improve her English. She would read to me all the time before I was even born because she knew the importance of reading and learning. During our visits to the library, we would read and write together. Learning to read and write helped me open my mind up to a world of pure imagination where anything could happen.

I remember walking into the library and maneuvering my way through what seemed like a maze of books. The children's reading room had a bright yellow background, and the room was in a circular shape that resembled the sun. I felt happy there because I felt as if I were reading underneath the sun. The room was filled with color. From the beanbag chairs to the tables and chairs, almost every color of the rainbow could be found—blues, yellows, greens, and oranges. They even had puppets that children could play with and create their own stories. The library's atmosphere was warm and inviting with plenty of cozy places to cuddle up with a book or write stories; thus, this enhanced my experience, and it made me enjoy reading books even more because of the stories I could read and then write.

My favorite book was *The Little Red Hen* by Paul Galdone. *The Little Red Hen* is a story about a little red hen who finds some seeds and decides to bake a loaf of bread, but she has to work hard to make it happen. The little red hen asks some of her friends, "Who will help me plant the wheat?" The lazy dog, sleepy cat, and loud duck respond, "Not I." And with every task, she asks, "Who will help me?" Each and every one of her friends replies, "Not I." So, she does the work by herself, and when the bread is done, her friends quickly rush to her house because of the delicious aroma. The hen asks, "Who will help me eat this bread?" Everyone eagerly replies, "I will . . . I will . . . I will!" Suddenly she shouts, "No, you will not! I will eat it all by myself

because I did all of the work.” In other words, the little red hen is enjoying the fruits of her labor: the loaf of bread. At the same time, she is standing up for herself against her selfish friends who have not been interested in helping her but want to take part in eating the bread. Essentially if you work hard enough, then you will be able to succeed and reap the rewards. I saw how strong the little red hen is; in addition, her persistence and hard work reminded me of my mother because she was working hard to improve her English skills. Reading *The Little Red Hen* taught me about responsibility and the benefit of hard work.

Inspired by the books that I read, the desire to create my own stories quickly emerged. Although I had only begun to learn how to write, I tried my hardest to compose stories. Often times I was the only one who could understand my writing, but the fact that I was not well versed in writing did not hold me back. Instead I was motivated to make people understand my writing, so I began to create illustrations to follow along with my writing. I drew a variety of animals, such as green frogs, yellow ducklings, orange tabby cats, and red hens. Essentially, I was imitating the structure of the books I read, and in doing so, I was able to create stories of my own that people could follow along with.

Upon reflection, some of my fondest memories are of reading at my local library's children's reading room with my mother. I am grateful that my mom taught me the importance of learning to read and write. Learning to read and write gave me the opportunity to go to the library, and it has been one of the best decisions I've made. Not only did I develop an eagerness to read, but I also developed a fondness for writing. As far as I can remember my mother has always encouraged me to expand my knowledge; in addition, my experience at the library has greatly influenced my literacy skills and myself as a person, a most unforgettable experience that amplified my curiosity and imagination, which I applied to create the most interesting of stories.

To this day, I can always take advantage of my imagination because I have the ability to make the stories that I read come alive and create detailed scenes of things I have merely read about. I fell in love with reading because when it comes to reading, I can always place myself into that world. For me, reading is like watching a movie filled with different characters, voices, and scenes. It has never been a dull experience. Similarly, it was the love of reading that led me to express

myself through my writing. The journey of reading and being able to get wrapped up in the text was the best part of reading, and soon I began to witness my writing having the same effect: the words leapt off the paper. ☺

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Samuel Carrillo** is a 27-year-old Creative Writing Major from Long Beach. He is a father to his newborn girl Zariah. He enjoys reading poetry, non-fiction, fiction, short stories and anything he can be inspired by. Samuel hopes to break down barriers and connect with the world through writing.

After a lifetime of flitting—first from LB Poly to Mills College, then Honolulu to Carson High, on to Camp Pendleton, Okinawa and NATO, then 29 Palms and Capitol Hill, finally settling back in Long Beach—**Mary Hancock Hinds** now prefers to live a life of fantasy and philanthropy. She married appropriately. (Elvis was not available, so she wrote a book about him.) Her life motto: *“In order to be old and wise, one must first be young and stupid.”*

**David Mann** is a 28-year-old film and writing major hoping to transfer to UCLA. Before attending LBCC he trained as a professional wrestler. Aside from wrestling, his hobbies include storytelling and going on beer and wine tasting trips

**Melody McCants** is 20 years old and will soon be transferring to CSULB, majoring in Creative Writing. She is happiest when she is making art, writing, reading, singing, strumming her guitar, or frolicking in nature. She strives to make prayer and meditation a part of her daily life and wishes we could all just get along, man.

**Samuel Pflugrath** is 24 years old, graduated from Long Beach Poly in 2011, and has been worming his way through LBCC (focusing on English and creative writing and hoping to eventually transfer) ever since. He has been writing on and off since (Washington) Middle School—whether his work has improved at all since then is up for debate. There is a safety pin affixed to the front of his hoodie.

**Robert B. Shockley** is a fifth semester participant in LBCC's Creative Writing program, having experience with the short fiction, poetry and novel workshops. He will be transferring to either CSULB or Columbia University, if he can overcome his irrational terror of NYC. If that happened, the vibrant Long Beach writer's community would be sorely missed. Robert is honored to have his fiction and poetry featured in the first and second volume of LBCC's exciting literary journal, *Saga*. He is currently at work on a collection of linked short stories.

**Amy Valenzuela** is an urban villager in the making, and a fifth-generation Gabrielino living in Long Beach with her wife and kids. She is the 2017 winner of the Donald Drury Prize in Poetry and enjoys writing workshops at LBCC.

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