PEGASUS



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"Wrestling Alligators"

To be honest, while writing thrills me, it also terrifies me. I fear I will run out of words, or spend weeks on a story that does not blossom. I worry about writer's block. Sometimes when faced with a blank page waiting for my words, I swear wrestling alligators must be less daunting.

So, why do it? Why choose to spend hours each day or night with your fingers tapping across -- or, worse, sitting motionless on -- the keyboard, staring at a computer screen?

Why, indeed? I don't really have an answer. I guess because writing is a lot like running. Hard, surely, but -- as I learned personally when forced to sit out two high school cross-country seasons because of leg injuries that eventually required surgery -- for runners, not running is harder. The same goes for writers and writing. Writing is hard -- tortuous, tedious, scary. But, for me at least -- and maybe for you as well -- not writing is harder.

So, I take the easier route. I keep writing. And writing. And writing some more. Why? I guess because the thrills are worth it. I may not always enjoy the sometimes-tedious, sometimes-dull, sometimes-terrifying process of writing -- but I love the sweet satisfaction of having written.

Barbara Kingsolver, author of The Poisonwood Bible, said it well: "There's no perfect time to write. There's only now." Why wait? Try to write every single day, if only for ten minutes. You'll be amazed at how the pages can add up -- and how ten minutes will often stretch to an hour, or two, or four.

I think Ray Bradbury's advice to writers is my favorite: "Write with passion! Write with love!" What better way to wrestle alligators -- or live your life -- than that?

- Dallas Woodburn

DING!
(a short story)
by Dallas Woodburn

He bakes bread once a week. Every Wednesday, every week, except for the two weeks – one in the fall, one in the spring – when he travels back east to visit his old life.

An early riser, he bakes before the sun comes up. Even before he does the crossword puzzle – in ink, for he's a brave soul – because he often bakes before the newspaper arrives.

He bakes cinnamon bread. More like cake, actually. Flour, sugar, eggs, water, butter, and the secret "starter" ingredient of dough saved from last week's batch. Oh, yes, and chocolate chips, sometimes, if he's making it for the grandkids (which he usually is, considering he has nine of them.) Walnuts if he's bringing it to the office. Just plain for him, maybe an extra pinch of cinnamon – but he hardly ever makes it just for himself anymore. He can never finish a whole loaf before it grows dry and stale. And it seems like such a waste to throw half a loaf away. His mother would have scolded him, just as she had when he was a boy during the Depression and didn't clean his plate.

Eat your carrots, Ollie! she would say. *There's plenty of kids right here in America who will go to bed hungry tonight and would give anything to have those carrots to eat. So be thankful! Wastefulness is a sin!*

Cooked carrots are a sin, the young boy thought then and the old man thinks now, stirring the thick batter with a wooden spoon. His arm muscles ache by the time the batter is smooth and ready for the oven, but he still stubbornly mixes everything by hand. To do it any other way seems like cheating.

A couple years ago his youngest daughter bought him a shiny high-tech electric mixer for his 75th birthday. The best mixer on the market, the one Emeril uses. No matter. It went straight to the attic, its brand-new box unopened, out of place amidst the boxes filled with sweaters and mothballs, and the old Christmas decorations, and the rocking horse he made so long ago for his oldest daughter and never found the heart to give away after his youngest grew up. You have to sweat a little bit, toil a tad more, add in a pinch of labor and two doses each of love and honest effort, if you want to get a decent result at the end. *If something's worth doing, it's worth doing your best.* Those were his father's words. Good old Pop. He didn't care for cooked carrots either.

As he stirred the batter, watching the ingredients slowly soften and melt into one, the old man hummed quietly to himself. A show tune, from the Big Bands era. No words, just music, music, glorious music. *Da-dum-de-de-dum . . .*

Soon he was tapping his foot, swishing his hips, swaying across the worn tile floor with

an invisible partner in his arms, the batter-coated spoon still clutched in his right hand, momentarily forgotten. Nearly a decade had passed since he last shared a dance with her, but he can close his eyes and still feel her with him, her warm body pressed against his, the soft brushing of her skirt against his shins, her cheek gently resting on his chest. *Dum-dee-dee-dum.* He reached out his arm and twirled her – oh, how she loved when he did that! – and then gently pulled her back to him, their bodies meeting in quiet passion, sharing a secret language all their own.

They hadn't always danced this way, of course. When they were younger they moved hard and fast, quick steps, twirls and hops, stomping boots and clicking heels, panting and sweating and laughing with youth's overflowing well of energy. The years had slowed them down, as years always do, but the old man didn't mind. Looking back, of all the dances he had ever shared with her – the square dance at the country fair where they first met, the jig at their senior prom, even the dance of honor at their wedding – their slow shuffling waltz around the kitchen was his favorite, her breath warm and sweet against his cheek as she whispered something in his ear, the subtle hint of her perfume on his shirt afterwards. *Dum-dee-da-dum, a memory. . .*

DING! The oven timer sounded and the old man opened his eyes, jolted back to the present. The oven was prewarmed to 375 degrees. Batter dripped down the wooden spoon's long handle and he went over to the sink and washed it off. *Don't lick the batter, Ollie*, his mother used to scold when she caught him with his tongue on the spoon. *It makes you look like a heathen with no upbringing at all.* His dad would just smile and shoot him a sly wink. Pop understood the best part about baking was licking the spoon afterwards. Funny that now, when the old man finally had the chance to do so without getting scolded, he always found himself washing the extra batter off the spoon into the sink anyway.

He gazed out the window above the sink. On clear days you could see the ocean, and on even clearer days the Channel Islands far away. But this early in the morning he only saw fog.

They had taken a boating trip to the islands one time, just the two of them, before she got sick. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, was that possible?

It rained on the boat trip back and everyone huddled under the awnings, wet and cold and miserable. Everyone except her, that is. She stood out in the rain clutching the boat railing, her face upturned to the dark veiled heavens, her long hair bouncing across her shoulders with the jerk of the waves. He remained under the awning with the rest of the passengers, watching her laughing and shrieking as the foaming waves splashed against the boat. He had never loved her more. A few moments later she turned and called to him, looked at him with those mischievous blue eyes, and he soon found himself out in the rain beside her, soaked to the skin but warmed by her smile, her drenched form pressed against his, her kiss tasting of salt and rain and mystery, somehow. The ocean had always enchanted her, and she had always enchanted him.

The old man greased the loaf pan and sprinkled a light dusting of flour on the bottom – one of her old tricks to prevent sticking – before carefully pouring the batter in, spreading it evenly with a spatula. He popped a small handful of chocolate chips into his mouth before pouring the rest on top of the batter. His mother's scolding words echoed in his mind – *Don't do that, Ollie, it means less for the bread!* – but this time he ignored them. She, the other she, his wife, had always swiped a few chocolate chips before sliding the loaf pan into the oven. "Reward for the chef!" she would explain, flashing her smile like a secret shared between them,

her playful smile, the smile he fell in love with that first night at the country fair. That smile was his doom, his downfall, and she long knew it. One glimpse of it and he forgave her for anything: uncovering three bottles of vanilla extract in the pantry because she never made grocery lists and forgot she had just bought some two weeks before; ordering a dozen boxes of Girl Scout cookies because "the girls looked so cute in their little uniforms" even though the kids had already left for college and it was just the two of them and they couldn't eat three boxes of thin mints, let alone a dozen; leaving him to drive to work with the gas gauge on Empty because she refused to go to the gas station until it was "absolutely necessary." Which, in her case, was always "tomorrow."

Yep, he forgave her for anything, because of that smile. He even forgave her for dying.

The old man wiped his hands on his apron – her apron, actually; his youngest daughter bought him a new apron for Christmas one year but he had never worn it. It might as well have been covered in mothballs in the attic. Crisp and new and creased neatly in its folds, it remained in the bottom drawer below the stove. Baking was something she used to do, something he did now to be closer to her.

The first few weeks after she died, he wandered around in a fog, lost, his refrigerator filled with casseroles from well-meaning neighbors, his countertop piled with unopened sympathy cards from well-meaning friends. Then one day his granddaughter came to visit with a loaf of "Grandma's bread," this bread, plain but with extra cinnamon, the way he liked it best. "I know it's not the same as when Grandma used to make it. . ." she said, her voice cracking, and then tears were spilling out her big innocent eyes, and he was crying, too, as he cut them each a slice that they tried to eat but couldn't. Funny how dry your mouth can be when your eyes are so wet.

A few weeks later, he went through some of her old cookbooks and found the recipe. The first batch was a disaster – burned on the bottom, uncooked in the middle, edges glued to the pan because he forgot to grease it first. Later, in the back of the fridge behind the casseroles, he found the saved "starter" batter for the bread. The secret ingredient. He gave baking another try, and this time the finished product was actually edible. An improvement, though it still wasn't nearly as good as hers had been. But the familiar smell of baking that filled the kitchen was like going back in time, like stepping into a memory, and he could close his eyes and imagine she was still there, right beside him.

So he kept baking, cooking, experimenting, paging through her shelves of cookbooks, watching Emeril on The Food Network, trying out new recipes on friends. It was like therapy, or maybe like a drug, an addiction, but sometimes it was the only thing that kept him going through the endless lonely days so he figured it was all right. He eventually bought new pans and pots because the others were getting worn and grimy; he knew she'd understand. But he kept her old aprons, every one. He couldn't imagine wearing anything other than this faded flowered apron that had once cinched around her waist, that still smelled slightly of her scent if he brought it to his face and closed his eyes and breathed in deeply enough.

Clutching the mismatched potholders his daughters had stitched in Home Ec more than half a lifetime ago, the old man gently slid the pan into the preheated oven, savoring the familiar warmth on his face and hands. Soon the house would be filled with the smells of baking, her ineffable perfume. He set the timer. Waiting. It seemed he was always waiting, now.

The old man sat down heavily at the kitchen table, resting his head in his arms, suddenly

exhausted. Funny how the years crept up on a person, slowly and then – BOOM! – blindsiding you. A blitz, like the coaches used to warn against in football. The old man broke his nose one time, during a high school game. Jogged to the sidelines and the team trainer popped it straight and stuffed some cotton in it to stop the bleeding. Then he went right back in and kept playing. That was when he was young, when he was invincible. Now he knew better.

Funny how baking took so much out of him these days. Or maybe it was the remembering. *I miss him so much, Ollie, his mother used to sigh*, after his father passed away. Mom seemed so much older as a widow. As if she had aged years overnight, blindsided by death. *I even miss him licking that goddam spoon!* Funny how the things that used to annoy you were the things you missed most when they were gone.

The old man missed discovering extra bottles of vanilla extract in the pantry. He missed the stale Girl Scout cookies. Heck, he even missed running out of gas. Sometimes he delayed going to the gas station for a day or three, just to see how close to Empty he could get, to remember how it felt to coast up to a pump running on fumes. She only ran out of gas one time. He knew sooner or later it would happen; she would learn her lesson. But the one time she did run out of gas, it was at an intersection with gas stations on three – THREE! – corners. Just her luck! It was raining to boot, but she didn't even get wet because an attendant came over with a can and filled her tank. Needless to say, she didn't learn her lesson.

Funny how looking back, he was almost glad she didn't.

The old man closed his eyes. Imagined he felt the cool ocean breeze on his face, saw the waves splashing the little boat, the rain streaming down her face. Her smile. He felt her in his arms, dancing across the boat's slippery deck, dancing around the kitchen, only it wasn't a ghost this time, it wasn't a memory, it was her, Her, HER, and she was laughing as he twirled her, *da-dum-de-dum, Ollie I missed you so much . . .*

DING! An hour later, the oven timer went off. This time, the old man didn't hear it.

THE END

Dallas Woodburn has published two collections of short stories; her latest, 3 a.m., is available at amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com. She has been published in magazines including Writer's Digest, The Writer, Family Circle, and Cicada; the Los Angeles Times and Ventura County Star newspapers; and four "Chicken Soup for the Soul" books. A sophomore Creative Writing major at the Univesity of Southern California, Dallas also writes a biweekly opinion column for USC's student newspaper The Daily Trojan, and is a regular contributor to the WORD blog published by the Weekly Reader corporation. E-mail Dallas and check out her nonprofit foundation "Write On!" to encourage youth literacy at www.zest.net/writeon.

Dear father
By Brandy Williams

I demand answers to this trivia that appear to disturb my thoughts

I'm uncertain you'll ever appreciate the battle that I've fought

Why did you treat all the other children so much differently?

All I ever wanted was the comfort of your arms being opened to me

So why did you shut me out and leave me in the cold?

How can you walk away and leave only memories for me to hold?

Even though you washed your hands I still kept my faith strong

I'll never understand what it was that I did wrong

You stomped out of my life and upon my once devoted heart

Leaving no one for me to turn to while my whole world falls apart

You acted like I didn't exist when I needed you the most

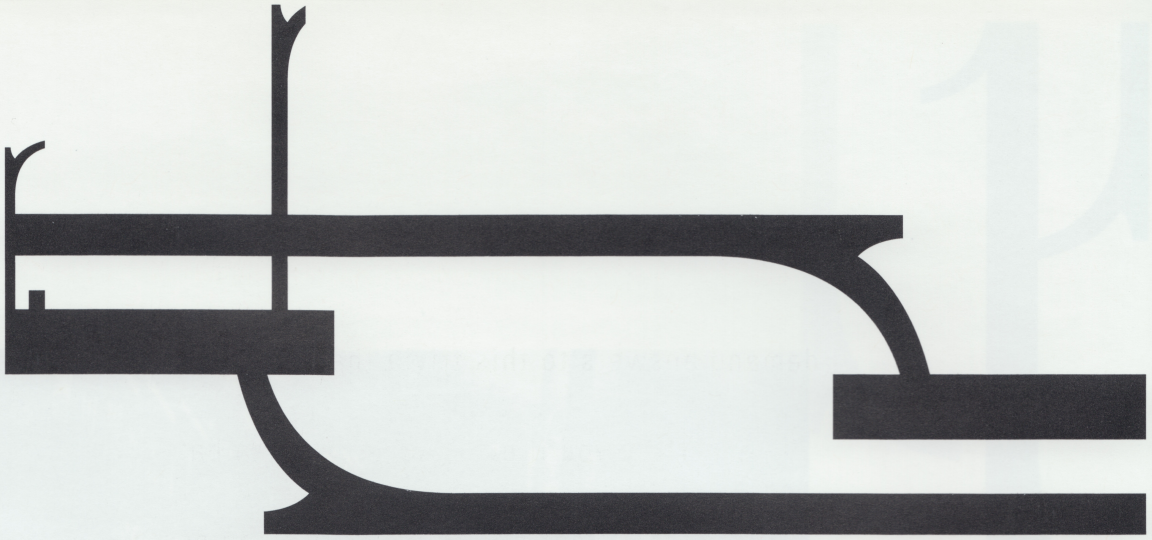
Leaving nothing for me to clasp but the presence of your ghost

Through my trials and tribulations you were never there

When the only thing I asked of you was simply just to care

Why don't I detect your foot steps printed across the land?

I witness only my own foot prints repeated across the sand



Madness
By EJ Crawford

I sat in the darkness feeling the cold sweat moisten upon my brow. I rubbed my face with the back of my hand listening to the voices in the room. Sitting in the chair opposite me I saw a small girl with her back turned to me whispering a nursery rhyme into the wall.

The window was cracked open and the rain started to make it's presence on the creaking wooden floor. The girl, still unaware of my being, stopped talking and stood up. From under her long red hair I saw she had no arms, she had no back to her at all....she was a skeleton. I dropped to the floor and my arm slammed against the cold hard wooden ground. The blood rushed around my arm and I scrambled back into my corner and gasped for air but I felt the closing in on my chest and oxygen escaped me.

I went to the still standing skeletal girl and turned her around and as I did so, her bottom jaw fell to the ground and shattered. I walked toward the wall where she once sat and gazed and recognized the wall as not a wall but a door. Turning the decrepit handle it collapsed in my grasp and fell to sand on the floor beside the broken teeth and bones.

Facing the other wall I remembered the window which was open and darted over but the window was closed with black panes. Screaming I broke open the glass with my knee and fell to the ground as blood rushed from my gaping wound. The bone was protruding with crystal glass shining in the soft moon light and the wet blood cooled on the floor; seeping into the cracks between the floorboards.

As I lay there weeping silently into my tattered shirt I took to notice the window blocked a bold brick wall where no rain could even enter. I realize for the first time tonight that I am completely alone. I screamed into the wall and for God to help this lost cause.

The doctor and his colleagues stood and peered into the slot to where a patient lay crying about torture.

"As you can see, Christopher here suffers from a serious case of delirium after his family had him committed for murdering his sister one night during a storm. Perhaps we should move on to the next wing, but first let's break for lunch" the doctor finished as he and his partners walked down the long hall of the Brookside Mental Institution.

Their footsteps echoed and drifted into the mixed screams or insanity.



"NBA, Here I Come" Photo by Chrisann Wroten

Island Morning
By Marilyn C. Marsella

The sweet aromas of wild jasmine and vanilla stir islanders from their sleep as they listen to the gentle lapping of a blue ocean against the beach.

Far off in the distance, the light-footed sounds of tiny grains of sand being remolded as footsteps press into them softly.

One by one, flickering white candles come to life in each bungalow as cool linen canopies blow freely in the warm vanilla breeze.

High overhead, the delightful echoing of seagulls as they effortlessly rise up to greet the morning sun or dive into the clear blue water to catch a morning fish.

The earth gradually awakens from a peaceful rest.

Early morning reveals the gracefulness and speed of dolphins as they crest the water, leading returning fishing boats back to harbor. The calls of captains and the echoes of ships' bells and horns travel through the morning air beckoning to the visiting islanders.

A surfer's board stands upright in the sand in front of a small aging grass hut waiting to be taken into the crystal blue waves that billow on the surf.

The island tempts the sleepy to get up, but they stay nestled in their comfortable surroundings of big white pillows that beckon them back into a light, lazy morning slumber. They daydream about the tropical blue sky framed by luscious green palm trees, a beautiful sunrise, and soft fluffy clouds that linger in the sky as vacationing islanders sway back and forth in their hammocks without a care in the world.

Pegasus would like to apologize to Marilyn C. Marsella for the misprint that appeared in last year's publication.

Mirror

By Valerie Ann Cannon

It's been more than seven years since Mimi last saw her reflection in a mirror. She can hardly remember the day she woke to find her mother had removed all the mirrors in the house. The only vision she has of herself now is how she looked when she was six. Her hair was blue-black with loose curls. Her face still showed slight traces of baby chub, and her periwinkle eyes still held the innocence only a child could possess.

But all of that has become a vague memory. After all, seven years is a long time to try and hold on to a picture of a face you didn't know you would one day never see again.

The day the mirrors were removed from Mimi's home was also the day her entire life had come to a pause. After that her mother wouldn't let her go to school, play outdoors, or even leave the house. And she was especially not allowed to go in her mother's room.

Again and again Mimi posed questions as to why she was suddenly not allowed to do the things she normally did: "But why, Mama? Why do I have to stay inside all the time? And why can't I go in your room?"

"You have to trust me, Mimi," her mother would say. "Just be a good girl and obey your mother. Go on up to your room and play."

In time Mimi accepted this way of life. She no longer questioned why all the mirrors were gone, or why she could only stay in the house, or why her mother forbade her to go in her bedroom.

There were many times Mimi wondered what she looked like now. She knew that her hair was the same blue-black because it still hung with loose curls just past her shoulders. But that's all she knew about her appearance.

She often wondered if she looked anything like her mother now. But she found that hard to believe. Mimi's mother was not a picture of beauty, and Mimi couldn't remember having any similar features.

Her mother was shaped so that her hips and shoulders were wide, her stomach bulged, and she was unusually tall. She had black hair but it was not in the least bit pretty. All its luster that it might have once had was gone, and streaks of white ran through it. Her skin was a dull gray with bags under eyes that were brown and as dull as her skin. It was also in the way she walked, and held herself that it showed she knew she wasn't pretty. Mimi could remember the way her mother used to look at her. It was if the mere sight of Mimi offended her. It was if her eyes alone could curse Mimi for being so pretty when her mother clearly was not.

But one day the harsh glare of her mother stopped. It stopped the same day the mirrors were removed. Since then, her mother's eyes were filled with an unexplainable sadness.

It was a night in late winter when Mimi heard the faint sound of her mother crying from her bedroom. At first she thought it was the wind outside that woke her, and then she realized it was the unmistakable sound of crying.
Mimi's heart began to pitter patter.

Slowly and quietly Mimi crept out of her bed and on tip-toes walked to the door of her mother's room.

For a moment she only listened.

"Oh, Mimi," she heard her mother sob. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me! I never meant to do it."

Fear surged through Mimi at rapid speed. Was her mother having a nightmare? She wanted to run back to her room, but her feet were stuck to the floor as if nailed. A draft brushed her skin, urging her to enter her mother's room.

Compelled, Mimi turned the handle and opened the door. Mimi became dizzy. Her throat was closing...she was losing vision...childish laughter filled her ears...waves of memory swept over her...

She sat in front of her mother's Vanity dabbing blush on her cheeks. She was wearing a frilly dress and her mothers pearl necklace. Her lips were colored poorly with brilliant red lip stick. She was making kissy faces in the mirror, and pulling her hair into different styles.

Her mother walked in the room looking dazed. A strange flush crept up from her neck to her face.

"Look at me, Mommy! Don't I look pretty?"

Her mother walked towards her. Every moment closer her lips formed into a deeper frown. She was trembling. Tears were trickling down her cheeks.

"Mommy...what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Her mothers hands went around her neck...she couldn't breath...she gasped for air while gripping at her mom's hands...she was losing consciousness...light was fading...her mother's hands let go of her neck.

Her mother screamed. Every second she became louder. She ripped articles of clothing to shreds. She threw jewelry across the room. As if unable to stop she shattered perfume bottles, smeared lipstick across her mirror, smashed the pictures of Mimi that were on the wall, and then fell to the floor sobbing.

"No!" she screamed. "I didn't mean to! I'm so sorry, Mimi, so sorry! God please forgive me, I didn't mean to do it. PLEASE, PLEASE BRING HER BACK!"

Her screams calmed, and her crying ceased. She opened her eyes and stared at her only daughter still wearing the pearl necklace, the poorly done make up, the frilly dress...

Air seemed to fill Mimi's lungs again. She held her neck as if her mother's hands had just been there a moment ago. She felt unsteady, like a baby first learning to stand up on her own.

Her mother was still in her bed looking at Mimi with red eyes, her mouth slightly open.

It took every bit of energy for Mimi to form words.

"Why did you try to kill me?" she finally managed in a whisper.

A lone tear leaked from her mother's eye.

"Because you were what I always wanted to be," she choked. "I wanted to be beautiful. When I looked at you I was reminded of what a monster I was. And, Mimi...oh, Mimi...I lost my mind every time I looked at you. I couldn't bare the sight of something so beautiful when I was always so hideous. I'm so sorry."
Burying her face into her hands, she fell into renewed sobs.

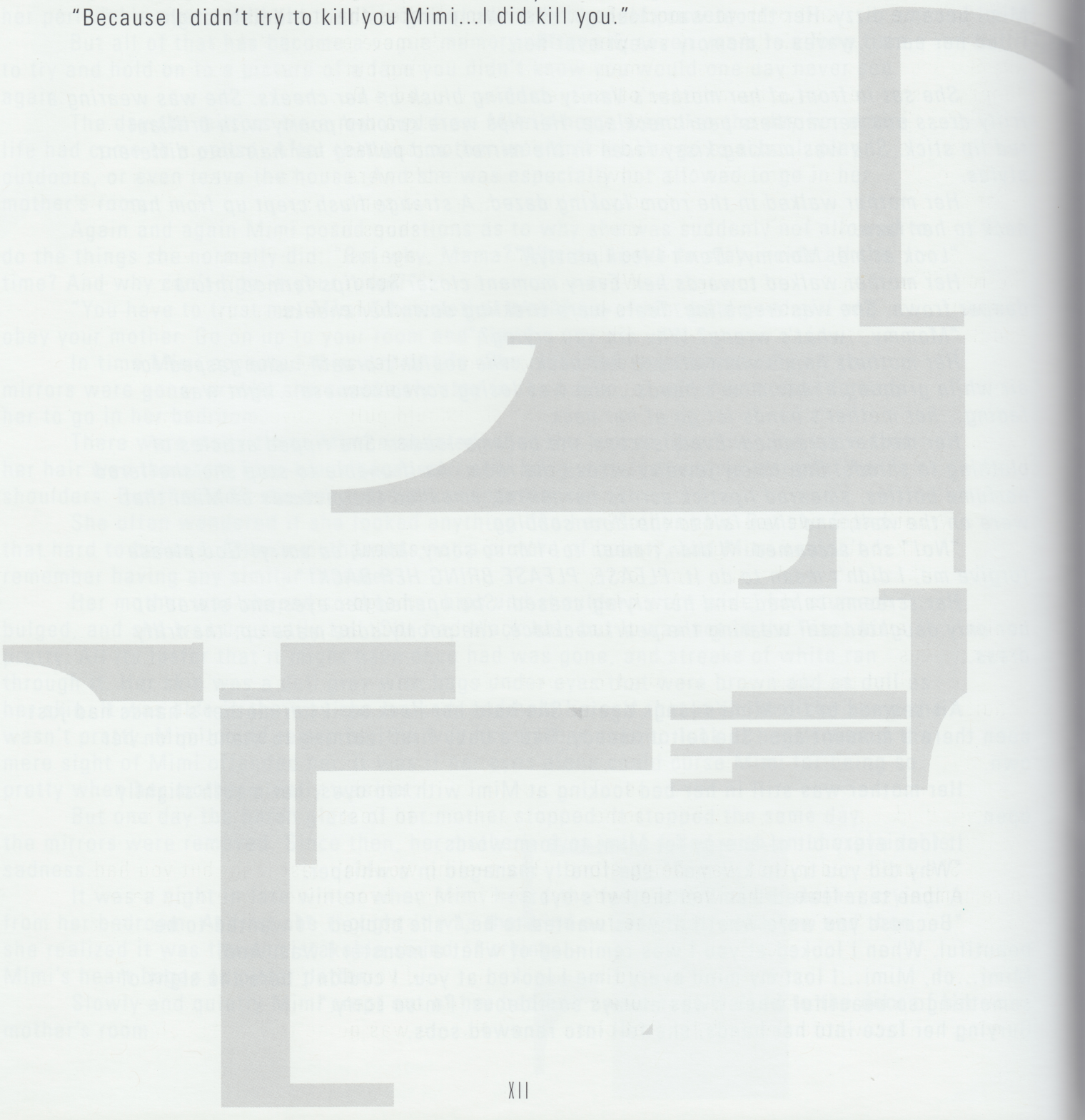
Mimi walked past her mother's bed. She walked to the Vanity, and sat in the chair. Finally, after five years, she was going to see her face again. When she looked in the mirror, she gasped. She didn't see her face, her eyes, nose or lips. She had no reflection at all.

She rocked back and forth, fear etching itself in every part of her body.

"Why can't I see myself, Mama?" She cried. "Why can't I see my face?"

Her mother looked at her with the saddest eyes Mimi ever seen.

"Because I didn't try to kill you Mimi...I did kill you."



Destiny's Dance
By Gregory Weber

The lights went from blue to red to green in beat with pounding music so loud it would leave ears ringing for days afterward. That this was a family restaurant by day was forgotten. This was Friday night, and this was the only place within an hour's drive that served a decent beer. It was damn well going to be hopping or else you might as well go home and knit with your mom. For the swaying bodies that packed the dance floor this was New York, LA (or if you were feeling a little more exotic), Tokyo or Milan. Because no one dressed to remember they were living out in the tobacco fields. Johnny Cash would have been booed off stage. They wanted a DJ.

Destiny navigated the space like a pro, never spilling a drop of her beer, never missing a name when someone shouted hello. Her halter-top was cut low enough to entice, but not enough to make the wolves drool. Her heels were the talk of the town, at least of the girls- high, slim, and deadly. When people said something about her they always mentioned those heels. You have to know how to strut in shoes like those.

She crossed the sea of bodies to the bar, leaned up against the back and watched the fun. She lived for these nights. What else was there? School was on the other side of summer, work was something you did to buy the next set of clothes. The party was all about the now, and that was how she liked it.

"Yo, sup?" Mark came out of the floor, sweating a little, and leaned against the counter next to her. Not too close though. You either knew everyone's lines or you didn't stay popular for long. There wasn't a guy in town that could pull a move on Destiny. Except for that guy, the one from out of town. What was his name? It didn't matter. He'd been gone after a week, and missing ever since.

"Hey. You see Millie in there? She owes me a drink, and I want a shot."

"What's she owe you a drink for?"

"I talked to Jim Birmingham for her. Poor girl couldn't put two words together for him. I hear they had a nice time last week though."

"Good for them, I guess." Mark tried to stay out of the gossip mill. It really couldn't be avoided in the long run, but at least you didn't look desperate to meet expectations.

He rolled the sleeves of his black collared shirt farther up. There wasn't an air conditioner on the planet that could keep this place cool. It was only going to get hotter too. Someone was going to overheat and pass out. Or worse, they'll lose it, like Dessie did. Just the temperature getting to her, but damn that wasn't fun.

Jamie Martin was dancing alone. That had to be rectified, at least in his opinion. He went back out to floor, mumbling some goodbye phrase to Destiny. She smiled and let it go.

She preferred it that way, being alone. The feeling wouldn't last long, but you had to remember sometime. This was the two-year anniversary. Everything was a gray haze now, the whole first year, but everyone remembered her snapping. It was the heat, and it wasn't the heat. And then...

And then time moves on, she told herself firmly. And you don't worry about the past. What you worry about is that sore spot on your bottom teeth that might just be an infection. Now where the hell did that come from? No one was going to find out about

that either, but only because some idiot would believe it was herpes. She knew it wasn't herpes. You have to touch someone, kiss someone, for herpes to get you. That was hardly an issue.

Millie came out of the crowd and the time for reflection ended.

"I heard I owed you a drink," she said.

Dessie grinned, "I'll buy you one if you buy me one."

They got their shots and traded over. Millie almost tipped the glass as she slid it over the bar. She was more than a little drunk.

"Ready? One, two, three!"

The liquor rolled down the hatch, leaving them both gasping for air.

"That's going to hit me hard," said Dessie, pulling herself together.

"I think it's already hit me hard." Millie laughed. "Hey! Come dance!"

"I'll be over in a few minutes. I want to let this stuff settle in first. It's Friday! I have to dance at some point."

"Yeah, but you'd better hurry up," said Millie in a whisper that was as soft as a bullhorn. "There's this really weird pale kid from somewhere out of town. Got all these scars on his arm, like he was in an accident or something. If you don't get on the dance floor he might try to become friends, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Dessie replied as her stomach dropped ten stories. "I think I can handle myself though. You know me."

"Suit yourself. I don't like weird ass strangers hitting on me, personally."

"Go dance Millie. I'll be out."

She disappeared into the pack of people. They were playing that new one by Fergie, and half the younger kids were trying to emulate the dance moves.

Destiny couldn't even hear the music. Her high heels no longer tapped to the beat. Her only movement was a few fingers picking at the top of her halter-top, plucking in time to a different song.

She stepped away from the bar and moved with slow strides around the dance floor, looking in every direction, like an escaped convicted would look for the police. Every face was familiar. The same old country kids were getting as wild as on any other Friday. It was still hot as a furnace, she realized, even if her body had the shakes. Someone must have slipped her something, but that couldn't be true. No, it was just what Millie said, and the way it was two years to the day. A weird coincidence that bothered the hell out of her.

She turned the curve of the crowd, coming near the front door. There was the regular bouncer, Ed, sitting on a stool and still letting in anyone who might possibly be somewhere around twenty-one. He waved to her, and Dessie waved back, faking a smile. There was no kid there, no one with scars in a tee shirt. Nothing to worry about. She kept going, now sure there was nothing.

Nothing to be scared of at all.

Nonetheless she completed her circuit, actually passing behind the DJ, speakers and wiring to get an up front view where no one could see her through the strobe lights. No one. There were no scars here.

Dessie returned to the bar and got two more shots in close order. No lightweight, she needed to feel the effects quick. Her arms were still shaking. God, what a way to celebrate two years from the breakdown, from the hospital.

"Get me a shot of straight vodka. I don't know if you guys have a name for that around here," someone said off to the left.
"One for her, too."

Another small glass slid Dessie's way. She didn't bother to look over. "How are you, Jeff?"

"Oh, you know. I imagine that you would know better than anyone else. I'm alright. How are you Destiny?"

She laughed. "I was alright. Am I alright now? Who knows."

Jeff looked much the same as he had before. The Beatle length blond hair, not cut quite properly. The Sketcher shoes tied funny with orange shoelaces. And his arms were the same, of course. They had gone from being cuts and stitches to pale scars, but all the lines were still there.

"You look nice. Different, but I suppose we all do don't we?" He said, as if he could feel her eyes on him.

"You don't look that different."

"Oh, the clothes are the same. But the mask is on now. Its like plastic surgery isn't it? It's on, and no one ever needs to know."

She studied his face then, and he was right. There was a sort of mask. You never would have known. Just like her. Could anyone here guess she'd once smoked cigarettes with this boy in the hospital courtyard, arguing about the point of suicide notes while a nurse guarded the door? *We look too normal, she thought. No, not too normal. Just the right amount of normal, or it wouldn't work. And Jeff could have been any of a dozen boys who drove beat up Buicks through town.*

He pulled out a red box of cigarettes, then took his time lighting one with a silver Zippo. A puff of smoke headed for the ceiling. "You want one?" he mumbled around the filter.

Dessie shook her head. "I don't smoke anymore."

"Suit yourself. I feel like cigarettes are another kind of medication. They keep my nerves steady, if the other stuff isn't working well enough."

"I wouldn't know."

"So you've never snuck out and lit one up? Just because something was missing, and you couldn't help it?"

"Once in a while. But not much, anymore."

"I'm happy for you. Maybe I was wrong coming here."

"Why are you here Jeff? I mean, that was what, two years ago and you visited for a week six months later. We knew things were different back then. The hospital...you talk a lot of shit in there, you can't help it. You spill your guts out to people you don't even know, and they act like they care. And it's easy to believe them while you're in there. Out here nothing is so simple. You were great. You were the friend I needed. But two years is a hell of a long time."

He blew smoke through his nose, and she thought it looked like a dragon blowing fire. His finger traced the edge of the empty shot glass, and glanced at the bartender on the other side of the bar. "I don't want to get drunk here. It's not worth it."

"Jeff! Why are you here?"

"Its funny what memories stay with you, and what glazes over. I can't remember hardly anything over the three years before that week, and there are funny patches

afterward too, a few of them at least. But they got the medications right about three weeks after we parted ways and that clears a lot of things up. I remember the hospital clear enough. Do you remember that old green couch in the day room? The one with the busted spring? And then there was the courtyard, with that damn fence and you could see the drugstore across the street. Mainly there was that one time where we found a blind spot from the nurse-"

"Stop!" Dessie almost shouted. She covered her eyes, but could still hear."

"You remember then. I remember it, that's for damn sure. Don't kid yourself, I'm not claiming you saved me, I'm not claiming I have some hold on you. But you know me, and I know you, and... how many people do you know in this room like this?"

"Everyone."

"Alright then. Well, I just came by to say hello, that kind of thing. I'm driving to California. Got a friend there, says he's got a few rooms to rent and maybe a job to go with it. A little change of atmosphere. So, this was almost on the way."

"Good for you."

"Do you want to dance? Old times sake? I think I should stretch my legs before getting back in that damn car."

"Go for it. I'm not going to."

"That's fine."

He stood up and passed her by without so much as a second glance. Soon he was lost in the mob, eaten up by it with anyone not caring one way or the other if he was there. Millie had wanted her to dance. If only she'd listened!

Maybe she would dance now. Maybe she'd show him how things had changed.

Dessie got off her stool, looking for a break in the crowd. She wormed her way through with the usual poise, heading up to the DJ's stand. There was a little stage for him there, nothing much but something to stand on. Next to it on one side was the ball pit for the days when this place wasn't a nightclub. On the other side was the pole, for who knew what purpose. There was never any stripping. Every once in awhile someone would get drunk enough to try the damn thing out though, and get either cheers or laughter.

She climbed the stage and the volume level immediately went up. Despite the temperature the pole was cool to the touch, and slick with condensation. Her hips began to sway to the beat. Cheers rose out of the crowd.

"Yeah, Dessie, go for it!"

"Look at that body!"

Yeah, look at that body. It was flawless, and she'd worked to make it that way. You couldn't see the slash marks underneath the clothes, the little imperfections. She was perfect as she twisted around the pole to show off her backside.

"Woo!"

"Now that's a gal!"

Another twist, and then a dip. Dessie looked over the crowd, and there were a hundred eyes staring up at her, staring at the whole package. What were they seeing? Somewhere the mask began to slip.

"Hey, take some of it off!"

"Let's see it all!"

They'd never see any of it. That was the point Jeff made, wasn't it? Who the hell were you going to tell? These guys? These girls? Where was he anyway?

She shook her head, swinging her head, and then picked him out of the crowd. He was watching her, neither smiling nor cheering. No longer dancing, just standing there, keeping his eyes on her face. Not because he didn't like the rest of it. There were just more interesting things going on in her head, if you knew to look. The mask was slipping and falling. She was disgusted.

How long can someone hide? She wondered. *How long can you drink and dance?* She did one more twist, kicked off her heels and jumped off the stage. The mask fell somewhere to the floor. Destiny was heading toward the exit.

Jeff met her halfway. "What happened up there?"

"You're an asshole. It's not fair."

"Not really, not. I mean, I am an asshole. And it's not fair."

"What's California like?"

"We'll find out."

They took off to the exit. Jeff lit a cigarette, then held the light for Destiny's. These things were going to kill her, but damn if she didn't feel fine.

In Dreams
By EJ Crawford

I had that nightmare again,
The one where I wake up laying in bed
And all the people in black
Were leaning over me crying.
As I call to them they just weep
Why can't I just sit up?
Or even speak?
The room is cold and my eyes
Feel like they are going to burst.
My body aches
And my arms are limp.
But it could be worse,
I could be that guy who
Fell asleep at the wheel
And plummeted into the lake
And drown.
But now that I think about it,
It is getting harder to breathe.

Transitioning
By Shakinah Brown

I didn't know
What time was
Until I thought
Of the last time
I sat for a Sunday morning
Press-n-curl
Or
A set of Cornrows
When all I had to do was
Sit still and be young
Time sure has a way of
Changing life

What Once Was Pure
By Rachel Kleinschmidt

I just want to surrender to misery
I just want to abandon everything
Just let it go down the drain
Just let it wash away the pain
The blood does nothing anymore,
It hasn't helped me like before

I feel so dirty

The rush is gone and I'm still dead
I watch the bath water becoming red
It gushes; it runs right down my breast
I close my eyes and wait for eternal rest
Placid waters broken, rippled by the drops
Nothing I do, can make the anguish stop

I feel so dirty

I plod along through each memory
Though, it doesn't help obtain serenity
It only persists with the endeavoring sorrow
And embraces the tragedy with every morrow
Help me; hurt me, it's all the same
No more pieces left here to maim

I feel so dirty

I lie here losing my sanity
Bewildered by your vanity
I could take a simple pin and
Drag it down your revolting skin
I would make you bleed, (like me)
And expose every impurity

I feel so dirty

Everyday I rejected you, and everyday I was right
Everyday I hate you more as I lie awake each night
I want to make you suffer I want you to be like me
Cause I can't ever be like you, broken and yet so free

I feel so dirty!

FORGIVNESS IS NOT FOR THE WEAK

By Jessica Fowler

My older sister Lauren and I step out of her car at the same time as the Collingdale Florist delivery man is getting out of his. We all reach the edge of the driveway. The timing is so exact it's like we're old friends meeting up, which we might as well be, considering how much we've seen each other lately.

The balding Italian man smiles gently and hands me a vivid bouquet of fuchsia carnations and snap dragons. They appear so full of life that I almost pity them for where they are about go.

Inside is the setting nearly identical to any other Wednesday evening in my home. As usual, Lauren and I have shopping bags in our hands. My mother is sitting at the mahogany dining room table talking a mile a minute to someone on the phone.

My grandparents, on my mother's side, are predictably talking politics. They are both shouting angrily about homosexuals and the "gay and lesbian agenda." Somehow they remain unaware of my 16-year-old brother Andrew, whose homosexuality is blatantly obvious to everyone else but them. He is lying on the floral printed sofa watching a muted episode of *American Idol*.

Sean, Lauren's boyfriend, is sitting at the computer.

It is April 26, a night which would be just like every other night except that it is three nights after the date of my father's death.

When someone you love dies, in order to accept it, you have to understand it. To this day, I will never understand how a disease is capable of claiming not only a life, but the memory and spirit of a person. The coroner would tell us in later days that my father died due to a batch of fatally tainted heroine. His exact words were, "John was killed by a bad batch of heroin." As if there were any such thing as good heroin.

In my shopping bag is a plain black dress. From my mother's mouth come the repeated phrases I have heard countless times today.

"Yes, the kids are hanging in there."

"No, we're not having a viewing. The memorial service is Friday morning at 11."

"They don't know how he died yet, but they found heroin in the apartment."

She sounds like a broken record one might hear played in hell.

My grandparents are up from Florida for the funeral and to support my mom. My brother Andrew is silent and lost in his thoughts. None of us have been invited to them. Sean is creating a memorial video for the funeral.

I stand behind Sean watching the slides of old photographs fading in and out. Ray Charles's deep voice pours from the speakers and "Amazing Grace", the song I've heard a hundred times today, is playing softly.

Grief flows over me in waves, but the tears don't come. I don't think the brain can be in a perpetual state of sorrow. I have cried enough over the past three days to water the dozens of flower bouquets that fill up our dining room.

I recall my mother on the phone earlier this afternoon. She told the faceless voice on the other end how ironic my reaction to the news has been.

"It's funny," she said without a trace of humor in her voice. "Jessie said constantly how much she hated her father and she is the one who is taking it the hardest."

The bible states that if you cannot forgive, God cannot forgive you. I wonder what criteria God has for those who realize too late they should have forgiven someone.

My father spent four months in America's Keswick Addiction Recovery Center, a Christian rehab that our church paid to send him to. During this time he wrote me a two page letter begging for my forgiveness and asking to be allowed back in my life. I tucked the letter under my mattress and never responded. I kept the grudge inside myself for months and months, too scared to let it go and too weak to forgive.

Two months after he got out, he relapsed. Two months after that, he passed away.

For this, I cannot forgive myself.

I am sobbing again, staring at a photograph Sean finished scanning of my father holding me. His blue eyes look down at me with awe while I stare up with blind affection.

Where did that little girl go?

My grandfather comes up soon and gives me a pat on the shoulder. When I don't stop crying, he is unsure what to do and walks away. I don't blame him.

Death has a way of being raw and impolite. It is awkward to acknowledge and hard to know when to comfort someone. I have felt that way too when others have suffered through something similar to this.

My mother sees me and comes behind me to hold me. I crumble in her arms.

"It's my fault," I say through sobs. My mother runs her fingers through my hair and shushes me.

"Jessie, you can't beat yourself up like this," she says. "You wanted him to be accountable. You had every right to feel as you felt."

"I was spiteful, I was..."

"You were strong," my mother says. "You were strong for us all. You put him in a place in your heart where he could not hurt you anymore. Your father was a good man but he had a bad drug problem."

"But he was sorry."

"How many times was he sorry? I can't let you blame yourself for this," she says, though I know she has done the same. I know she has wondered what may have been different if she had let him move back into the house.

"He died believing I hated him," I say, as the tears are pouring out. My mother puts her hands on my shoulders and gently shakes me.

"Listen to me," she says convincingly. "You were hurt. You wanted to protect yourself from getting hurt again. There is nothing wrong with that."

"I just wish we had peace between us when he died."

"It's not too late," she says. I stop crying and look at her. "Your father is in heaven. I am sure of it. I know he was saved. He had a bad drug problem but he loved God. You can talk to him anytime. He is watching you now and it is breaking his heart to see you like this."

It is the first thing anyone has said so far to comfort me. I wonder if my dad can hear me and if he knows how much I loved him, despite how I tried to hide it from everyone, including myself.

I wonder if it's ever too late to forgive someone.

My mother cradles me in her arms like I am still her baby girl, which I am in so many ways.

"Let's pray," she says. I nod my head obediently, though I have not prayed for so long. I already know the words she wants to say with me.

"God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; the courage to change the things we can; and wisdom to know the difference."

She kisses my forehead and whispers "Amen."

Journal Entries

By Kevin Wayne Case

January 25th 2007 (thursday night)

how can i be the love of your life
when you so easily sweep me under the rug?

you say there is no other, but we both know that is false.

i can't compete with your liquid comfort
i had hoped you could find that in these solid arms.

i can see this dieing
there is beauty watching the roses petals
as they fall.

January 18th 2007 (4:30 am)

i wake up on the floor of the dining room
roll over to see the phone off the hook next to me

(i don't remember making a call)

a pale yellow glow illuminating from the number pad
casting upon my sunken face

i am a ghost

January 5th 2007

my father lies sleeping deep in my subconscious
i've been holding my breath
all these years
so as not to wake him.

tonight my biological clock rings
since i am fluid enough
he comes raging to the surface

blinding speed

i stare at my hands
they are not my own anymore.

Wednesday December 27th (morning reflections)

i draw a bath
i realy needed on last night
but there was no hot water

climb in

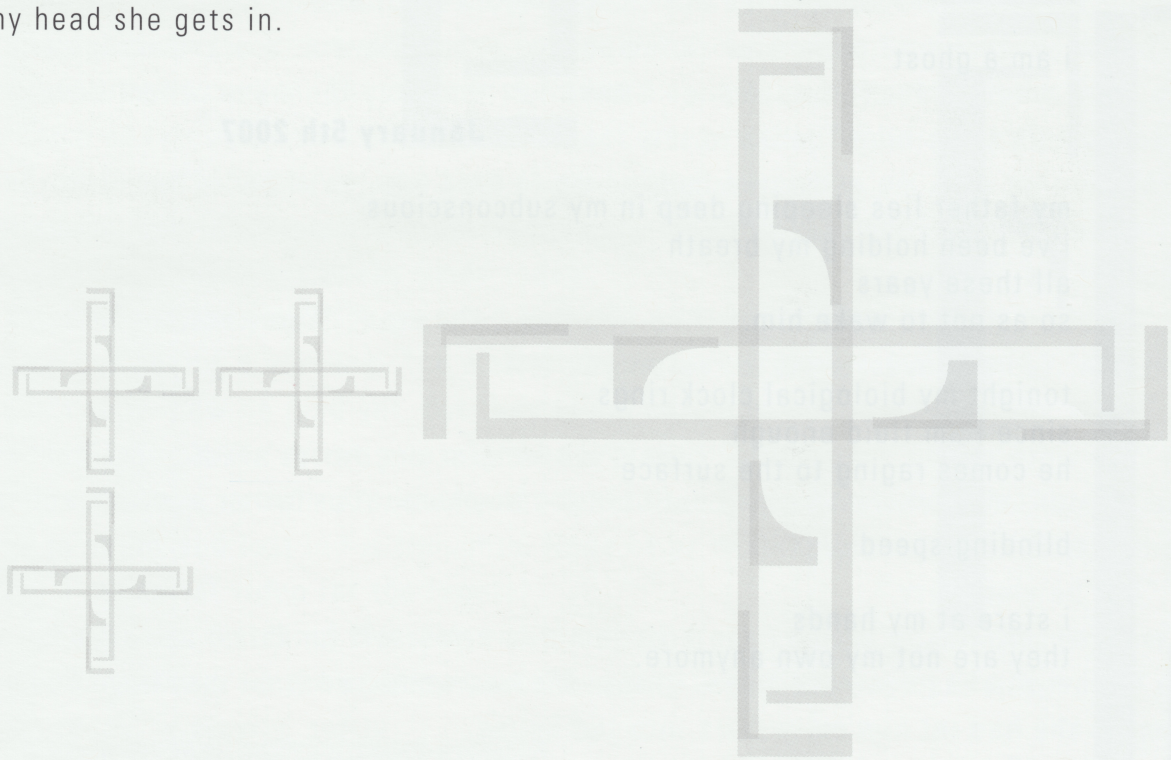
the water rises to the edge spilling over just a bit.
it feels good on my stomach

stayed the night in a smoky inn
trying to escape her fathers reach

the plug for the tub is faulty
a slow drain is occurring
i can relate

cannot recall what was playing in the background
it was soft and depressing
like her

she stands at the side of the tub staring at me from behind swollen eyes.
with a nod of my head she gets in.





"Center City Fountain" Photo by Micael Downs



The Cherry Tree
By Kenneth Smyth

Picked and fastened in the ground.
Rings of footsteps trailing laughter.
The center of a field,
  Children would explore,
    Tree of fire patches,
      Laughter's soon unhinged.
Grass tall with joy and fastened in the ground.
Sweetly stained tongues, soaked with sugar laughter.
The king of summer grass,
  Children would explore,
    Lawn of booming laughs,
      Laughter's soon unhinged.
Careful when you pass near the cherry tree,
For children hidden with-in the tall grass.

The Oil Baron's Son
By Sarajane Sein

Damien Metzick found the young man in the center of Nebraska, lying right on the edge of his oil field.

The weather was cold – after all, it was late December, right after Christmas – and the figure seemed to almost be coated in a layer of ice. Metzick wasn't even sure it WAS a person at first – all he saw was a bump in the distance. *Maybe someone just left their bag there or something. In that case, of course, what in the hell was someone doing leaving things on my oil field?* The workers hadn't been there for two days, taking their holiday breaks, so the only other explanation was that some kids had been screwing around on his oil field, in which case he decided he better find out what was going on before he was slapped with a lawsuit.

Metzick was a short, stocky man with light brown hair and gray eyes, who never smiled without smirking and never made a deal before he thought through what it meant for his oil empire. *My oil. My beautiful, glorious black oil.*

When Metzick at last reached the bump, he could see a torn black coat laid over the figure of a young man (he looked as if he could be as young as fourteen) with dirty-blonde hair. With a short gasp, Metzick reached forward and struck the figure's shoulder with his hand. The boy stirred. Metzick slid his hand past the young man's face, and bringing it back in front of his eyes he saw small red splotches. He's been beaten and left for dead, Metzick thought distraughtly, and in my oil field too. With a short sigh, Metzick reached down and picked up the body. He walked over his oil field and returned to his front door, quickly jerking the door open before placing the boy on the couch.

"Damien!" called a voice. At once, his wife Dawn walked briskly down the stairs and looked him over. "What in the- what happened to HIM?" she exclaimed, seeing the body on the couch. Metzick shrugged earnestly.

"I don't know. I don't have a clue who he is."

"I'll get him a blanket," said Dawn. She trotted back upstairs and return with a wool blanket, which she gently draped over the boy's body. "Do you think we should call the police?" Metzick shook his head.

"It's the day after Christmas, the streets will be packed," he replied, "And I think he'll make it okay. I'll go get a hot water bottle." As he pivoted towards the kitchen, the boy stirred again then let out a short moan.

Metzick and his wife quickly raced to the couch. Slowly, the young man's eyes opened, to reveal light-brown dots that dilated and shifted back to normal in the light.

"Whurr am I?" he inquired, in a slurred voice.

"Who ARE you?" replied Metzick, "And what HAPPENED to you?"

"Yes," chimed Dawn, "What in the world happened to your forehead?" Metzick looked where she was pointing, and now they could see a long gash across the young man's forehead, as well as one behind his ear. The boy's hand shot up to his forehead and he placed it in front of his eyes, looking at the blood thoughtfully. He then placed his hand to his mouth, and blood came away again. That was, Metzick and Dawn deduced, the reason for his slurred speech.

"Fl'g pull," he mumbled, "Do guys be' me up."

"Why did they do that?" inquired Metzick, "And what in the world were you doing out here in my oil field?... With a flag pole?"

"Ah, well, uh," the young man leaned forward and moved himself into a sitting position,

"Muh par'ints tru me out, 'ah de guys, well be'cos, ah..." His eyes flickered and he seemed about ready to faint, and Dawn caught him.

"Shh," she said, "Be careful. Lie back now. We'll just ask questions and you'll nod or shake your head." The young man nodded.

"Why did you parents throw you out?" inquired Metzick, "Did you do badly in school?" The young man shook his head. "Did you talk back?" Another shake of the head. *This is like goddamned charades.* "Was it someone you associated with?" A thoughtful look, then a nod. Dawn looked curiously at him.

"Was it someone you dated?" she inquired. A nod. "Was it your girlfriend?" A shake of the head. Metzick blinked. *Ohh.*

"So it was," he said hesitantly, "That you were...are...a..." A nod. "Ohh," Metzick said with a sort of mix of a gasp and a declaration.

"Listen, darling," said Dawn, "You sleep here. What's your name, by the way?" The young man shook his head. "You don't want someone to track you down?" A nod. "I see. Are you're fourteen?" No. "Fifteen?" No. "Sixteen?" Yes. "Damien, dear, may I talk with you in the other room a moment?"

Dawn walked into the kitchen with Metzick by her side.

"What do you think?" she inquired, "Do you think what I think? A son for you at last? We can't send this poor child back into that brutality. We could keep him here. You could train him in the oil business."

"But Dawn," Metzick said, "How can I raise a sixteen-year-old all of a sudden, now, especially one with his... problem? Issue? Whatever they call it now?"

"Orientation," said Dawn gently, "And you FOUND him. You're as attached to him now as I am. I know you, Damien. I know you. We'll give him a new identity, a new home. You'll have your heir. I feel like I'd always failed you there."

"Failed me? Are you insane, Dawn? You're the best thing to ever happen to me. Do you understand how the rest of the country views oil businessmen? We're all heartless, soulless cretins who would sell our own mothers if we'd make another buck off of oil. We're war profiteers, corrupt tycoons, worse than politicians! And yet I ended up with someone as beautiful as you. The Lord works in mysterious ways, I suppose." There was a pause. "I guess you're right. He needs a home... I need a son. I need something to put my effort into besides oil. Do you think he'll go for it?"

"You can go ask him." They walked back into the living room. "Darling?" Dawn called to the young man, "We never got the chance to introduce ourselves. This is my husband, Damien Metzick, and I'm Dawn Metzick. We'd like to know if you'd like to stay in our home, and be our son." The young man's eyes twinkled, and he looked up at the two. With a shift jerk of the head, he nodded.

"You'll need a name," Metzick said. The young man looked at the wood structure next to him – Metzick's bookcase. With a forced extension of his arm, he grasped a book. It slipped out of his hand and tumbled to the ground. Dawn bent down to retrieve it, and turned to her husband.

"It's the book on Lyndon B. Johnson," she said, "...Lyndon?" The young man nodded. "Lyndon Metzick," Dawn said quietly, "Lyndon Metzick."

Three years later...

"Run for the Senate?" 19-year-old Lyndon Metzick shouted angrily, "Run for the Senate,

are you insane?"

"Son," Damien Metzick said, sighing, "I really think this could help both my career and the state. The Senators in charge aren't addressing what most people in Nebraska want. What's your problem? Shoot."

"My problem is what you're proposing in this website your cronies have put up! Supporting a Federal Marriage Amendment? Marriage between a man and a woman, getting rid of activist judges, did you even stop to THINK how I would take this?"

"Son, it's what Nebraska wants. People are legislating from the bench, they're making parts of the Constitution up that aren't there."

"I can't support you in this, Mr. Metzick. I can't," Lyndon shot back, "You haven't stopped to THINK what this means to people like me. People who would give the clothes on their back for the chance to feel that what's in their heart is respected by SOMEONE out there. You, on the other hand, are just interested in profits. Profits in oil; profits in politics. Let's send some more troops out to die for our mistakes and our oil; let's fry a few more minorities on Death Row! As long as Metzick Oil stays on top, as long as you win re-election, it doesn't matter, does it?"

"Lyndon!" Metzick cried, "This is just what I feel is right. I haven't said a thing to you about your lifestyle, even when I didn't agree with it. Let me have this, son, please. This is what I believe in, these causes on this website. The people of Nebraska; that's what I believe in. I believe in your right to believe that I'm wrong, but please don't call me a cad. That I'm not. I may be the head of an oil business and I may be a conservative – that may be right or wrong. But I'm not heartless, I'm not saying these things to hurt people. I'm trying to preserve the way of life, the way Nebraskans want it to be. Son, will you please not condemn me for what I believe is right in my heart?"

"I'm sorry," said Lyndon with a sigh, walking to the door and slinging his bag over his shoulder, "I'm going. It's time for me to leave. I've overstayed my welcome here as it is. You and Mrs. Metzick have done a lot for me, but I need to find my own way now."

"Lyndon, but what if someone hurts you again?" Metzick asked, "What will you do then?"

"I suspect the next time I'm left to die in a field, the job will be done properly," Lyndon said flatly. "And with the conservatives in Congress, I'll suspect they'll build a memorial to the ones who did it." He opened the door and slipped out.

"Lyndon, don't," cried Metzick. He sighed. The phone rang. He picked it up. *A poll. So much to do for the upcoming election...* Metzick laboriously approached his computer and began to type an e-mail.

Two weeks later...

"Damien," called Dawn, "Look what came in the mail." She picked up a small post-card and handed it to her husband.

Metzick looked at the photograph on the card. It was a photograph of Iowa. He flipped it over.

It said, in a wobbly script:

Dear Mr. Metzick (Dad),

I'm traveling to Minnesota. They've elected a lot of liberals so I think it might be better for me there. I'm sorry for yelling at you earlier, but I don't think I'll ever understand your way of thinking. It just seems so shallow to me.

I'm in Iowa, I've met some people. They said they'll help me out, but things didn't exactly work as planned.

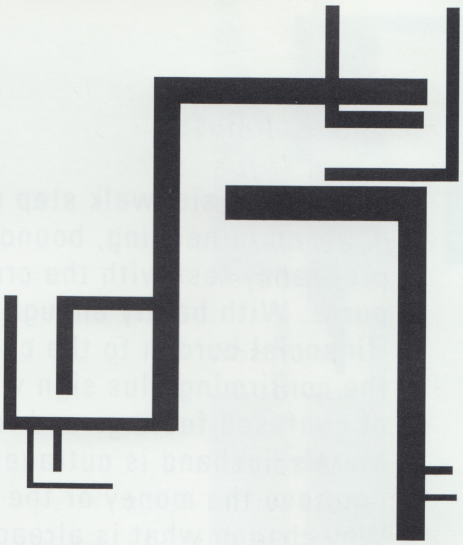
I'll be accepted someday, Maybe.

Your son,
Lyndon

Metzick looked at the postcard as his heart caught in his throat. The card was dotted with wet spots with red centers – tears with specks of blood. The oil baron – and maybe Senator – felt a tear trickle down his own face as he read it again.

I'll be accepted, Metzick thought to himself. *Someday. Maybe.*

The End



Behind the Bottle
By Kenneth Smyth

Ol' groaning stoned old man,
Still swishing whiskey from cheek to cheek.
Tell me tales of your trial and fails.

Where were you when the soldiers grew stale in Saigon?
Stumbling, sleeping on the barn bails near an old wagon.
How many suns and moons have your eyes sailed at half mass?
Several decades while paint chips cracked, have now come to pass.

When I discover your water, will I fish the dull days away?
Hunting with no hook, this water too fast consumed all who I' am.
Tired, babbling, lips moving with out talking.
Mutter your murmur, humming out of tune
Your life you never planed to murder.
Is your wife around? Are your children
out on laughter's playground?
Is your dog barking blindly, happily
into the greenness of the distant hills?
He turns languidly with a tear too many for
Each eye to hold, and in his stream of pity,
He says: They been where I've kept
'em all along. In the back of my mind, behind
the bottle.

Motherly Love
By Devon Gustin

Each sidewalk step she takes brings to mind the image of a baby, no bigger than the diamond in her ring, bounding inside her to the nervous rhythm of her step. She pays for the pregnancy test with the crumpled bills in her pocket and the scrounged up change from her purse. With barely enough money to afford the test, the actual baby would be nothing more than financial burden to the couple. She prays this family has not been "blessed." Her heart sinks at the confirming plus sign within the tiny plastic window. The wait for her husbands return is that of confused feelings and forced sobbing during the rehearsals in front of the bathroom mirror. Mara's husband is outraged at the unpleasant news. They were not meant to be parents. They did not have the money or the desire to have children. Everything was pleasant without children. Why change what is already good?

A month passes and Mara's husband learns to accept what he cannot change. He welcomes the idea of a family and realizes that it would not have happened if it was not meant to be. Mara, however, allows her despise of the unborn baby to grow deeper. She is torn between instinct and superficiality. She doesn't want the baby. Mara does not welcome weight gain and a bulging stomach. She is also too insecure, though, to chance losing her pro-life friends to any word of an abortion. So for now, she and her growing stomach sit and wait, both unsure of their future.

Times have grown happier in the past three months because Mara has learned to smile. She smiles as she kisses her wonderful husband as he leaves for work and assures him that she will plan for the baby while he is gone. She smiles as she uncovers the heat vent hiding her pill bottle and she smiles as she savors the chalky taste of wrongfully prescribed birth control pills. She even lets out a happy giggle as she washes down that chalky taste with shots of vodka or whiskey depending on her liking that morning. The burning in her throat is comforting knowing that it will kill the unborn thing. She played dumb through the pregnancy's first couple months believing her husband will be relieved in the end. They'll just say, "Poor Mara. She didn't know she was pregnant. How unfortunate. Never bring it up again." That would be the end of it. Problem solved.

By five months, Mara's stomach begins to show through her clothing. Mara refuses to see a doctor fearing they would be suspicious of her actions against the baby. She only hopes that the fetus is growing closer to death. At seven months Mara experiences her first labor pains. As she sits in the hospital bed in the maternity ward she tries to convince everyone it is a false alarm. It is too early to be giving birth. She knew the fetus had to be too weak by now to push into birth especially this soon. Her water breaks. This baby is coming now. Her husband is at her side and a nurse and a doctor at her feet. She stares at the fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling as she attempts to distract herself from the pain. Everyone in the room is yelling commands at her but she is too deep in thought and pain to hear them. She can work from home editing for the newspaper. Her husband can pick up a few hours at the music store. She wants someone to call her mommy. She catches a glimpse of her husband as tears of joy are pouring down his face in anticipation. She wants this baby. It's final. She gives one last push and the room is silent. Where is the baby's cry? Her husband's tears of joy have turned to tears of sorrow. "I'm sorry," the doctor tells her. The body is scrawny and inhuman looking. Its downward slanted eyes show signs of fetal alcohol syndrome. The blue, translucent skin reveals the tiny veins that would have pumped the blood throughout the body of her beautiful baby boy. Mara killed the one person that she and her husband ever really needed in their lives.

Regret
By Jessica Fowler

Cerulean blue-eyed man
I see your terse lips, your square shoulders;
The stubble of hair along your face
That grayed as you got older.
Your crooked toothed smile
Nicotine stained fingers
Your cartoon character laugh,
Which to this day, still lingers.
Memories exist in every corner
In my minds eye, there is a profile of you
The image of a tortured man it hurt to love
Engraved into me like a tattoo.
No shame remains as I call you my father;
I have grown from the seeds you planted
We once looked up on a warm August night
Dotted with the stars of a million wishes granted.
You said the world was mine for the taking
You said it's okay that stars have to fall
You said I was all that I needed to be
With one look, you said it all.
Cerulean blue-eyed man;
Begging to be absolved, to be let in
I faked hate, shut the door
Forced myself to forget the father you once had been.
I shoveled your remorseful letters out of sight
Ignored the words ringing in my ears,
You said you'd do anything to know your daughter again
I said I wanted you to disappear.
You were wrong, dad.
There was nothing for you to be proud of
I was no woman then, just a resentful child,
Pretending she couldn't feel love.
For every star now, I see those brilliant eyes of yours
And I beg the heavens to let you hear me now;
I'll never stop wishing for a way to tell you
That I can forgive you now.

Nature vs. Nurture
By Jessica Fowler

Within my heart a second heart beating;
A possibility of a life within another.
Waiting within, for our eventual meeting
An unborn child sleeping inside its mother.

A possibility of a life within another;
A soul sheltered in my soul.
An unborn child sleeping inside its mother
The maternal piece fits now in the once vacant hole.

A soul sheltered in another soul;
Untainted still by the sorrows experience may bring.
The maternal piece fits now in the once vacant hole
As I fall in love with this unhatched fledgling.

Untainted still by the sorrows experience may bring;
How quick does a kick make me so elated?
As I fall in love with this unhatched fledgling
This perfect miracle I've somehow created.

How quick does a kick make me so elated?
I am the sanctuary for this sinless spirit.
This perfect miracle I've somehow created
Dwelling in me now, safe and perfect.

I am the sanctuary for this sinless spirit
Waiting within, for our eventual meeting.
Dwelling in me now, safe and perfect
Within my heart a second heart beating.

First Place Winner in the 2006 Edith Garlow Poetry Contest.

