

The 2019 California Writers Club

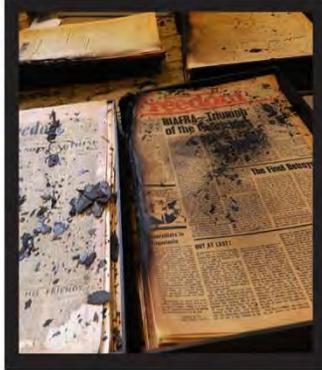
LITERARY REVIEW

We shine
our lights
on darkness.



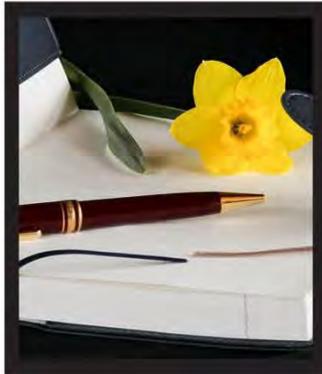
We shape words
into sentences to give
sense to the senseless.

Doubt, rejection,
fire, flood—
somehow we
find the will
to go on.



No matter
the circumstances,
we do our work.

Because we are
writers, and that is
what writers do.



Above all else,
we persevere.
We sail on.



The California Writers Club *Literary Review*
is published annually by
The California Writers Club, a 501(c)3 nonprofit
P.O. Box 201 • Danville, CA 94526
calwriters.org

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Notes from the Editors:

This, the 2019 edition of the California Writers Club *Literary Review*, could be considered a minor miracle.

Four individuals ... scattered throughout the state, knowing each other only casually ... four highly creative, highly opinionated individuals ... came together, forged an alliance, and worked harmoniously, contributing time and talent without rancor or contentiousness for ten months to produce the magazine you are now holding in your hands. That, my friends, is a bit of a miracle.

This year's editorial team:

Tish Davidson (Fremont Area Writers) is the author of fourteen traditionally published nonfiction books.

Kimberly A. Edwards (Sacramento) is an articles/essay writer, memoir teacher, Kenyon/Squaw Valley alumnus, Sacramento branch president; current project: History Press book.

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Joyce Krieg (Central Coast Writers) is president of California Writers Club, author of three mysteries published by St. Martin's Press, and a freelance editor.

We congratulate the writers whose work is showcased in these pages, with a special salute to our colleagues affected by the horrific fires that swept our state the past two years, touching our members in the North State, San Fernando Valley, Redwood and Napa Valley branches. As writers, we believe fervently in the power of creativity to help us rebuild after tragic loss. Please see a special section starting on page 23 with works inspired by these events, some written while the skies were still gray with smoke.

This is what writers do—forge order out of chaos, craft sentences to lend meaning to the senseless, allow hope and beauty to rise out of tragedy. We persevere, despite obstacles and rejection. It takes great courage to give words to our innermost thoughts and desires, doubly so to share our written work with others.

We encourage all our members to follow the example of the writers selected for publication this year by offering your work for the 2020 edition of the CWC *Literary Review*. It's never too early to begin polishing your story, poem, essay or memoir, making it the very best it can be, so you'll be ready to submit when the window opens on September 1. Check calwriters.org starting in late August for details.

Sail on!

Tish Kim June Joyce

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MEET OUR CONTRIBUTORS:

Brief biographical sketches of the authors included in this issue may be found on the inside back cover



Going Down

by John Heide, *Redwood Writers*

Albert scooted sideways to make room for the short swarthy man who slipped inside the hotel's 37th floor portal mere seconds before the elevator doors closed with a gentle whoosh. Albert didn't mind. He'd learned to share his whole life.

"Going down?" Albert offered the useless remark with the customary tilt of his head, signifying a friendly Midwestern message. *It's okay to talk.*

"You bet it is," the man growled into the corner.

The elevator whined, the cage gently shook and gravity got a little lighter. A lower number lit up above the doors. Despite the other man's furtive lack of eye contact and after what Albert considered the polite number of seconds passed, he released some pent-up vacation exuberance. "I just got into town," he said into the echoless chamber. The man looked over his shoulder and sized up his temporary roommate like a snake studies a mouse. In one motion, the man spun to face Albert, in his hand a gun. "Give me your wallet, quick!"

Albert's smile refused to yield. He tilted his head to one side. "What?"

"You heard me. Give it. Now!" The man jabbed the gun forward.

Albert raised his hands. "Well, I guess so. I could give it to you. You mean right now? Here?"

"Yes, goddamn it. I forgot to make an appointment. Give it or I'll fuckin' shoot you." The man's dark eyes blazed with urgency.

"Well, okay. You know, this is mine. You know ..." Albert's voice trailed off, but his hand was already on his back pocket. "All right. All right," Albert muttered the words and proffered the bulging leather lump toward the man.

In an instant the wallet disappeared in a calculated swipe just as the elevator bounced to a stop and the doors started to open. "Not a word, or you and somebody else gets it. Understand?" the man snarled over his shoulder. He stepped in front of the open doors making himself as imposing as a five-foot-five inch human can be. "No room. No room," he repeated as the 30-something couple with a four-year-old in tow abruptly stopped in their tracks, puzzlement on their faces. The woman frowned and glanced to Albert, who had scrunched his rather large bulk into the back corner with a pasted-on smile. As the doors finally slid closed, the 30-something woman tugged at her mate's sleeve with an urgency that implied "something's wrong."

The descent resumed and the man nodded and cooed toward Albert. "That was good, dude. Nobody got hurt." Albert noticed a damaged front tooth. "A few more floors

down, I get out of here and down the fire stairs. Gone before you even hit the lobby! Ha! Then you get to whine to the cops for a few hours. It's gonna do you no good. I'm too smart. You wouldn't know, now would you? Your fancy outfit and all." The man eyed Albert's polyblend slacks and Walmart aloha shirt that hadn't been laundered yet. Albert shrugged.

Without a hint of warning, the elevator shuddered and jerked to a halt mid-floor between 28 and 27. The lights dimmed for a couple seconds, then went out. A single emergency bulb in the ceiling blinked on and the two bewildered men stood anchored in place, illuminated like pasty mannequins in the pale dim light.

"What the fuck?" the man screamed.

"Yeah ... what's this fuck?" a wide-eyed Albert squeaked.

"Stay back. You hear me?" Desperation in his voice, he waved the gun while vigorously punching every button on the panel.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay there, buddy. It's okay. I'm sure this contraption will get going real soon and you can run away like you said. No problem. Just don't shoot me, all right?" Albert lowered his volume. "Please."

"Shut the hell up. You don't do nothing, I don't shoot you. Got it? Unbelievable. No way this is happening!" The man repeatedly punched the panel buttons hard with the heel of his hand. After a full minute with nothing changed, the man eased up and listlessly probed the buttons with his gun barrel. "Just my luck," he grunted and slid his back down to the floor beside the uncooperative knobs. A tense silence between them dominated the tiny space, punctuated only by the sound of a gun barrel tapping a bare palm. Both men merely glanced at each other as the minutes passed.

"Mind if I sit?" Albert shifted to his other foot.

The man scanned him, grunted, and motioned the gun toward the floor.

"Thanks." Albert leaned down, extended his arm, swung his butt to the floor, and brought his knees up to his chest. "Ever since that Chevy rolled over my foot, I can't stand on it for too long. It's been three years, but it still aches a bit."

"Shut up. I gotta think."

Albert nodded. More moments of silence

"Dammit! I knew this would happen! Something always happens." The man spit the words out and slapped his knee.

Albert's eyes grew wide. "Wow. I never thought this would happen. Nothing ever happens around me."

"Well, a stuck elevator in the middle of a robbery is happening, dummy!"

"Yeah, okay. You're right," Albert answered in just above a whisper. "What are you going to do?"

"What am I supposed to do? I'm going to write my congressman. I'm going to call for pizza!" The man paused, threw his arms apart, cocked his head to the side and



continued in a conspiratorially drenched tone, “First of all, if you must know, I fancy myself as a man that thinks outside the box.”

Albert looked around the cramped enclosure. “Seems that would be impossible right now.”

The man glared at Albert but fell silent, the only sound in the elevator an incessant, insect-like buzzing. More minutes passed. Albert noticed tattoos on the backs of both his hands. “Who’s Francine and Ellie?” he ventured.

“My wife. Ex-wife to be exact, and my daughter.” The man extended his hands and studied them. “Better days,” he announced in a somber tone. “Ellie’s already ten now. Can you believe it?” The man shook his head as if watching his favored team go down in defeat.

The relentless buzz of the light dominated the enclosure and minutes passed. Albert motioned toward the top of the elevator panel. “Did you try that emergency call button at the top up there?”

The man jumped up, never taking his eyes off of Albert. The gun came out again, the barrel pointed squarely at Albert. He scanned the upper panel and uttered a grunt when he spied the red-lettered button. He reached up, but paused with a wavering finger an inch from the button. “Is this like an intercom or something? Are they going to want to talk to me?”

Albert shrugged. “I don’t know. This being an older hotel. Maybe.”

The man spun around, fury in his eyes. “That stupid couple with the kid on the 35th. They’re probably ratting on me right now to the hotel stiff’s.” With no room to pace, he rocked back and forth on his feet, then drilled Albert with his eyes. “You gotta do it. You call ’em.”

“You want me to be our spokesman?” There was a faint hint of pride in the question. Albert angled himself back up on his feet, careful to keep his six-foot four-inch frame as far away as possible from his diminutive captor.

“You tell them everything’s fine,” the man directed.

“Everything’s fine,” Albert breathlessly repeated.

“Tell them there’s no robbery going on.”

“Everything’s fine and there’s no robbery going on.” Albert nodded. Another silence ensued. The man waited. Albert glanced around the small enclosure. “Maybe, I’m thinking, that I shouldn’t mention robbery. What do you think? Things aren’t really that fine either. It’s been over an hour now and we have heard nothing from them. The button probably doesn’t work anyway.”

The dim light in the elevator was just enough for the two men to lock eyes. “Forget the damn button,” the man finally announced. “They’ll be waiting for me either way.” His backside slid to the floor again. “I’m screwed.” Albert let his frame slide down as well. They positioned themselves opposite with legs outstretched. Albert checked his watch.

“The cops around here know me. I’m a regular star on their security cameras.” The man sighed. After a long silence he resumed in a small voice. “My old lady used to work this place. Not hooking!” he barked and glared accusingly at Albert. “She did clean-up maid stuff.” The man emphasized with a wave of the gun. “I was drunk one night and because she had a key to get in, I took advantage and stole a bunch of crap. They fired her and threw me in jail. That was the beginning of the end for us.”

“Oh, that’s kind of sad,” Albert offered.

“Yeah, kind of sad.” The man smacked his lips. “Yeah, yeah. Must seem that way to you. Fat ass living it up in Vegas. Probably got kids that are already in college.”

Albert took a deep breath and swiped his forehead. “Yes, you’re right, my ass is fat. I feel bad about that, but hey, I’m well past 50 now, so what do you do?” He held up one hand gesturing a complete surrender to aging. “Kids? I wish. Doris and I tried for ten years. Just didn’t happen.

“Then she left. Didn’t say why. I still got the auto repair shop though.”

“Your wife just left?”

“Yeah, she wrote a note. Said she wanted a new life.” Albert sighed. “We never did talk much.”

continued

Everything I Know

by Kate Adams, *SF Peninsula*

At the dinner table eating pie,
he lifts his gaze, he looks me in the eye.
Jesus, kiddo, we’re so lucky to be here
underneath an English-speaking sky.

He laughs out loud, leans back, puts down his fork.
I can see he’s opened up the door:
English on his tongue, spoken since he’s young,
long history, wild language he adores.

All my life I’ve used his gift,
the simple sounds I sit and sift
in search of words to love him with.

Nothing else he gave me lasts,
my body just a shadow cast
by his. But words pick up the past

as he picked up his napkin, waved his spoon,
magician making magic in the room.
All he did was talk, damned amazing cock.
He taught me how to crow—everything I know,
his tongue my one possession, my heirloom.



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“Hey man, that’s first class wrong. At least my wife screamed and yelled at me. I knew exactly what the deal was and how I was showing up and not showing up. What your wife did, that’s just not right.” He paused. “What the hell you doing in Vegas, anyway? Oh, don’t tell me, I get it.” The man sneered and shook his head. “What happens here, stays here. Right?”

Albert stared at the floor.

The man snorted, then continued in a softer voice. “Well, tell you the truth, that’s pretty much how I got here. But I didn’t have a home to go back to.” He swiped his mouth. Albert nodded. The man folded his arms across his chest and studied his captive. “My dad used to work on cars before he died. He helped me fix up my first car. Taught me a lot. We rebuilt the whole engine. Did body work. Everything.” The man’s eyes drifted off to the ceiling.

“Sounds like a good man,” Albert said. After a moment he added, “Where’s your wife and daughter now?”

“They’re around. As a matter of fact ... hey, what time is it?” The man gestured at Albert’s watch.

“Almost four-thirty. We’ve been in here for about two hours.”

“I had until five to get the money to the courthouse.”

Poetic Landscape

by Ruth Wildes Schuler, Marin

The poet rises to face
another day, the sun climbing
to the surface of infinity.
She takes her pen and dips
into language – words,
short and long, fragile
and forlorn. The morning
mirrors her thoughts breaking
into clusters of rhyme and rhythm.
The trees speak in tongues
and she translates their syllables.
A geranium glitters in the sunlight,
and waves of wheat moan
in fields like one of
Van Gogh’s creations.
Quiet climbs down the staircase
and the calico cat notes
the event, she knows what
is thawing and about to
burst forth in
illuminating brilliance.
The unconscious releases its captive.
The poet’s hand trembles.
The poem is born.

“What do you mean?” Albert shifted his weight and leaned a little closer.

“More of the same, can’t do a goddamn thing right. In order to continue my visitation rights, I had until five o’clock today to pay up at least 500 bucks in back child support. I didn’t have the money. I tried, I really did, but ... things didn’t work out.”

“Wow,” Albert began. “That’s sad.”

“You already said that.”

The monotonous buzz suddenly stopped and the main elevator lights blinked back to life. Albert and the man simultaneously jumped up and were momentarily put off balance as the elevator jerked down resuming the descent. They locked eyes without a word.

The man reached into his jacket pocket, produced Albert’s wallet and extended it forward. “Here, you might as well have this back now.”

While still eyeing the gun at the man’s side, Albert’s hand nibbled at the edge of the wallet, then snatched it back. “Thank you,” he said.

The numbers above the wall steadily counted down the impending fate. When it read three, Albert extended his hand. “Give me the gun,” he said in a calm, even tone.

“What? No,” the man protested.

“No time, trust me. Give me the gun.”

The elevator light read Lobby; the motion dropped to a standstill and the doors parted. The man’s face was like ice, but his hand, behind his back, slipped the revolver, handle first, to Albert’s hand. “It’s not loaded,” he whispered.

“I figured as much,” Albert muttered back while stuffing the gun under his shirt. Police, reporters covering the power outage, hotel staff, and cheering bystanders pressed toward the doorway. Before Albert and the man could even move, two policemen pushed their way to the front of the throng. Albert threw his big arm around the man. “Wow, buddy, we made it! So glad to see you folks,” Albert’s booming voice cut through the crowd’s chatter, his arm upraised in a universal sign of triumph. Cameras clicked. The police paused. The press shouted questions at Albert and the wide-eyed man. Albert clutched him even closer to his side. “Folks, thanks very much, but we really need to get some fresh air.” Albert shoved aside a paramedic who stood ready to resuscitate any victims.

The police, sporting half smiles, resumed their mission by blocking Albert’s path. “Hold it a minute, sir, we need to check in with your friend here.” They both peered up and down at the man now scrunched sideways against Albert. “And how are we today, Lenny? We got a report of, let’s say, suspicious activity on the elevator. And then we check the hotel cameras and guess what?” The taller of the two policemen let the last words ooze out of his mouth like ominous syrup.

The man known as Lenny slumped, his cheeks puffed out as he exhaled in resignation. Albert stared down at the shrinking man, shored him up against his body and began with an even louder voice. “Ah, thanks officers, but you see we’re late. I had called him up to my room for a job interview. I need somebody with experience back in my shop and he came highly recommended by Lenny’s father.” With one arm, Albert bounced the much smaller man several times. “I do hope he accepts my job offer, but you see, right now we have to go.” Lenny glanced at the cops and around the crowd with the look of someone that had

woken up in a different reality. The police frowned at each other but stepped aside as Albert, still clutching an astonished Lenny, pushed forward and out the front doors of the hotel where he hustled over to a waiting taxi. Without hesitation, he opened the back door, shoved Lenny in and jumped in after him.

Lying sideways in the backseat, Lenny opened his mouth to say something, but Albert shushed him with an upheld finger and barked toward the driver. “To the courthouse. Quickly!” Albert smiled at his backseat captive, then turned back to the driver. “Please.”

The Unconventional Recruit

by Julie Royce, *Tri-Valley*

Dressed in combat gear with a dummy rifle slung over my shoulder, I climbed the steps to the high diving board. The male FBI recruits who crowded around to watch me jump warned each other that when their turns came they should “Hold tight to the family jewels” and “Go in straight—feet first—it will hurt less that way.” They offered me no advice. My mind froze on one fact: I swim like a ton of reinforced concrete.

I searched the staring faces for glimmers of compassion—a slight smile, a worried look—some hint that I had an ally who wouldn’t let me drown. The job posting hadn’t mentioned swimming.

“You don’t have to swim. You just have to flail to the side and haul your butt out,” the instructor said. I wanted to ask how many times an FBI agent had jumped from a high-dive board in the line of duty, but it was too late for that. If I was going to die, I planned to do so with dignity. No tears, no groveling, no hesitation. I walked to the end of the board and stepped over, staying as close to the side of the pool as possible. I sank in a split-second, then rose at a speed that defied the theory of a body’s natural buoyancy. I broke the surface, thrashing and spitting and sputtering—but close enough for a handhold. I took several deep, painful breaths before hoisting myself up and over the edge. I lay like a beached mermaid, grateful for the chlorine-permeated oxygen filling my lungs.

During those moments when death had seemed imminent, what flashed before my eyes wasn’t my life, but how I got myself into that situation. While my law school classmates applied to firms with fancy pedigrees, I sent my application to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I thought the 10-week training program on the Marine Corps base at Quantico sounded intriguing. I read subtext into the posting: Three meals a day with someone else assigned cleanup. A top-notch physical fitness program that I needed after years of studying late into the nights with only bags of

chips and tubs of onion dip as company. Women paid big bucks to get in shape. For me, the program would be free.

The surprising thing wasn’t that I applied for the job. I faced a dull future interpreting securities regulation or unraveling the Federal Tax Code. My dream of a little excitement seemed normal compared to the FBI rationale for hiring me. I stood five feet tall, weighed one hundred and ten pounds, and had never done anything physical in my life. I passed the background check, which took none of those factors into consideration. It confirmed that my neighbors said nice things about me, and none of them were aware I possessed any peculiar sexual proclivities. Our country’s premier investigative agency confirmed I had no criminal record—I had never even been handed a speeding ticket—and I didn’t associate with known felons. I was hired.

I sold my condo in California, packed a couple of suits, a pair of running shoes and all of my 60s idealism into a suitcase and headed to an enclave a few miles outside of Washington D.C. I was as naïve and green as Jed Clampett heading from Bug Tussle to Beverly Hills. My goal was to survive the on-the-job-training and get my creds, a gun, and a sexy new body.

My class had ten women and twenty-five men, the largest proportion of women to men ever accepted into a new recruit class. It was a new era, and the Bureau was under pressure to hire women and minorities. Up until then, diversity meant they hired white men from all fifty states. FBI old timers didn’t welcome change. True Hooverites still genuflected during their morning two-mile runs on Hoover Road.

The men, new hires and agents alike, were politically conservative ex-cops, ex-Marines, ex-Special-Forces and other ex-military. Conservative women stayed clear of the FBI unless they married an agent. We were ten females, big

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on Constitutional rights, big on limiting search and seizure, big on strengthening the requirements for probable cause—idealism that the FBI didn't appreciate.

A newly-minted lawyer, I was also big on logic. Events and actions had to make sense. I soon learned that what seemed logical to me didn't always appear that way to my instructors. Their lack of rational thought proved painful.

My male classmates had been trained by the best. Under other circumstances, they might have been considered an exceptional dating pool: bright, buffed, physically fit, and full of testosterone. I struggled with ten pushups, climbing a twelve-foot rope to scale a wall, or a single unmodified pull-up.

Our instructors—think Lou Gossett Jr. as the Marine drill sergeant in *An Officer and a Gentleman*—devised a ready list of tortures. I figured I could put up with any persecution for three-and-a-half months.

The first day in the gym, we double-timed around the perimeter until I gasped for air. Then the fun began. As we slumped to the floor, the women in varying stages of exhaustion, the instructor began. "Snake Henderson stands six feet, six inches, has a jagged five-inch scar down his left cheek, eats small babies for breakfast, and has killed at least a hundred tough guys. He takes no prisoners. He makes Bad, Bad Leroy Brown look like a wimp. You'll meet him on a dark street corner, and you had better be able to take care of yourself because he wants you dead. Keeping you alive is what defensive tactics is about."

I was impressed.

To ready me for a confrontation with Mr. Henderson, we engaged in boxing. Boxing, for God's sake. Do you think Snake Henderson is going to box with me? Do you think he's going to give me a helmet and gloves? Determined to be a team player, I kept the logic glitch to myself.

I was paired with Ted. He delivered a right uppercut, and my head bounced off the sides of that damned helmet like a steel ball shot in a pinball machine. It was an hour before I could think clearly. My roommate said I kept mumbling something that sounded like, "team player, team player."

A week later, we tried a new exercise. "Pair off. One of you runs one way, one of you the other, circle the gym and when you meet, grab your opponent and flip him over your shoulder."

"Wait, I'm paired up with Stan. He's a foot taller and has a hundred pounds on me. The fundamentals of leverage say this isn't going to work."

"Quit whining. Do you think Snake Henderson will cut you any slack?"

"No, but I don't think I'm going to argue with Snake if he comes at me ready for the kill. Isn't that why you give me a gun?"

His frown said, "Run!"

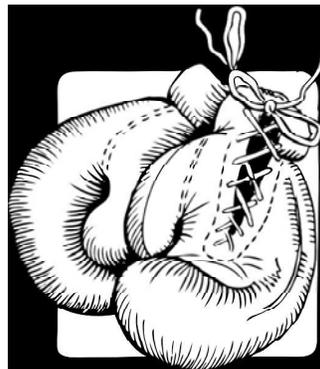
Okay, okay, I'm a team player. What's the worst thing that could happen? I loped forward. Let Stan get worn out running. When we finally met, I heard a choir of onlookers screaming, "Bite him. Bite him." I did.

That made sense—was imminently logical. Biting, scratching and clawing eyes are fair play in a street fight with the formidable Snake Henderson who had no respect for leveling the playing field or rules of gentlemanly conduct. The Marine I bit didn't see it that way. The onlookers frowned as though I had committed an unpardonable sin. Apparently, they were yelling, "Fight him. Fight him." not "Bite him. Bite him."

Two weeks later, Stan evened the score, although I'm sure it was unintentional. This time when he flipped me, his head came up as my nose went down. There was a loud crack. Stan apologized to me. Then he apologized to the instructor who was too busy cleaning my blood off the floor to pay him much attention. Later that night, with my nose and eyes swollen, I convinced Stan it was more than okay. It was the best thing that had happened to me since I had been at Quantico. The doctor gave me an excuse to sit out of boxing for the next four weeks.

During one of our final defensive tactics sessions, the instructor shared wisdom I hoped I would never have to test. "There is no reason to be killed by a dog. It's a poor excuse of a man who can't choke a dog." (Note: He specifically left out "or woman.") I half expected he would bring in a mixed pack of rottweilers and pit bulls to prove his point. His demonstration of how to properly choke a dog convinced me I wasn't in Kansas anymore. What kind of person strangles Toto?

One afternoon, when the other games had worn thin and the instructors longed for levity, they took us to Combat Village. We ran through bombed-out buildings and dodged bad guys hiding around corners. At the end of the exercises, the instructor announced a special tear-gas drill. There was that logic glitch again. "I believe you," I said. "You're the experts. I don't need to experience this personally to understand it's dreadful." The instructor handed me a mask that not only let the gas in but trapped it there. When I removed the defective gear, my eyes were on fire. No one had warned me that rubbing my eyes with tear-gas-tainted fingers would exponentially worsen the situation. The men instinctively knew that or got a cheat sheet that the women hadn't been provided.



I enjoyed firearms training. Mostly, I do wish someone had told me to hold the shotgun tight to my shoulder. It would have reduced the bruising. But firearms were my downfall. I had no problem with the rifles, the shotguns, the two-handed .38 course. But the heft of the gun and the recoil on the one-handed revolver was too much to let my small, weak hand bring the gun back into alignment to shoot again with anything near required speed. "I'm fine when I use two hands," I said.

"And what will you do when Snake Henderson shoots you in your left hand and you have to protect yourself?"

There it was. The last logic glitch I would have to swallow before leaving Quantico. "You are assuming he shoots me in the non-dominant hand, not the head or some other vital body part?" I asked. "You assume I'm bleeding profusely from that non-dominant hand? You assume I'm

already down and panicked? Yet you believe shooting with my remaining good hand is going to save me?"

"Just shoot."

"Local law enforcement agencies don't make trainees pass a one-handed course."

"This is the FBI. Shoot."

"Hey, look, I could prop the gun against my left forearm, bloody though it is from my wound. I'm sure adrenaline would save me."

I was unable to pass the one-handed firearms course, and the FBI politely asked me to leave. I was five pounds lighter, could flex real muscle, and I had learned a few new tricks. So, what if I couldn't shoot one-handed? I couldn't imagine another job where my boss would care.



A Man, A Boy and Their Hawk

by Russell Sunshine, *Central Coast Writers*

The first screech pierces the air above the Grove Market's barrel roof. A second gull hopping on Fandango Restaurant's chimney relays the alarm. A third triangulates the perceived threat from the dance studio down the Sixteenth Street slope. Far below in the municipal parking lot, Kat remains calm and confident, not deigning to acknowledge the agitated chorus. Even totally stationary, her menacing presence is inflicting the desired disruption.

Kat is a Harris's Hawk, a splendid creature who doesn't reveal her full beauty at first glance. When she's at rest, like this morning, you notice a dominant dark-chocolate tone, covering her head, neck, chest, wings and back. Against this background, her first mark of distinction is a butter-yellow ring encircling each eye. That same yellow saturates her long, obviously powerful legs and huge clutching claws. Next you spot russet red, decorating scalloped epaulettes from her shoulders half-way down broad wings, as well as curiously delicate feathered ankle puffs. During takeoff or when airborne, she exposes a rich creamy-white belly and rump, as well as a magnificent fanning tail with alternating horizontal bands of cream and ebony.

In the parking lot, Kat balances without strain on her partner's extended left forearm. Like all other raptors, Harris's Hawks are surprisingly light-weight. (A massive Golden Eagle might give the impression of a 20-pound hulk, but in fact tip the scales at a mere five pounds.) Despite Kat's 23-inch length and 46-inch wingspan, she weighs only two pounds. "Feather-weight" is an apt description for this hollow-boned flying machine capable of breathtaking aerobatics.

David stands as motionless as his hawk, surrounded by gyrating gulls. His appearance is more muted than his partner's. His olive green uniform and matching cap sport logos from his company, Green Fields Falconry. Attached to his chest are the tools of his trade: hawk hoods and a whistle, a leash, swivels and clamps. A black leather gauntlet reaching to David's elbow doubles as landing pad and perching platform. Over his right shoulder, he's hitched a weathered canvas carryall containing all he and Kat will need for this morning's patrol—trail snacks for her, spare parts for her tethers, bottled water, and raptor-photo business cards for him.

David Lindenthal-Cox is one of only a relative handful of Master Falconers in all of California. How did this self-effacing Pacific Grove resident ascend to the top echelon of an ancient guild? Like many an epic quest, this one began at a kitchen table.

In 2009, David and his wife Jan were struggling to energize their drifting eldest child. Fourteen-year-old Mackenzie, "Mac" for short, seemed equally immune to the attractions of schoolwork or sports, surf or skateboards.

David sat down with his son for an awkward heart-to-heart. "Mac, tell me what turns you on. Do you have a dream? Your mother and I want to help you go for it."

Mac held back for three long beats. "I want to be a falconer."

Images of Sherwood Forest and Hogwarts flashed across David's mental screen. "A what?"

"A falconer."

"Oookay. But where's this coming from?"

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“Third grade.”

Mac committed to taking the plunge. “A falconer visited my class at Forest Grove. She carried a huge Golden Eagle on a leather glove. It was awesome.”

The teen’s tense jaw began to relax. “I didn’t want to show my excitement, in case the other kids made fun of me. But I made myself a promise. Someday, that would be me.”

Mac later told his dad that his school-visit inspiration had been reinforced by reading and rereading two iconic books. *My Side of the Mountain* followed a runaway boy as he bonded in the forest with a magical Peregrine Falcon. *Wesley the Owl* celebrated the real-life relationship forged by Cal Tech biologist Stacey O’Brien with an injured Barn Owl.

David had gotten more than he’d bargained for. But he was moved by his son’s secret passion. Even though they hadn’t a clue where this might lead, he and Jan promised to help Mac get started.

For Christmas, the parents thrilled their son with a copy of the California Hawking Club’s *Apprentice Study Guide*. When Mac grew intimidated by this manual’s technical vocabulary, David said “Let’s look at this together.” After three pages, the father found a second surprise. “The hook was in my mouth,” he recalls. Two pilgrims would embark on this falconry quest.

Becoming a licensed falconer in California is not for the impulsive or impatient. It’s a long slog with multiple challenges to hurdle. Of 300 hundred enthusiasts who start the process each year, only 30 stay the course. In 2018, there were only 700 active falconers in the state, out of a population approaching 40 million.

California falconry is regulated and managed by the State Department of Fish & Wildlife (F&W). The Department administers falconry candidates’ annual written entry test and awards Apprentice, General and Master’s Licenses for ascending successive rungs of the practitioners’ ladder. Supporting supervision and encouragement are contributed by the California Hawking Club (CHC).

David and Mac attacked this credentialing marathon as a tandem team. Prepping for and passing the F&W threshold test took them eight intermittent months of effort. After several false starts securing an accessible and compatible sponsor, apprenticeship consumed another demanding two years, including steady practice trapping, training and re-releasing wild birds. Perfecting their falconry skills until they qualified for Master-Falconer status added five years to that calendar. The pair’s licenses were only admission tickets. David describes falconry, with deep pleasure, as “life-long learning.”

Most of that learning has been hands-on and experiential, refining David and Mac’s communication with wary, independent birds of prey. But much of the curriculum has also been historical and cultural, absorbing the accumulated wisdom of an ancient international fellowship.

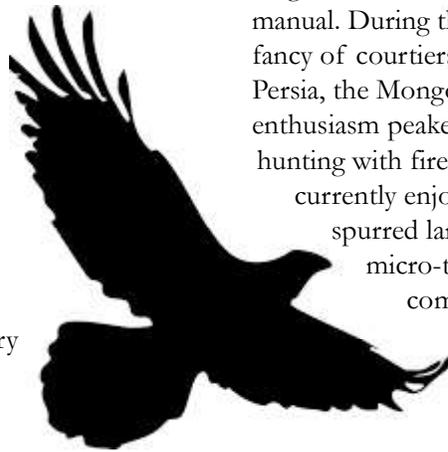
Falconry is one of the world’s oldest sports. Even its definition springs from the past: the taking of wild quarry in its natural state and habitat by means of a trained raptor. The earliest references date from Mesopotamia in 2000 BCE.

Hunting with raptors was apparently introduced into Europe by Central Asian Huns invading the collapsing Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. A major boost came in the mid-13th century when a German king commissioned a translation of an Arab falconry manual. During the Middle Ages, falconry captured the fancy of courtiers across Eurasia, spanning Europe, Arabia, Persia, the Mongol Empire, Korea, and Japan. European enthusiasm peaked in the 17th century, soon overtaken by hunting with firearms. In the US and UK, falconry is currently enjoying its greatest resurgence in 300 years, spurred largely by successful captive breeding and micro-telemetry. Hawks, falcons, and less commonly, eagles and owls are the raptors normally flown in America.

Even in hang-loose California, falconry is sustained by a hierarchical order of devotees, with Apprentices reporting to Masters, patiently working their way through initiation. The resemblance to medieval tradesmen’s guilds is no coincidence. Modern falconry’s exotic working vocabulary traces linguistic roots back 700 or more years.

Although the California Hawking Club is a relaxed association of widely dispersed and independent members, its leaders clearly consider themselves stewards of a venerable tradition. Far more vital for novices than memorizing antique verbs is absorbing a principled Code of Conduct. This excerpt conveys the underpinning values:

- ◆ Falconry is a one-on-one relationship based on trust.
- ◆ Trained raptors remain wild and are capable of returning to the wild at any time they are flown. They often do.
- ◆ Birds of prey are trained entirely by reward and the bird’s natural response to food is the key. No punishment is ever used, nor is it effective. While dogs will respond to the tone of a voice and horses to the touch of the reins, raptors have no desire to please their human companions.
- ◆ Wise falconers come to realize that they don’t train the birds to hunt. Hawks and falcons are, by nature, successful hunters ... Hawks chase, capture and kill their prey with no training from their human companions. The



training in falconry involves having the hawk learn to accept the human as an aid to more successful hunting and to a more dependable food supply.

Harris's Hawks are among the most prized and popular raptors in American falconry. Keenly intelligent and a quick study, the breed consistently demonstrates hunting enthusiasm and stamina. It achieves its greatest hunting potential when given as much freedom as possible. These hawks are unusually sociable, getting along with other birds and even famously hunting cooperatively in pairs or packs. They are equally appreciated for their relaxed disposition with humans, accepting them as hunting partners rather than rivals. Diminishing in the wild, they've been successfully bred in captivity since the 1960s.

David and Jan purchased Kat as a present for Mac in 2012. Their source was a federally licensed Tennessee breeder. The bird that arrived at San Jose International Airport was a 14-week-old, fully grown chick, completely untrained, with no prior human interaction (and thus, implicitly, no prior bad habits). David and Mac set quickly and quietly to work.

First came "manning," getting Kat used to human contact, demonstrating that her falconers presented no threat. David and Mac would take turns sitting with the chick for hours, periodically offering tasty tidbits and calling her softly by name. Falconers name their birds to facilitate initial training. The name is an attention-getter, repeatedly called by the falconer, accompanied by a blown whistle, to train the bird to fly to the gauntlet. David and Mac used a creance (a long cord attached to the falcon's leash) to let her practice flying free to the gauntlet. Next David got her attention with a shushing noise, pointing at tidbits dropped to the ground to begin associating the ground with food and game in preparation for hunting. He'd then call her back up to the glove. Repeat, repeat, until novel became normal.

The most crucial training before flying free was to wed the bird to the lure. A simple sliced tennis ball attached to a seven-foot rope, the lure's irresistible appeal stemmed from the generous meal packed inside. The bird was rewarded with access to this feast whenever the lure was whirled above the falconer's head. This association became so automatic that later, in the field, merely lifting the lure from the falconer's field pack and beginning its circular sweep sufficed to bring the hawk winging back without hesitation from any distance or terrain. This crude mechanical summons could prove an invaluable back-up if the falconer lost sight of the bird or its micro-transmitter were malfunctioning.

As a refinement on preparations for hunting, Kat also learned to fly to a T-perch. David constructed this prop from extendable aluminum tubes, topped by a horizontal bar wrapped in thick industrial carpeting. In the field, Kat

would sit on this elevated stand, six feet above David's head, to survey the surrounding terrain.

The sequential training program proceeded at a rapid pace. Fieldwork began by teaching Kat to be comfortable hopping into and traveling inside her personal transport box in the rear of the van, made attractive by more tidbits to create this positive association. In the field, she was free-flying by Day Ten. Already, father and son grasped that this was one savvy bird.

With Kat fully trained and comfortable in her handlers' care, a local opportunity arose to let her help earn her keep. Pacific Grove's city government hit upon an innovative approach to a stubborn public nuisance. Invading gulls were overwhelming downtown merchants, residents, and tourists. The gulls raided restaurant trash bins, spread litter on pavements, bombed car hoods and pedestrian heads with viscous droppings, and harassed those same walkers with feints and attacks during nesting season. Taking their cue from a successful precedent on Santa Catalina Island, the Pacific Grove authorities invited gull-abatement bids from Central Coast falconers and their raptors. David's new consultancy, Green Fields Falconry, won the contract, and man and hawk began their disruptive patrols. The gulls immediately marked Kat as their natural enemy. Their agitation was evident from squawks and sallies. The roving pair kept them on edge from dawn to dusk. (Other raptors from the Green Fields aviary spelled Kat on frequent rest breaks, but David marched on, reinvigorated by periodic lattes.) Mac took his turns walking the beat and added value by dismantling rooftop nests. The City derived a well-noted public-relations bonus from David's informal sidewalk seminars for enchanted children. The sustained impact of this multifaceted abatement campaign will only be confirmed by repeated annual cycles. But initial signs are all positive.

Green Fields Falconry's forward momentum is steadily accelerating. In addition to aiming for a return engagement with the City of Pacific Grove, David's firm is bidding on a major gull-abatement contract in adjacent Monterey. Private clients have engaged GFF to furnish abatement services for their residential neighborhoods. Watsonville farmers are appealing for its falcons to deter starlings and robins from stealing their ripening berries. School visits continue to enrich the firm's public-service contributions. Six birds now share the spacious aviary.

David free-flies Kat every week to maintain her health and fitness. Mac is reducing his involvement as he heads off to college in San Luis Obispo. Jan and elder daughter Maggie are applying for their Apprentice Falconer licenses.

David would never pretend that gull abatement is what sustains his passion for falconry. Abatement engagements protect fellow residents and help pay the bills. And he

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genuinely enjoys pedestrian contact, especially with irrepressible kids. But the chief source of his joy is daily interaction with intelligent creatures from other species. This intimate communication is magical and magnetic. David's partner Kat is now six years of age. Barring serious

injury or chronic infection, they can look forward to spending another 20 years together.

The mild Master answers the unasked question. His voice is soft but resolute. "I will always be a falconer."

Thomas Edison's Last Invention

by Richard E. McCallum, *SF Peninsula*

Thomas Edison's film clip concludes with his narration. "My phonograph and movie camera capture your voice and image and record them for future viewers. It may be possible to invent a device so sensitive that those on the other side can send warnings to us."

The lights come up in the newsroom as the end piece of the film flaps around and around the reel. My fellow reporters stir, stretch, and light up smokes.

One of them asks me, "What do you think, Jake?"

"A premonition transmitter?" I answer.

My news producer, whose large frame generated his nickname The Bull, lights his cigar as he walks to the front of our gathering.

"Okay, gentlemen, Edison turns 84 this month. I hear he's been ill lately. Rumors of dementia circulate." The Bull takes another puff. "I've been told his wife thinks his inventions entice sinful lifestyles. She won't allow him to wire their house with his electrical lights. They use gas lamps except for Edison's cellar workshop."

"My sources confirm he gabs with ghosts," pipes in one of the old-timers.

"What sources?" I question. "Gossip isn't news." As the youngest newshound on The Bull's team, just out of college with a degree in journalism, I need to get my voice in there and challenge these ink-stained news hawkers.

"Thanks, Jake." The Bull blows smoke rings. He swats one. "At any rate, before the 'Father of the Future' passes on, let's find out what thoughts he has on the fate of man, his hopes for humanity, and his reflections on the past. Anybody got any other questions to ask of him? If we can get an interview?"

"How has the economic downturn," one reporter says, "altered his belief in the power of man's inventions to overcome problems?"

"Is he religious?" another reporter says. "What role does he see for religion in the scientific world of the future?"

"Yeah. Does Edison view the current state of the world as God's way of punishing man? Retribution for believing man's inventions—not God—can save humankind from its problems?"

"I'm interested in this psychic research angle," I say.

"I've always believed as Edison does. Man's inventions are the key to saving the world. He never seems to have concern for the future."

"Jake." The Bull turns toward me. "Your steadfast support of Edison and your interest in psychic research persuades me to give you first shot at this assignment. He's scheduled to speak at a lighting convention. Try to get a personal interview before then."

He adjourns the meeting.

I dated a girl whose mother attends the same church as Mrs. Edison and was able to obtain a referral. I approach the Edison house for my interview, and after knocking quite loudly for a time, Mrs. Edison opens the door. She invites me in, and I ask about Thomas. She walks over to the closed door leading down to his workshop and raps on it with the curved portion of a heavily ornamented walking cane.

She calls out to him in a shrill and nagging voice.

"Thomas, Thomas."

The old man reacts in the conditioned response of husbands who have long ago given up the battle with a domineering wife. "Yes, dear?" I hear him call out from down in the cellar.

Though she hears him respond, the big-boned, strong-featured woman gives a few more raps with her cane.

"Thomas, Thomas. There's a newsman here. Get up here right now, or I'll send him away."

Thomas calls out, "Coming dear."

Mrs. Edison, walking with her cane, leads me back to the parlor and we sit while waiting for Thomas. "I'm not happy about this, young man. If Sarah, from my prayer group, hadn't recommended you, I'd never let a newsperson in my house. The things they write about Thomas."

I stir uncomfortably in the chair and am relieved to see Thomas entering the room. Mrs. Edison controls the situation. "Thomas, this young man, Jake, comes recommended by Sarah. He's from Movietone News."

I rise and shake Thomas's hand as he crosses over to a chair.

She continues to dominate the introduction. "Now, Jake will take notes on your speech tonight at the lighting

convention. Remember, no answers to any questions about those silly rumors. Your inventions alone have caused enough evil in this world. The things those decadent people do in the record and movie business, disgusting!”

Thomas and I nod to each other.

“Now, get dressed: no, you wait here while I pick out the clothes you’ll wear.” She stands up with much labor. “You two get acquainted. Jake promised to write a nice story about you that will make me proud.” She walks out, leaning heavily on her cane.

“Mr. Edison what of the psychic research rumors?” I ask.

“All my inventions move man forward into the future.”

Not the answer I was looking for, so I try again, “But, have you invented a psychic device allowing you to talk with the dead?”

He hesitates, then, says in a voice low enough to assure that Mrs. Edison cannot hear him, “I have invented an apparatus so sensitive it allows a psychic power to communicate with me.”

Shocked, I ask, “How?”

“It absorbs my consciousness, something like the reverse of a movie projector.” He tries to simplify, “Instead of pictures projected onto a screen for me to see, my consciousness enters into a funnel of images and sounds.”

“What’s the message?”

His face darkens. “Something, or someone, sent me a warning ... sent humanity a warning of an evil force gathering strength, and will soon engage the whole world in a monstrous, murderous, struggle.”

“But who?”

Mrs. Edison’s cane raps on the railing as she calls down to Thomas. “Thomas, come up here right now, I’ve picked out the clothes for you to wear tonight.”

“Yes, dear.” He obediently starts to get up.

“Can I see this invention, sir?” I say as we rise.

“Yes, after the speech tonight. You can ride back here with us, and I will let you participate. Perhaps you can better interpret the images than I ... old, and slow, you know.” He winks at me as he leaves to get dressed. I scribble notes.

At the conference, I sit in the front row with the other correspondents from various news outlets, but I am the only Movietone News reporter. During Edison’s speech to the conventioners, I keep my eye on his overbearing wife as best I can. She sits in the crowd behind me, monitoring its responses.

The audience shows interest in his views on AC versus DC electricity and his competitive remarks about Tesla. The crowd’s focus on him pleases her. One old man, though, snoozes off, and Mrs. Edison taps him with her cane and snarls.

At the end of the speech, Thomas receives a standing ovation, and the journalists begin questioning him.

“What role do you see for religion in our modern scientific world?” asks the first reporter.

I flinch, knowing Mrs. Edison must be shooting threatening looks in her husband’s direction. He glances at her, then turns away.

“None,” Thomas says.

The crowd murmurs and makes notes. Mrs. Edison’s cane taps the floor, in rhythm with the beating of my heart.

Another reporter known to cover religious issues, asks, “Do you believe man has an immortal soul?”

I cringe, not daring to face Mrs. Edison. The tapping gets louder.

“An immortal intelligence,” Thomas answers.

In the few moments of verbal silence, while the audience absorbs what he just said, the tapping of the cane increases in speed and volume. Then everyone starts talking at once.

I look back and see Mrs. Edison roll her eyes and shake her head. The glare she gives me could melt iron. She awaits my question. I take a deep breath.

“Many of your inventions,” I say, “the phonograph, the movie projector, in essence, immortalize personalities. Do you put any stock in psychic research or mechanisms that claim to communicate with the dead?”

I feel Mrs. Edison’s eyes burning a hole in the back of my head. The tapping stops. Her weight must be shifting to the cane.

“Yes,” Thomas nods at me. “I do.”

I glance back. Mrs. Edison rises, stomps her cane and screams her husband’s name.

“Sir,” I shout over the clamor, “have you attempted to invent such a gadget?”

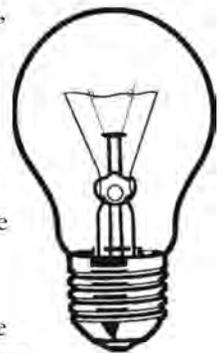
“All my inventions have resulted from my attempts to create the device. I can now report, I have succeeded.”

A collective gasp, then the shouting begins.

The old lady pushes her way up onto the stage. She drags Thomas out the door. The newshounds follow, laughing and shouting cruel jokes about ghosts. Mrs. Edison fends them off with her cane.

“Thomas has been sick and feverish,” she screams. “To blazes with you for repeating the mumblings of a great man suffering from old age and illness.” She herds Thomas toward the waiting limousine. I sidle up alongside.

The old lady shoos me away with her cane. “You’re no better than the rest of them,” she hollers. “Sarah was wrong about you. I’ll have to have a word with her!”



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Over his wife's shoulder, Thomas Edison mouths, "Cellar. Monday."

I arrive at the Edison house late Monday afternoon. Thomas has arranged for the gate to the iron fence around the yard to be unlatched, and the cellar window left open a crack. No evidence of Thomas. I widen the window gap and climb through. A display of all of Edison's original inventions clutters the space. One resembles a small movie screen made of glass. I sketch the scene, then hear someone coming. Time to hide. A corner affords a view of the room. Thomas Edison comes down the stairs.

"Thomas," I whisper.

He signals me to come over to the glass projection screen.

Wires and vacuum tubes connect behind it. Edison switches on the device, and when it warms up, the inventor tunes in a signal. He sits, and I stare over his shoulder.

Images play of swastikas, military marches, and a mustached man shouting. Sounds like German. I witness passenger ships torpedoed, cities bombed, families herded onto trains, starving masses—living skeletons—huddled together. Bodies pile up in huge mounds. Then, from the apex where the pictures originate, a massive flash erupts and spreads, to fill the entire screen with the image of a huge cloud, rising in the shape of a monstrous mushroom.

All these images swirl into a cosmic whirlpool.

Just then Mrs. Edison clatters down the stairs, faster than anyone would have thought possible. "I warned you!" she says to me, and wielding her cane, hits me and knocks me down. She starts smashing the equipment around us.

"No!" Thomas and his psyche—I must protect the screen. I lunge and utter a piercing cry, trying to muster the strength to stop her. She knocks me back.

Then Thomas Edison appears in the screen's whirlpool, transparent as a ghost, staring out from the other side as if the horrid images had absorbed his consciousness. I rise and gasp. Thomas remains seated in front of the screen.

Mrs. Edison demolishes the glass tube, breaking off the head of her cane. I watch in terror as shattered glass flies. Thomas's body—face bleeding—slumps forward and tumbles unconscious to the floor.

Ambulance attendants have placed the unconscious Thomas Edison upstairs on his bed. I hear a car screech to a stop. I go to the window and see The Bull double-park in front of the house. Emergency lights from the police cars and ambulance flash the entryway. A small crowd of neighbors stands outside of the iron post fence. As my producer walks by the folks gathered on the sidewalk, one of them shouts out to him, "Hey, Newsy, what happened to Thomas?"

The Bull pulls the unlit cigar out of his mouth, and calls in his loud recognizable voice, "Wait for the newsreel." He pops it back in and enters the yard. I go down to meet him.

In the entranceway, detectives analyze broken pieces of glass and electrical components. A police officer comes up the cellar stairs, then places more broken items on a table. The curved head portion of an ornamented, wooden, walking cane, sharply broken off just below the bend, catches their attention.

Turning Point

by Rusty LaGrange, *High Desert*

It was only three hundred feet,
a long and crunchy journey
to the far end of her world,
while she pondered the absurd.

I can recall her angry words,
"I'm not talking to you no more!"
It hurt inside and gut-punched me
like a welter weight in the ring.

She wore her backpack half zipped,
crammed with the essentials:
a doll, a sock, a book, a juice box,
and an angry glare of independence.

I watched through the window,
holding my breath as she reached
that wide abyss between toddler
and independent spirit.

Our dirt road led to freedom.
She stood looking for a safe
path to make the crossing, then
her shoulders dropped and met defeat.

She dragged her bag all the way home.
I was giddy inside and torn with tears,
the doorjamb hiding my smile, "Are you okay?"
"I'm not allowed to cross the road," she said.

We enjoyed the sweetest cookies and milk,
talked of nursery rhymes and favorite books,
colored on the floor for hours,
and made handprints in my heart.

Detective Morgan scrutinizes the debris, “Top part of old lady Edison’s cane. Guess this proves Jake right.” He looks up at the producer and then at me. “She smashed up all this electric stuff.”

Morgan and The Bull have a long history. I sense the detective would love to implicate my boss and myself in this mess.

“Hey, Copper,” my boss bullies the law officer, “where’s Edison?” He reaches down for the detective’s lighter. The cop knocks The Bull’s hand away, must think he’s going to snatch the cane head. The Bull pushes the policeman’s fist back, grabs the igniter, then puffs. “What the hell happened here?” He blows smoke into the cop’s face.

Morgan coughs, fans the air, and barks back, “I ain’t about to break protocol and tell you police business. You figure out what occurred. If you want to keep us from locking up your reporter, Jake, give me the truth. And don’t let me catch you releasing any information you ain’t cleared with me first. Follow Jake upstairs to the top. It’s the first bedroom on the right.”

I lead the way up the narrow winding stairway to the upper bedrooms. At the first landing, Mrs. Edison sits attended by the ambulance crew. She clutches the remains of the broken, walking cane.

“Jes...” The Bull starts to take the Lord’s name in vain. He catches himself. “Mrs. Edison.” The doctor descends from the second landing. My producer asks him, “How’s Thomas?”

“His wounds from the glass are minor,” the medical person says, “but he drifts in and out.”

The Bull and I huff up the next flight of winding stairs. I bend over Edison. He stirs, swallows, and tries to utter something.

I strain to catch any word, but he lapses. Darn. I pick up my sketch pad and draw the image of Thomas’ face trapped in the now-shattered device.

“Unbelievable!” The Bull taps my drawing, then walks over to the window and looks out.

“I used to think all man needed was scientific advances to defeat evil,” I say, “but terror and hatred advance at the same rate and transform scientific inventions into powerful tools of destruction. Now, I dread the future and science.”

Thomas opens his eyes. I lean in close to him. “Mr. Edison? Thomas, Thomas?”

“Fear not...,” he answers.

I wait in anticipation. I touch the old man’s wrinkled face. Will he be able to continue? The Bull joins me at Edison’s bedside.

“The future,” Edison whispers. “Wondrous.”

Life Support

by Julaina Kleist-Corwin, *Tri-Valley*

My visit to Shelly in the hospital included a routine before I entered her room. Visitors were required to wash their hands with antibacterial soap in the large sink for twenty-six hand rotations. As soon as I threw the paper towels in the trash can, the double doors to the children’s ward opened. A few months ago, I had been here for Alicia, another student of mine. I hoped for a better outcome this time, but I had doubts.

Shelly’s bed was the first in a row of three. I clutched a small yellow stuffed toy I bought for her and tightened my grip while the nurse attempted to administer Shell’s regular dose of morphine. I stood on the opposite side of the bed to give her plenty of room.

I held the toy so Shell could see it. “Hey, sweetie. Look, I brought you a yellow ducky.” She didn’t focus on it and in her quadriplegic condition, a refusal to focus had become her way to show noncompliance. Neither eye could track very well, but the left one moved on its own and usually drifted off to one side, partially hidden by her upper eyelid.

Shell looked as though she were beyond hearing anyone in the room. I knew that stare. I had learned the eight-year-

old’s moods despite the fact she couldn’t talk. Voiceless, except when she screamed in terror during intense seizures, her eyes were the only response indicator to my instruction. I taught her and four other multi-challenged students in their homes for an hour each, five days a week. All four had their own expressions that I had learned to interpret.

Shelly’s perfectly formed body, clad in the short hospital gown, gave no clue about her severe medical and cognitive condition. If spinal meningitis had been diagnosed sooner, the damage to her brain stem might have been avoided. Unlike my other students, Shell had been free from paralysis until she was four years old when she became a victim of someone’s mistake.

The nurse’s labored breathing indicated she was having trouble giving Shell the injection. She put the needle in Shell’s leg, but was unable to pierce the vein. After a long exhale, she swabbed Shell’s leg for yet another try in a different spot. Shell’s body jerked and the puncture missed the vein. I tried to distract my student with the toy duck, but her good eye glared at me.

I put the duck on the bed and leaned forward to observe the nurse’s fourth attempt to give Shell the shot. Her body contorted again in obvious pain. The nurse glanced up at me with a look of frustrated embarrassment and then bent down to find another part of Shell’s leg to pierce.

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When the nurse unsuccessfully jabbed Shell for the fifth time, the unusual contortion continued to occur. Through my clenched teeth, I said, "Please, that's enough. Give her a break for a while."

Surprisingly the nurse nodded, brushed the perspiration from her forehead, and left Shell's bedside with the filled vial in her hand. I pulled the sheet and light blanket over Shell's legs and torso and made quacking sounds while bouncing the yellow duck within her view. She stared off in the distance with her good eye. The other eye had rolled under her lid, invisible. I took a storybook from my bag and read aloud about a lost duck.

I had read the story many times. A part of my mind automatically read while another part dwelled on the severity of Shell's condition. A month ago, she caught a cold and soon it turned into pneumonia. She had to be hospitalized but day-by-day the infection became worse instead of better.

The same problem happened with fifteen-year-old Alicia who had not survived her final bouts with pneumonia. The lack of mobility caused her unexercised lungs to fill with fluid, and when an unbeatable bacterial infection ensued, it was the harbinger of death.

The smell of hospital antiseptic solutions brought me back to the present and I heard my own voice reading the words in the duck story. I paused and glanced at Shell who stared at me. The hidden eye had become visible and centered. Surprised, I dropped the unfinished book on the table nearby and touched her arm. "What is it, Shell?"

Her body jerked. I held her little hand and fought back my tears. I remembered what Patrice, her mother, had told me. When Shell used to play with her two older brothers, she led them around like a mother hen. Shell was the boss, a feisty one. An active preschooler who wanted to jump rope, ride a bike, and take ballet lessons, but her dreams had shattered with the fever's attack.

I met her focused eyes. "I know the treatments are painful, Shelly. I know you hate the shots and the morphine doesn't seem to work any more."

She maintained eye contact, the indicator that she was listening. "Shell, if all this is too painful for you and if it's time for you to go to heaven, your brothers will be fine. So will your mom and dad. Everyone loves you and always will, whether you are here with us or another place where you can be who you want to be."

Chills crept up my arms as both of Shell's eyes seemed to communicate with me. The nurse's reappearance interrupted our eye-to-eye connection. She proceeded to uncover Shell's leg for another round of piercing with the needle.

I squeezed Shell's hand, put the yellow duck in the crook of her arm, and kissed her cheek, "I love you, Shelly.

You will always be our beautiful girl." I walked to the end of the bed, turned to blow kisses, and waved good-bye.

The hidden monitor opened the double doors before I could press the buzzer. I searched for a tissue in my purse as I walked into the hall and then hurried down the two flights of stairs.

In my car, I called Patrice on my cell phone. I described the many attempted injections. "Have you seen her body contort?" I asked as I searched for more tissues in my purse.

After a pause on the other end, Patrice sighed. "Yes. She does the same thing when she's given the respiratory treatments only worse. It's so intense, I can barely stay in the room. Her little body wants to move away from the therapist, but it can't. I don't understand why the morphine doesn't soften the pain."

"Alicia reacted the same way, and with her sign language, she told her parents she wanted to stop all treatments even if it meant her death.

"Today, Shell seemed determined to communicate with me, even her hidden eye was focused and centered. She looked at me with both eyes. I told her you all would be okay if this pain and illness was too much for her." I paused but Patrice made no response.

"I think she understood what I said because she gave me a look as if to say, 'you better be right'."

"Sounds like her—something she'd say. I'll talk to Rick when he gets home and then we'll call our pastor. I can't make this decision alone. Rick said when it's time, it's up to me, but I can't do it by myself. Do you think it's time?"

"It's a difficult decision." I bit my lower lip. "How long could she live without the respiratory treatments and machine support?"

"The doctor didn't say exactly, maybe hours or days."

"Would it be painful?"

I could hear a constriction in Patrice's voice. "I don't know. And I wonder if she'd gasp for air without the machine. It might be scary for her."

"If you decide to let her go naturally and you want me to come, I will." With another tissue, I dabbed the tears flowing down my cheeks.

"Thank you. I don't know what to do. I don't want her to be in pain, but I'd miss her so much." Patrice was crying too.

It was hard to imagine how a mother could make that kind of a decision.

"I can't think straight right now. Thanks for calling. I've got to talk to Rick."

On the way home, I reminisced about my first meeting with Shell's parents and her older brothers four years ago. Rick, a loving father, worked two jobs so Patrice could stay home and care for Shell. The boys, then six and seven-years-old, were polite but rambunctious. They played in their fort



outside and ran into the house for supplies, mainly food to eat during their pretend adventures.

Shelly, pretty in her little shorts and butterfly-patterned top, lay in an in-door hammock. Patrice gently rocked her as she explained to me what had happened.

“When the fever started, I took her to the doctor every day. He kept saying she had the flu but I knew he was wrong. She was only four then. The third day, I shouted at the doctor. I was sure something horrible was happening to her. I insisted on tests. They finally agreed and then called to tell me that the tests showed positive for spinal meningitis. The worst of it was that by then it had attacked her brain stem and it was already too late to prevent the paralysis.”

The younger brother, Billy, ran in and stopped to listen to us talking about his sister, and said, “She can’t eat like we do. She has to have mushed up food and put it into a tube in her stomach.” Then he ran outside not waiting for a response.

They became like family to me. I treasured my friendship with Patrice; we confided with each other. But I had a feeling our relationship would not be the same without Shelly. The empty space would be too painful for both of us, just as it was for Alicia’s mother and me.

After the half-hour drive home from the hospital, I wasn’t hungry. I ate half an apple, then planned for my next day’s schedule and went to bed early. I tossed and turned until after midnight when I finally fell asleep.

The phone woke me before the sun rose. I fumbled for the light, turned it on, and searched the bedside table for my glasses. I put them on and glanced at the clock—three a.m. I waited for another ring, wondering if I had imagined it. When the phone sounded again, I grabbed for the receiver, but it slipped and fell to the floor. I snatched it up. “Hello?”

After a pause, I heard Patrice’s familiar voice. “The pastor came and the three of us stayed with her. It was peaceful. She wasn’t scared.”

I jumped out of bed and held the phone receiver with both hands trying to respond, but couldn’t. The click on the other end echoed in my heart. I lost Shell and I knew I lost the whole family as well.

I must have sobbed myself to sleep. When I awoke, sun steamed through the window and warmed my face. Church bells chimed eight times. I visualized Alicia and Shell laughing together and ringing those bells to wake me. I blew kisses to them.

I knew they always would be with me. 

Skin Color Matters

by Liv Haugland, *Long Beach*

I am Nordic. Oh, I tan easily enough. Through the summer, my skin turns a golden brown, deepening as the months go by—and the color lingers and lasts. I’m still brownish even at mid-winter. But no matter how you cut it, I am Nordic—so Nordic that no amount of tanning or cosmetic surgery could ever conceal that indisputable fact.

My inside though, is not so Nordic. I grew up in Taiwan, where the culture, weather, language, and rituals intertwined with my Nordic-ness and formed an odd hybrid of a person.

I took this person to L.A. and went about my business trying to adapt to yet another challenge: the American persona. But that is another story, not the episode I want to relate about when skin and culture collided.

It was just a simple trip to Ranch 99, a big Asian chain I frequent when I need a new supply of *dou ban jiang* for my fried rice or some lotus root for a salad. The market was busy. Probably a Sunday, for they had lots of samples. I shopped and sampled and finally lined up at the check-out. The young woman behind the counter seemed harried. She scooped up my bag of pork and scanned it.

“Great price on pork this week,” I said to her in Chinese.

“Yes,” she answered in Chinese.

“The long beans look quite fresh,” I continued, still speaking Chinese.

“We got them in this morning,” she replied, also in Chinese.

This exchange went on for the duration of my check-out. After scanning the last item, she finally looked up.

“It’s not possible!” she said—in Chinese.

“What?” I asked, in the same language.

She looked me in the eye. “You don’t speak Chinese.”

“What language are we conversing in?” I asked.

She just stared at me. Finally, she looked down. “This is not right,” she said, still in our mutual language. “Your skin color is not correct.”

Her arrogance made me chuckle, but before you reach any conclusions about my own innocence, let me relate another brief incident that occurred—in *China*.

I was on a riverboat cruise in Quilin, one of the most scenic spots on the face of this earth. Because I was not a resident, I was relegated to the tourist boat, one decorated to the hilt and filled with fellow travelers from around the world, all eager to enjoy in the breathtaking scenery—and believe me, we enjoyed!

I couldn’t help noticing a striking young woman in full Korean traditional dress being photographed in all her finery, by who? A gangly looking Scandinavian. Yes, Scandinavian! What was such a beautiful Korean doing with one of my pale-skinned, gawky countrymen?

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Oh yes, I categorized. I profiled, I judged, I pigeon-holed. And in the end, I got egg on my face—actually, more like three dozen eggs on my soul!

I, who considered myself worldly, having traveled more than most. I, who considered myself sensitive, having been labeled without consent or knowledge of background. I, the objective cultural-anthropology major, jumped to the conclusion that this was yet another case of a less-than-attractive Scandinavian man falling for a vulnerable Asian woman.

Oh the egg! The presumptions! I blush even now as I recall their story.

Turns out, she spoke not one word of Korean. No, no, she'd been adopted as a baby, raised in Norway—met and fallen in love with her husband—and actually had more claim to my heritage than I did!

He was the one who had suggested they use their wedding trip to tour Korea and explore her cultural heritage. They'd followed that with a trip to China to debrief and digest their feelings.

Total Lunar Eclipse

by Simona Carini, *Redwood Writers*

When risen, the full moon is not blood red, as advertised, but damask rose and blurred in the dusk sky polluted by street lamps and headlights. Sad, I drive back home. At night, a blade of light across our front yard signals Selene has changed back to white attire and whole round shape. I step outside and hope to see the moon above the trees. The spruce though, tall and thick, occlude the view. My eyes are set to shut their lids. I turn around to go inside. I stop breathing: the Big Dipper has landed on our roof, its seven stars button the inky sky, outline a ladle tilted just enough to shower stardust on our house.



So what do I *do* with this knowledge? What do *we* do?

When we meet people, we make three vast assumptions based on our first impressions: age, sex, and race. Sometimes we never examine our knee-jerk conclusions because we simply need to get on with our lives and retain a sense of order. But could we possibly stop for a while? Could *I* stop for just a moment, just to be aware of my ever-active brain and ask it to *slow down* before these assumptions take root as truths in my mind?

It may take many, many more eggs to make this happen, but perhaps my psyche will finally get it. Perhaps—if I can remember to take a deep breath when these automatic categorizations pop up, and then challenge and think a bit—I won't need to wipe off so many eggs in the future.

Malone

by Robert Poirier, *Mt. Diablo*

It was sunrise, near the end of his shift, and Oregon State Trooper Thomas Malone was heading north, back to the barn. The light drizzle had started an hour earlier, and the wipers were intermittently clearing the windshield. His 2013 dark blue Dodge Challenger cruiser seemed to know the way. Assigned to the Southern Command Center in Central Point, he patrolled the area from Central Point to the California border, and all the byroads in that 40-mile range.

Midway from Ashland to Medford, through the mist, he noticed a light blue, mid-90s Volvo sedan under a streetlight on the frontage road off to his right. It had not been there when he last passed through this section a few hours before.

Half the population of the Medford-Ashland corridor have Volvos, he thought, but something seemed off. *Oh hell*, he thought as he keyed the mic. *This is what they pay me for.*

“Dispatch, this is Adam Twelve. I’m taking the Phoenix North exit to check out a 12-35 on the frontage road.”

“Roger, Adam Twelve.” came the response.

“Description of the abandoned vehicle?”

“Light blue Volvo sedan with body damage driver’s side.”

“Roger, Adam Twelve.”

Per protocol he parked a car length behind the Volvo and relayed the plate information to dispatch. He was about to exit the cruiser when the radio came to life again.

“Adam Twelve, be advised this vehicle was reported carjacked at 1845 yesterday.”

“Roger,” Malone replied. “The rear driver’s-side tire is flat and shredded. It looks abandoned. I’ll check it out.”

He exited the cruiser, eyes more alert, released the holster strap on his Glock 22 department handgun, lifted the weapon out of its holster and then put it back in place. He approached the Volvo on the driver’s side.



“State Police,” he called out loudly. “Show me your hands.”

There was no answer. He looked inside and saw blood on the steering wheel and on the driver’s headrest.

Malone pressed the button on his shoulder mic. “Dispatch, this is Adam Twelve. I have blood inside the vehicle. Code Eight. Request backup.”

“Roger, Adam Twelve. Backup is 12 minutes out.”

Careful not to contaminate a possible crime scene, Malone knocked, then banged on the trunk door.

He opened the driver’s door and released the trunk door with the lever. He walked to the back of the car and fully opened the trunk.

“Holy crap,” he said.

“Dispatch, this is Adam Twelve. There’s a male body in the trunk, two bullet exit holes in the back torso. Better notify CID Major Crimes.”

“Roger, Adam Twelve. Backup is eight minutes out.”

When he bent over to check the victim’s pulse, he heard the crack of a rifle shot. The rear window exploded, spraying him with glass particles. Instinct took over. He pulled the Glock and scrambled around the Volvo, putting it between himself and the shooter.

“Dispatch, this is Adam Twelve. I’m taking rifle fire from the woods about a hundred yards above and to the right of the frontage road.”

“Roger, Adam Twelve. Backup is six minutes out.”

Malone wanted the AR-15 locked in the cruiser trunk but would have to settle for the Remington 870 shotgun in the front seat. He sprinted the 20 feet from the Volvo to the cruiser door. He felt a sharp tug in his side a step before reaching the safety of the cruiser. The impact of the round knocked him to the ground.

The entrance hole was just below the Kevlar vest. He felt for the exit wound. It was through and through. Blood was starting to soak the front and back of his light blue uniform shirt.

“Dispatch, Adam Twelve. 12-99. I’m hit in the side.”

“Roger, Adam Twelve. Backup is five minutes out.”

Malone heard a twig snap near the back of the cruiser. He crawled along the length of it and peered carefully around the trunk. He saw the shooter about 25 yards out heading slowly towards him. There was a medium-sized, gray and white Australian shepherd near his left side. The shooter’s AR-15 was at eye level and pointed at the rear of the cruiser.

Malone lurched forward and fired the Glock eight times, saving seven rounds in reserve. He saw the shooter go down on one knee, then rise and start firing back. The rounds

pinged off the cruiser. Malone rose again and fired the remaining seven shots. The shooter went down again.

Malone fell back against the cruiser. Realizing he was going into shock, he tried to get the backup magazine but couldn’t reach it. He watched the shooter get up, reach his hand around his back, then bring it forward and look at the blood.

The shooter walked to the back of the cruiser. Malone was in a sitting position, against the driver’s side rear wheel, with his hands on the ground beside him. The shooter kicked the empty Glock out of reach.

He looked down at him. “Ex-military?” he asked.

Malone nodded. “Marines. Fallujah.”

“Thought so. The way you ambushed the shots. I was Fifth Stryker Brigade, Second Infantry, Afghanistan. Medevac’d out after getting hit by an IED. Never been right in the head since. Sorry about the body. His name was Brady. He was a bad dude. Tried to make me do something I didn’t want to do.”

“You could get help,” Malone said.

“Nah. That second group hit me good. I’m kidney shot. Probably be dead in 45 minutes. I’ve lost everything. No place in the world for me now. I just wanted one more firefight before I checked out.”

He dropped a manila envelope next to Malone. “This is my identifying information. If you make it out alive, would appreciate you see that the police get this.”

They could hear the sirens.

The shooter moaned softly as he picked up the Glock. “Forty cal, right?”

Malone nodded.

“Where’s your spare magazine?”

“Belt behind my hip. Can’t reach it.”

“I’ll get it.” He moaned again as he lifted Malone by his utility belt, unsnapped the magazine holder, inserted the magazine into the Glock, and chambered a round.

“Here you go,” he said and handed Malone the Glock while pointing the rifle at him.

“Have to play this out,” the shooter continued as he walked backwards a few steps to the back of the cruiser. “I’m going to stand here. See if you can hit me before I shoot you. The dog’s name is Luther. Belonged to Brady. If you treat him right, he’ll be good to you. Goodbye, bro.”

The shooter raised his rifle. In one fluid movement Malone turned on his side, shifted his Glock towards the shooter, and shot him three times. The shooter dropped to his knees, looked at Malone, and toppled over. The dog



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nuzzled the shooter's face, made a low cry, then padded over and stretched out next to Malone.

The first backup cruiser arrived a minute later. The trooper exited his vehicle with his pistol pointed at the downed shooter. He quickly checked for a pulse. "Shooter's dead."

He removed the first-aid kit from his cruiser, put pads on Malone's front and back wounds, and wrapped the pads with tape. He then put Malone on his stomach, and pressed down hard on the exit wound to slow the bleeding.

"Through and through," he told Malone. "You should be fine."

He keyed his shoulder mic. "This is Adam Ten. We have one dead shooter and need an ambulance for Malone."

"Roger Adam 10. I've already called for an ambulance. ETA is six minutes."

The second backup cruiser arrived two minutes later. The trooper secured the scene and picked up the AR-15. "It's empty," he said.

Malone put his hand on the dog's neck and wept.

Jordan's Bull

by James Dorsey, *Central Coast Writers*

Hippopotamuses surfaced with wiggling ears as the boatman poled our *dhow* past the submerged herd. We were both tense, expecting a bluff charge, while only feet away white pelicans with long golden beaks floated in the shallows, casually scooping minnows in their great fleshy pouches. On the opposite shore, the grass huts of the Fulani glowed like fiery tumbleweeds in the hazy sunrise as bare-breasted women pounded their dirty wash on river rocks.

At this bend of Mali's Niger River, the lethargic water resembles dark roasted coffee as it slowly meanders on towards the fabled city of Timbuktu. I was in old spear and loin cloth Africa to chase the end of an era with my camera.

The Fulani, hereditary nomads of North Africa, had driven over 1,000 head of their cattle onto a small island to graze for a few days and as is their custom, they had surrounded them with their traditional grass huts. Fulani move about like the wind; they and those like them are vanishing from the African continent.

My *dhow* was piled with bunches of bananas, gifts of a delicacy hard to come by in such a remote place. As I knew from experience, when they saw me coming the village children would swarm me on the beach, looking for treats.

While passing out the fruit, I noticed one little boy sitting by himself, scooping mud from the river. He was fashioning curious animals out of the mud and laying them on a rock in the sand to bake in the sun. They struck me as wonderfully realistic from the hands of one so young. He worked with an intense concentration and the sureness of an instinctive artist that drew me to him. When I approached to tell him how much I liked his animals, he did not speak or acknowledge me in any way so I dropped off a banana, left him to his work, and walked up the bank to the village.

There, in front of a grass hut, I was warmly greeted by the village head man named Able who, noting my interest in

the boy, told me his name was Jordan. "Like the river in the Bible," he said. Able took both my hands in his and held my gaze as if searching for something in my face or demeanor until he finally added as a matter of fact, "The boy does not speak. He is touched by God." He then asked me to sit with him and take tea.

While western medicine has unpronounceable names and diagnoses for various mental states, it has been my experience that in many remote cultures, people like Jordan are often grouped under the title of "Touched by God." In my own country, such a child would probably be on a regimen of medications, therapy, or even confined to a "facility" to alter his behavior, but in rural Africa, people like Jordan are believed to exist on an alternate plane and are considered a liaison to the spirit world. Their condition is accepted as a gift to the village and they are often the people who become shamans or healers, commanding both power and respect. In rural Africa there is no mental illness, only spirits, both evil and good.

I drank the obligatory welcome of tea and made small talk as custom demanded, but could not take my eyes off the young boy at the water's edge. I asked Able if God ever spoke to Jordan or through him and his answer was only an enigmatic smile as he topped off my teacup. I knew that any further questions could only result in a conversation beyond my comprehension because to this man the physical and spirit worlds are intermingled and I am still a long way from being able to claim the same.

With Able's blessing I wandered into the vast cattle herd to take my photos while clouds of grasshoppers fled my shadow. Men filled calabash gourds with the morning milk, then handed them off to young boys who carried the nectar back to the village. The women were busy ferrying goatskin bags of water to the herders. The air was full of bees swollen with pollen, and the panoramic sky emphasized the vastness of the African plain. It was a traveler's day when the voices of nature became an aria and the only mechanical sound was that of my shutter capturing limitless beauty. Wood fire smoke mingled with the stench of a thousand feral longhorns when I felt a slight tug on my pants leg. I looked down just as Jordan slipped his hand into mine. I

had not heard him coming, and he had not said a word. Together we stood surrounded by baying cattle, taking in the moment. He was eating the banana.

I began to walk slowly and Jordan kept pace, his hand swallowed by my own. As we passed them, people stopped working and stood at an informal attention. I thought at first that they were simply offering a respectful welcome to a visitor but as we continued, I realized that it had nothing to do with me. They had stopped their work to acknowledge Jordan as he passed by, but it was more than that.

Travelers are often captured by a vortex beyond their comprehension. Remote journeys can sometimes be disorienting to the point of the wanderer asking themselves, "What just happened?" For many, attaining such a moment is the very reason for traveling. My reasons are built on a history of such events that always seem to find me while in Africa. It is a land steeped in animism and marinated in voodoo; a land of myth, legend, and ceremony where there is no horizon between the material and spiritual worlds and, by keeping an open mind, I have often found myself treading an edge between the two.

At first the sound was almost imperceptible from the constant breeze pushed along by the river, but it grew in intensity and volume until I could discern a harmonious chant. It was a traditional chant, the likes of which I have heard countless times in Africa, and yet it was its own. Rather than a narration followed by a chorus it was a constant mantra of the entire village emanating from their souls more than their lungs. It was a sound as old as the earth, a sound that held both agony and ecstasy. It was a sound I felt as much as heard. We were surrounded by the entire village, on their feet, chanting.

It was melodious and calming while suggesting an underlying current of power that enveloped me like a net. I floated in the moment, an organic piece of ancient Africa swept along in its mystery and ceremony. I was no longer a visitor but an integral part of the village, and I took in a panorama of the entire scene, hundreds of heads and shoulders interspersed in the vast herd, all turned inwards towards Jordan who still held my hand. His head was now tilted skyward, his eyes were closed, and he showed a tiny smile as he wiped banana from his chin.

Was this happening because the village holy man had left his trance to walk among them, or was I, this rare visitor, just an excuse for a spontaneous celebration? I had no idea what was taking place, and I really did not care; I only wanted the moment to continue. Jordan was in another place, or perhaps he had summoned another place to our here and now. Something inside at that moment told me he was indeed, touched by God. Whatever was happening was African, and could never be understood by a non-African, and that was enough for me to know. I just let the chant envelope me.

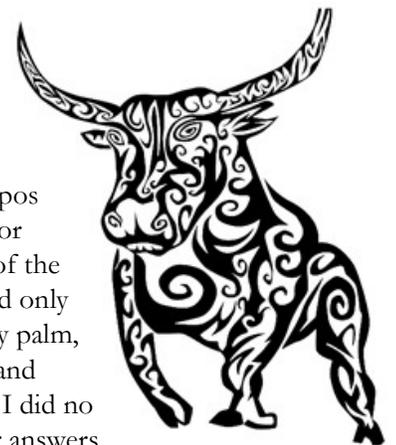
Jordan began to walk, this time leading me by the hand. The people parted as we passed them but continued their grand chorus. Time had slowed, sound intensified, colors glowed with brilliance, and I held the most sublime sense of belonging that has eluded me most times since. I remember herons flying overhead and egrets by the waterside and thinking how the emerald body of a dead cicada was the most brilliant green I had ever seen. The world had become intense. I was in my body but felt out of it, being carried along by the wonderful melody. Hours may have passed, but I am sure it was only minutes before I found myself back at Able's hut.

Jordan let go of my hand and returned to the riverside and his clay animals without ever having said a word. I do not remember the chanting coming to an end but suddenly all I heard was silence and when I looked about, people were returning to work tending the cattle. I felt elated yet unsure, as if exiting a dream. Able's face carried a knowing smile that made me wonder if other visitors had had such a day as mine.

It was late afternoon and the golden sky was turning crimson as the African sun submerged into the black water. People became silhouettes as Able walked me to the river's edge where the boatman waited for my return. We exchanged no words because none were sufficient. Our mutual silence was enough validation that something extraordinary had taken place. As I walked past Jordan he rose and pressed something into my hand, folding my fingers around it with great solemnity. He did not speak and made no eye contact. He simply returned to his place by the water and his clay animals. His gift was small, hard, and cool in my hand and I held it there, not looking at it until we reached the center of the river. It was a tiny clay bull, just like those that had surrounded us all day, Paleolithic in simplicity, pregnant with symbolism.

I did not watch for hippos during our return crossing or notice the ethereal beauty of the West African sunset. I could only stare at the tiny figure in my palm, running my fingers over it and reliving the day in my soul. I did no analysis, nor did I yearn for answers.

In truth, I often prefer the what-if to what is, and this was one of those times. I wanted only the day as it was, now a memory, but one that I could recall whenever I wished by the tiny clay bull I now held in my hand. Since that day Jordan's bull has become both talisman and artifact, and perhaps, even a relic.



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Later, at a café in Timbuktu I met two people who had both preceded me to the island. Both had taken notice of the silent boy by the water. They both told me he had not reacted to them in any way and the people had been friendly but had not sung or chanted. I could drive myself crazy with speculation of “Why me?” so I chose to go with “Why not me?”

Whether Jordan was “Touched by God” or simply a mute little boy, he held great face among his people and for his own reasons, took me into an unexplainable afternoon that has affected and elevated my life in the years that followed.

When Voices Sang

by Marina Romani, *Central Coast Writers*

And then the voices
intertwined to sing for him, my father,
who used to say a Russian funeral
will always break your heart.

I knew what he meant—
I’d heard the mournful melodies
and harmonies of grief,
the chants of graveside weeping,
the prayers for memory eternal.

I knew all that,
been to enough by then,
knew to stand grim
as smoke of incense drifted
upwards with the music,
the priests intoning ancient words,
the choir chanting in response.

But when I heard the voices
intertwine to sing those melodies for him
I felt the tears, so long held back, release at last
as smoke of incense drifted past.

And still I wondered
if he heard the voices
twining in those melodies for him,
and what he felt and thought
because I could not comprehend
that he could not. 

I am sure the world is full of Jordans, mostly overlooked or even ignored, walking among us, visible only to those with open minds and hearts. Maybe all it takes to have the kind of day a traveler prays for is to give a boy a banana. 

Unlike the Thing Itself

by Mark Meierding, *Redwood Writers*

I am sorry I more love
the illusion of a thing
than the thing itself...
ripples that scratch a tree-streaked stream,
a wife’s washed lips on the mirror’s face,
the revolutionary spirals of a steel bike rack,
a still life of yellow ginkgo leaves
nested in the shallow grave of a wet awning.

I prefer these representations,
viewed within their frames,
like those flip-books of minutely shifted photographs
that, when aptly advanced, mimic
genuine motion.

I am not proud of favoring
these magic acts that seduce
with their nuanced devices
and metaphoric spheres. Yet
the case remains that of itself,
an actual thing promises me
no moment of revelation. 

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Voices from the Ashes

The Doe

by Marlene Augstine-Gardini,
Redwood Writers

For more than a week, the wildfires burned. The air now hung in layers of soot and ash and particles of people's lives. A charred family photo here, a blackened edge of a utility bill there.

Emma stepped out of the house and glanced at the struggling sunrise. The bruised sun was smeared in the gray sky. Even so, her focus was on the form across the field. It was never a good day for a burial, she thought. But the doe was dead. It had died a long, heat-searing week ago.

Ever since the fires broke out, Emma had felt helpless and scared. At least burying the doe was something she could do. A small act she had control over in all the chaos.

She had first come across the doe propped up against the fence and resting under a tree in the shade of 90-degree heat. The dogs had been barking, and Emma went to reel them in.

She and the doe startled each other. Emma spoke softly and slowly backed away. She hoped the doe wouldn't panic, but the animal rose as if to flee. Exhaustion overcame fear, and the doe slumped down against the chain link fence. White foam circled her mouth. Pieces of her fur had burned away giving her the look of an old, moth-chewed stole. Emma wanted to reach out to comfort her but knew it would only cause more fear and pain.

The doe had made it out of the fires, but the fires had stayed with her. Trying to outrun this twist in nature that was destroying her world, she had torn through

flaming branches and scorched her lungs with waves of burning leaves.

Emma had left her to make some calls for help.

"We're so sorry, but no one is available for this right now. We're moving animals out of the fires."

"But ... you don't understand. I can't reach her. She's so scared. And she's ... she's in pain. She's hurt. Please! I don't know what to do!"

"Ma'am, all we can suggest is you give her some water. If she's still alive, call us tomorrow. We'll see what we can do. But most likely, we'd send someone out to destroy her. I'm sorry. I'm afraid all you can do is let nature take its course. I'm so sorry"

"No one will help," Emma thought. "No one can."

The dull ache in the pit of her stomach traveled through her body. The discovery of the doe had emptied the last ounce of her strength in grasping the reality of what was happening. Her world was being erased. She felt hollow as she watched the constant images on the TV of neighborhoods she knew being

continued

Camp Fire

by Gloria Conly, *North State Writers*

Blackness, deep, dense,
sun a dim orange glow,
losing its battle
with an angry earth.
Danger, flee, lungs seared
drawing in the thick air.
Trees lose their fight for life,
exploding like land mines,
from heat too hot to contain.
Our cars can't carry us,
our technologies can't save us.
We flee like the deer, running.

continued

transformed. Black sticks had once been trees. Melted mailboxes lay in front of piles of embers that were once her friends' homes.

The changing colors of the landscape numbed her. Once things lush and green were now black and dead. She shook her head to try to dislodge the images and went back outside.

Emma filled a bucket of water and lowered it slowly over the fence near, but not too near, the doe. But the doe panicked, this time gathering enough energy to run across the field to lean, spent, against the chicken coop.

Emma watched the doe, and a heavy weight of resignation replaced her emptiness. There was nothing she could do. For the doe. For the burning houses. For the charred land. In trying to help, she had frightened the doe out of the only patch of shade in the field.

The doe had run in pain and fear to get to this place—away from the heat of hell.

And now, Emma thought I've even taken away even that bit of comfort.

She went back inside and turned off the TV, letting the sadness fill her. It had always been easy for her to cry in sorrow or with joy. But even her tears had dried up in the heat. Now there was nothing to do but wait.

With a cardboard-box coffin dangling from her hand, she made her way across the field, the dry grass crunching under her shoes like knuckles cracking. The carcass was still half-standing against the chicken coop, the bones as white as a tombstone angel.

The turkey vultures made wistful passes overhead, again and again, but the skeleton had been scrubbed clean. Jigsaw-like pieces were scattered about. Emma slowly gathered what had not been carried away by feral cats or the crows and hawks. Placing the bones in the box, she marveled at how each tiny piece had once fit together to form a creature that could leap over a fence with the fluidity of water over river stones.

She dug a hole, hacking away at the drought-hardened dirt, each shovelful devoid of the damp, rich, ripe-smelling earth that worms love to live in.

She thought about this time last year—working in the garden. An abundance of vegetables and lush flowers. And now, the earth was dry and dead in one long angry blast.

As the hole grew, the enormity of the destruction of lives and land blew through her like a blowtorch.

She tried to catch her breath as she set the box in place and covered it with soil. Using her hands instead of the shovel, she felt lightened with each handful of dirt that shifted through her fingers. "Rain," she thought. "It sounds like rain."

She had almost forgotten that sound! The stiff soil and pebbles hitting the cardboard pattered like rain. It was the first time she had smiled in a long while.

It was as if the simple burial of this small creature could be the final, cleansing act in this tragedy.

The carcass, like the shell of a burned-out house, once framed life. Now, it was time to bury and move on.

Emma realized that the doe had waited for death to envelope her. No matter how far or how fast she ran or how safe she thought she was, Nature would ultimately take its course. Fires, storms, floods—all of these would change the face of the land and the creatures there. Nature would win in the end.

She knew her world had changed and would change again. It would rain, and things would grow.

A doe would be born, and it would die. And she would have to go on, letting Nature take its course. She patted the dirt over the small grave, hesitated, then turned to leave—barely missing the sprout of green pushing its way through the soil.



California Was on Fire and Paradise Is Lost

by Nanci Lee Woody, *Sacramento & SF Peninsula*

The Idyllic town in the foothills watched
a Hell fire roar through its thirsty woods,
tear through canyons, leap streams, fiendish
flames fueled by angry winds, hungry dry winds
opening gates of Hell in Paradise.

Fiery embers rained down onto the town
brittle black trees dropped their ashy branches
on smoldering smoking rooftops, spreading
fire inside, merciless were the flames
people panicked, grabbed pets, rescued photos.

They piled into pickups, burning burning
burning lungs burning eyes burning houses
old narrow roads jammed with abandoned cars.
Run! Run from Hell's own fire. Escape! Escape
a dungeon horrible, on all sides round.

Fast-moving frightful flames that might engulf
them as they ran, dragging along children
dragging along the sick, the elderly.
Terror stricken falling wailing hot hot
running running *as one great Furnace flam'd.*

Many thousands escaped old Satan's clutch.
For many more, bones and ashes smoldered.
Brave firefighters, rescue dogs, searched searched
in the rubble while the still living faced
another Hellish disaster — despair.

Sick with worry their loved ones won't be found
sick from polluted air, hungry, thirsty.
These poor people paid the terrible price
for the sins of us all against the earth.
Their prayed-for rain coming coming too late.

Too late it is to curse the drought, too late
to curse your God. Hold back your tears, your thoughts
and prayers. Resolve to better stewards be.
On earth, what we have sown we now have wrought.
California was on fire and Paradise is Lost.

Italics are lines from John Milton's "Paradise Lost"

My Son with Autism Evacuates

by Joan Goodreau, *North State Writers*

Ian rips off his smoke mask and
swings back and forth back and forth back and forth.
"Put your mask on," his sister says
commanding him like she did when they were little.

We all wear them so alien air won't choke us
and together trudge the crowded parking lot.

Ian pushes a shopping cart along with
other shuffling evacuees who
plod with eyes straight ahead to
pick whatever's left over.

He swings from side to side in a
bed not his and just before
he goes to sleep
sees the van that picks him up
every every every day

to walk the paths of Bille Park
collect for recycling
hang out with friends
read in library books
words he cannot speak.

Instead he wakes to an inferno
charred eclipse of the sun.

But if he repeats repeats repeats
his swaying long enough
maybe his world will reappear
rise through Ponderosa pines
just like before.

The Locked Door

by Anita Tosh, Fremont Area Writers

My sister and I had great fun on the mountain curves. We were sitting in the backseat of the old 1951 Ford and slid from Betsy's door to my door with each curve. Mom and Dad sang and laughed as we drove along. It's no wonder we were all happy; this was our first family vacation. My Aunt Ethel had let us use her mountain cabin for a week. It was in a place called Fiddletown. Just the name made me laugh.

As we headed deeper into the mountains, the trees became thicker and taller until it looked like monster Christmas trees on either side of the road. We turned off the highway onto a gravel road. While Mom directed Dad from the map she was holding, Betsy and I stuck our heads out the back windows trying to see the cabin.

"It looks like the third street on the left." We drove slowly, and then, "There it is. See the wooden sign?"

The next turn was a dirt road, and we slowed even more. In some places the weeds had sprouted in the road. I didn't see any other houses now. Aunt Ethel had not been up here in a few years, and it showed.

Dad pulled up to a modest, two-story cabin. "We're here!" he cheerfully announced, and we all piled out to stretch and look around.

"Let's bring in our things," Mom encouraged.

"I want to know which bedroom is mine," I answered.

"We'll have a look around," Mom replied.

I watched Mom carry a box of groceries into the cabin. Dad carried luggage. Betsy and I each had our own bag.

I didn't look anything like my mom. Her platinum-blond hair was combed into an attractive French bun. My limp brown hair was thin and stringy. The only good thing about my hair was that it was easy to comb, being so straight any knots just fell out. My older sister got the beautiful blonde hair and the blue eyes. My eyes were brown, like Dad's.

The front door opened into a cozy living / dining room area next to an open kitchen. A fireplace at the far wall would not be needed in this heat, but it looked neat anyway. A short hall snuggled under the stairway to the right. It held three doors close together, a bathroom, and two bedrooms. Only the bathroom had a real door on it. The bedrooms had curtains for an illusion of privacy.

Dad put their luggage down in the room with a full bed. Betsy and I went into the room containing two twin beds.

"Which bed do you want?" I asked.

Betsy eyed the open closet and chose the bed the farthest away. She was four years older than me, but she had this thing about closets. At home, the closet door had to be

shut before she would go to sleep. This closet didn't have a door, and I hoped she would be okay with that.

On the right-hand side of the living room, a wooden stairway hugged the wall and terminated at a small loft that opened out to our left. As we neared the top we could see extra beds, a small folding table with chairs and, on the far wall, a cabinet. Betsy went straight to the cabinet and found it was full of board games. I looked around from the top of the stairs and noticed a door to my right. I tried to open the door, but I could not, so I called for my sister.

"Betsy, can you get this door open?"

"Just a minute. Did you see this? Look, they have Monopoly!"

"Yeah, how about that," was my glib reply, knowing she would wipe me out when we played. "Can you give me a hand with this door? I want to see what's in here."

"Oh, okay." She reluctantly tore herself away from the games and sauntered over. She grasped the knob but it would not turn. She tried to push the door, but it firmly resisted.

"Mom!" She yelled. "Hey, Mom, do you have the keys? There's a locked door up here."

Mom started up the stairs. "What are you talking about?"

"This door is locked. Do you have the key?"

"Let me check." She tried the door, called for Dad.

He tried all the keys, then shrugged and smiled. "I guess we'll have to have a good time without this room. Think we can do that?"

We did do that. We were having such a great time; we didn't spare a thought for the locked door until much later.

Dad made his famous spaghetti sauce, Mom made a fabulous salad, and we all played Monopoly until the wee hours.

It seemed to take a long time in between turns and my thoughts wandered. As I daydreamed, Betsy's voice would bring me back to the present with a sing-song "Guess whose turn it is?" My eyes would then focus, but it was too late. Betsy got Park Place and Dad had Boardwalk so they were almost even until Dad decided to go to bed.

I was steadily losing interest as my holdings dwindled. My daydreaming continued. Again I heard Betsy's sing-song voice saying, "Guess whose turn it is?"

This brought me back to my miserable few dollars. I sighed. "Can I go to bed? I'm getting tired."

"You can't just quit because you're losing." Then her eyes moved to my one remaining card. "But if you're going, I want Marvin Gardens."

It was all I had left so I handed it to her and got up from the table. As I started for the bedroom I heard Mom say, "I guess we should call it a night, Betsy. Looks like you win."

In my mind I heard Tommy Smothers saying, "Mom always liked you best!" I shook the thought from my mind and went to our bedroom.

As I pulled back the curtain I was surprised at the way the moonlight transformed the room. I was glad I had a few minutes to enjoy it all to myself. I went to the window before changing for bed. The whole landscape was enchanted.

Betsy came in trumpeting, "Hey loser, you still awake?" This kind of broke the spell. She hadn't noticed the beauty of the night.

"Look," I said, pointing out the window. She quieted and came to look. Moonbeams spilled over the fir trees and the sky was bursting with stars. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. We both sighed at the same time and this made us giggle. We changed into our nightgowns, still giggling.

Then we heard Mom say, "Time to go to sleep, girls."

After a few more reminders we all settled down and the house was quiet. I was about to drift off when I heard footsteps going up the stairs. I could still see Betsy in the moonlight, so it must be Mom or Dad.

The next thing I knew it was morning. Sunlight illuminated the room and I could smell breakfast. I jumped out of bed and in two or three quick steps, I was in the kitchen.

Mom had made biscuits and gravy. As she put the food on the table, she asked, "One thing I want to know is, who went back upstairs last night?"

"I thought it was you," I gasped. We all looked at each other, and then we started for the stairs.

"Now, now, now," my dad began, "whatever it was can wait till after breakfast."

We weren't so sure. As we hesitated, Dad acquiesced. "Oh, all right!" He threw his napkin on the table and got up. "What do you expect to see up there anyway?"

We shrugged. "I don't know, I just want to look," Betsy replied.

"Me too," I added.

The four of us carefully made our way up the stairs. The wooden floor was dusty, and close to the door, we saw a footprint of someone who was barefoot. Our own footprints were around the door as well, so it wasn't a complete footprint. The front of the foot with the toes was clear in one spot. A heel mark was visible just before the locked door, as if someone had stepped through it. Mom was at the head of the line and gasped at the sight. She tried to get us away, but it was too late. We had all seen it.

"Creepy." Betsy shivered and hurried back down the stairs.

"I'm with you," chimed in Mom.

"Me too," I squeaked as I followed them down the stairs.

"You just had to go and see," Dad scolded. "Now can we have some breakfast?"

The days flew by. We went to the lake every day. We swam, got sunburned, and went fishing. The evenings were filled with playing games from the closet. All too soon it was time to go home, and we had not been revisited by the footsteps. What a relief.

When we arrived home, sad news awaited us. Aunt Ethel had passed away during our vacation. Another trip was immediately planned to go to Fairfield, help sort things out, and attend the funeral. Aunt Ethel had prepared envelopes for all of the family. Each envelope had a special message from her along with a description of what she bequeathed to them in her will. We could hardly believe it when Dad started to cry as he read his letter. He hugged us tight as he rasped out, "She left us the cabin." It took almost a year before Mom and Dad received all the paperwork and things related to the cabin. No one said it, but we all noticed there were no other keys.

When we got home, Dad announced we could get a puppy. With squeals of delight the four of us piled into the old Ford and made the long ride on the Monterey highway. There was a chain link fence around the house with colorful doggie cutouts here and there for decoration.

We were in luck. A litter of Schnoodles was just the right age for purchase. The brown one had so much personality; we all fell in love with him. His ears stood up and turned down at the tips. His jaunty step easily won our hearts.

Barney loved it at the cabin.



"We'll have to hire a locksmith one of these days," Dad reckoned, but "one of these days" just never seemed to come around.

Years went by with summers spent at the cabin. Betsy married when I was sixteen, and two years later I was engaged. Mom and I were sewing the dresses and busy with all the plans. This year's trip, it was just me and Barney with my parents at the cabin.

I cuddled with Barney while I dreamt of my future with Tebo, pronounced Tee-bow. I was one of the few people who knew his real name was Theobald. He knew my real name, too. I was christened Ethel May, after my aunt but everyone called me Mimi.

We had brought our sewing machines and continued our work on the bridesmaid's dresses. We had also brought a large piece of material to sew into a covering for the locked

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door. It fit just right and we were pleased with our handiwork.

Our last day there continued busy with sewing, and by evening fatigue overtook me. I lay down on the couch and read for a while. I was about to drop off to sleep when I heard footsteps on the stairway. The cloth we had hung that day in front of the locked door billowed out from the wall as if in a breeze, then stopped suddenly. The hair stood up on my arms and I rubbed them, though the room was quite warm.

One day not long after our return from the cabin, Barney came dragging in and puked on the floor. He became more and more listless and would not eat. The vet could do nothing. I held him, crying and praying for God to heal him. But God had other plans, and about a week later, he died. Tebo was sweet and promised that we would get another pet as soon as we could, but I didn't want another pet. I wanted Barney.

Tebo and I went to the cabin for our honeymoon. I showed Tebo around and as we climbed the stairs I told him about the locked door. When I reached the landing I froze, staring at the floor. There were paw prints on the dusty floor leading directly to the locked door. I felt rather faint as I hurried down the stairs to the sofa and sat down.

"I'm getting a really bizarre idea right now," I said to Tebo.

Changing the subject, Tebo asked, "How about we go into town for some dinner? I'll sweep upstairs while you get your coat. You'll feel better once we get back and I'll start a fire. Sound good?"

I nodded and went to get my coat. My shaky hands had trouble putting it on, but I made it just as Tebo came down the stairs with the broom. He stowed the broom, grabbed his coat and my arm and said, "That's my girl, come on!"

There have been many trips to the cabin through the years. Tebo and I brought our children often. Now they bring their children. The locked door now has book shelves in front of it, but every now and then we still heard footsteps going up the stairs.

This year I am going alone to the cabin. I miss Tebo terribly. He's been gone only a month. His heart attack was sudden, but death is always sudden, even when expected. I'm thinking back to that first trip with my sister and me in the backseat. Then I think of coming here as a young bride and I smile. What a long time ago. How quickly it passes.

I turn off the highway, and the road is now paved all the way to the cabin. That upstairs area doesn't look like there is room for anything at all beyond the locked door. I sigh, grab my small bag, and head inside.

The familiar sights are comforting. I talk to Jesus as I walk from room to room, thanking Him for His many blessings throughout my life. I think of all the loved ones who shared good times here; so many are gone now: Mom and Dad, Betsy, and now Tebo. A tear warms my cheek, I have one sharp intake of breath, and then I mount the stairs. The door is open! I hear Barney barking, his little head peeks through the doorway. I bend down to greet him. When I look up I see Tebo, young and strong again. I hear a familiar sing-song voice saying, "Guess whose turn it is?"

Fry Baby

by Art Carey, Fremont Area Writers

The clock on the mantle chimed as the hands registered 6:00 a.m. The golden Lab sleeping on a throw rug by the fireplace raised its head and snuffled softly.

Janie stirred on the couch and half-opened her eyes. "Shush, Rufus," she mumbled. "Go back to sleep."

The dog wagged its tail.

Grudgingly, Janie swung her feet to the floor and stretched. This was her last night tossing on the bumpy leather couch. All couches are uncomfortable for sleeping overnight, she decided. *Too soft, too hard, too ... something or other.* And it wasn't her couch, or her house, and Rufus wasn't her dog. Janie was homeless, and her house-and dog-sitting gig was ending. The home's elderly owners were due back from their 14-day Mediterranean cruise that afternoon.

She began pawing through her backpack and pulled out t-shirt, jeans and sweater. Slipping into the guest bath, she scrubbed up, taking care to wipe off the sink. After running a comb through short, brown hair, she examined herself in the mirror. Puffy green eyes stared back through round glasses with plastic frames. Light glinted off a small piece of tape on a hinge.

Still yawning, she walked into the kitchen, dog at her heels, and opened the refrigerator. She drained the O.J. container she'd brought and popped the last two pieces of bread in the toaster. The dog waited patiently as she refilled its water dish, ladled out some dry food into a bowl, and carried the dishes out to the patio.

"Come on, Ruf," she said.

Janie collected the blankets on the couch and returned them to the closet in the master bedroom. She never slept in the beds. Too personal. She pulled out her cell phone to check the bus schedule again. For most teenagers, a cell phone was a convenience; for her, it was a survival tool. She ordered her life with it. Minutes later, bus pass in hand, Janie

was out the door. She hid the house key in a flowerpot overflowing with red geraniums.

After arriving at John C. Fremont High School, Janie hurried to her homeroom so she could begin lining up a place to crash that night. She had English at 8:15 a.m. She'd be late with a paper on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, but at least she'd finished the reading after work at Boony Burgers. Gym followed at 9:15, chemistry at 10:15, and history, her favorite class, at 11:15.

Lunchtime arrived. Students jammed the cafeteria. Janie got milk and a salad and spied her friend Jake. She plunked down in a chair he had saved for her.

Like Janie, Jake was a senior and honor student. He played trumpet in the school band and was her only male friend. She had no time for guys.

"Want some of my fries?" He dangled one in the air temptingly.

Janie recoiled. "Yuck! I smell that stuff three hours a day, five days a week. I can't get the odor of grease out of my hair."

She looked at him suspiciously and leaned forward. "Can you smell anything?"

He flushed. "No."

"Honest?"

He hesitated. "Well ... maybe a little."

She sighed. "Curse of the fry babies."

He looked puzzled.

"That's what kids who work fast food get called behind their backs."

"That's hardcore!" he said, shaking his head.

"The gunk settles into the fibers of our uniforms and then into the skin itself," Janie continued. "It's like an invasion by microscopic aliens."

She shrugged. "People look at you differently if you stick out. Like it's a club and you don't belong. They don't intend to be mean."

He slathered another fry in ketchup and dowsed it with salt.

"What's with you?" Janie asked.

"The usual. I aced my biology test and got a D in trigonometry."

She nodded. "Trig's tough."

He brightened. "Band concert's this Saturday. I've got a solo. Bring your parents."

Janie took a sip of milk. "Can't. Out of town. I told you that."

"That's what you always say. You ..."

"Stop fishing, okay! I'll tell you what the deal is, but if you breathe a word I'll take that horn and put a dent in your skull."

Her eyes flashed a warning.

"My mom lost her job and moved to Nevada to look for another one," she said in a low voice. "She changed her

cell number and she doesn't call. Then the rent ran out. I had to move out."

"Your dad?"

"What's that?" she said matter-of-factly.

Jake gave a low whistle. "Wow! Where are you staying?"

"Around."

"Bummer ... Man, that's a bummer."

"It is what it is." She liked that phrase. It summed up recognition of life's unfairness without excuse or apology.

"How do you get away with it? Doesn't the school send mail home?"

"I cut a deal with the woman who moved into our old apartment. I baby-sit for her once a month. She holds the mail for my mom. I answer it when I have to. Most you can toss."

Jake blinked. "You sign report cards, too?"

"Why not?" she said. "I get good grades. Besides, who's to know?"

He looked at her admiringly. "You rock, J!"

The bell rang. She rose and pointed a threatening finger at him. "Not a word to anyone or they'll dump me in foster care. I'd lose my job and my freedom! I'll be 18 this summer and then no one can tell me what to do."

He nodded. "Okay ... okay."

Between math class and study hall, Janie whipped out her datebook to check the friends who let her sleep over. She rotated names on the list. Going to a shelter wasn't an option. She had stayed in one once, but the snoring and smell got to her, and people asked too many questions.

She spent most evenings at the public library, which didn't close until 9:00, or at the home of a friend. She had scored a few nights lately with Mary Buschetti, her best friend. But Mr. Buschetti had frowned when she explained—again—that her mother was out of town and she was afraid to sleep alone in the apartment. Even the best excuses wear thin over time.

"Yo! Lois Lane!"

She turned to see Andy Nguyen, a junior and editor of the school paper, *The Talisman*.

"My star reporter! What have you got for me? The next edition is out in three days!"

"Just an early story on the prom, Superman," Janie said. "I talked to Mrs. Yarosky, the adviser. She hinted the chaperones would be coming down hard on drinking this year."

He grinned. "Have a blast. I have to wait a year."

She shook her head. "No prom for me. My parents are dragging me out of town to a family reunion."

"Whoa, that's a downer," he said. "Hey, gotta bounce. See you in J-lab tomorrow."

"Don't forget your cape," she replied. Janie's shoulders slumped. A boy in her history class had invited her to the

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prom, but she had turned down the invitation with the same lie. Proms in California were a big deal—a big expensive deal. They required a fancy dress, shoes, hair styling and parties. No money for that.

Waiting for a bus to take her to work, Janie checked her cell phone. There were no messages for Homebodies, Inc. She ran an Internet blurb promoting her house-sitting service: *Leaving town? Need someone to water the plants, feed the cat and keep the lights on at night? Homebodies, Inc., will do it all at reasonable rates. References available.* Most of her jobs house-sitting came from the ad and word of mouth.

Where could she crash tonight? With Melanie? She hadn't leaned on her for a while. No. Melanie's brother was staying over. Rosa? Rosa might work, but she'd been there three weeks ago. Karla! She'd call Karla! Karla was overweight, lacked a boyfriend, and had her own apartment. When Janie stayed with her, she brought leftover food from Boony Burgers. Karla got off on Boony Biggies. Janie's fingers flicked over the screen.

Boony Burgers was almost deserted when she arrived. The day shift manager, Mr. Sampson, waved her over.

"Miguel is late again," he said. "Also, Irma has a bad cold. I sent her home."

She waited.

"Grab a headset and handle the drive-thru orders. You'll have to work the fry station, too, until Miguel comes in. Then you can cover the front counter."

"I worked fries yesterday, Mr. Sampson," she said. "I was hoping for the dressing station." She liked the dressing station. The routine of putting lettuce, tomatoes, onions and cheese on hamburgers, wrapping them in paper, and putting them in boxes let her mind ramble. Also, she got to chat with other workers and learn some Spanglish.

"I'll spell you as soon as I can," the manager promised.

Janie shrugged. At least she kept busy working the drive-thru window. The orders flowed into her headset, a stream of slurred, garbled speech in the vocabulary of fast food: *Boony'sBiggiewithfries ... CokeandBoonychicken bitsfortwo,small salad ... BabyBoonywithtoy, DoubleBoonyandbiggiefriesandachocolate cookie ... Plainbamburgernodressing,CalorieCutterside ...*

By 7:00 p.m., she was pooped.

She spent three nights with Karla, until she sensed Karla was losing her appetite for burgers and fries. She finished the paper on *Animal Farm*. Then she got lucky. A man and wife hired her to house sit for a week while they visited relatives on the East Coast. Yeah! She'd have kitchen privileges and steamy showers, unlike the quickies after gym class.

The calendar pages flipped to June. Graduation neared. Time compressed: school, work, sleep. Only one issue of *The Talisman* remained.

Andy Nguyen prowled the front of the journalism lab, wearing his serious editor's expression. "We need to do something off the hook, something hard-hitting for the last issue," he said.

"Student drinking?" suggested Larry Grimmer.

Nguyen shook his head. "Been done. Last year."

"Cheating?" offered Wendy Ramirez. "Buying essays online?"

"Done and done," replied Nguyen.

"Let's interview that freshman kid who dozes through study hall every third period. He sleeps in a shelter," piped up Maria Gomez.

"And there are a couple of kids who come to school in cars piled high with clothes and stuff. Looks like they're sleeping in them."

She could give them the real scoop on what it was like to be homeless . . .

Alicia Palmer rolled her eyes. "I know the kid in study hall. He looks like a train wreck. Clothes rumped, hair uncombed. I sit way, way back from him."

Janie fumed. Alicia was blonde, wore her cheerleader's sweater in warm weather, and yawned frequently. She rarely wrote anything for the school paper. When she did, it usually required heavy editing. She didn't know an apostrophe from a dash.

"Are there other homeless kids in class?" asked Nguyen.

Janie zoned out. She could give them the real scoop on what it was like to be homeless, to scramble for a place to sleep every night, to wear the same clothes. And in her case, to fly solo. But she wouldn't. No way she'd let stuck-up kids like Alicia Palmer look down on her. Worse, the administration would know she'd been signing her mother's name to stuff. Goodbye honor roll, goodbye college recommendations, goodbye chances of a scholarship. Hello, strangers running her life, however briefly.

"I like it ... I like it," the editor said. He roamed the front of the classroom, hands spread as if embracing a new and unexpected vision. "I see poverty vs. plenty—sacrifice vs. entitlement—struggles in a grim, unrelenting society vs. the comfy cocoon of life at home."

"Bor ... ing," said Alicia. "So there are a few homeless kids. Big deal."

Janie boiled over. "Some? There are hundreds of thousands out there, struggling to get through each day. It's a national problem."

Alicia's shoulders stiffened. "I didn't mean ..."

"Whoa!" The editor stepped in, cutting her off. "I like what I'm hearing. This is a social issue with an edge ... and right here."

He looked at Janie. "Hundreds of thousands?"



She nodded. "I did a report for social studies."

Nguyen slapped a desk. "Okay, gang. We've got a hot possibility. But first we've got to *find* some homeless students. Then we'll put together a story and drop a bomb on old John C. Fre." He turned to Janie. "Since you did a report, you know where to dig for background. Find me some stats, numbers ... costs ... anecdotes." He paused. "You can write the lead story."

Janie bit her lip. My bad, she thought. Now what?

She turned to the Internet. She found The U.S.

Department of Education estimated there were one million homeless students in the United States. *One million!*

The Talisman ran a small story on the front page of the next-to-last issue asking homeless students to contact the paper. A reporter for a daily newspaper noticed it and contacted the principal for information. Andy Nguyen was summoned to the principal's office.

"He wants us to kill the story," said Nguyen at a hastily called meeting of *The Talisman* staff. "He says it would leave a bad impression about the school."

Wendy Ramirez laughed. "You mean because he didn't even know how many homeless students go to John C. Fre?"

The editor shrugged. "That, too. Plus our advisor, Miss Sloan, asked me to reconsider doing the story."

Silence.

"What if we didn't do a *news* story?" suggested Larry Grimmer. "What if somebody wrote an opinion piece? Same effect. The problem gets aired."

More silence.

The editor nodded. "Yeah, but who'll write it?"

Alicia smiled and toyed with a curl. "Janie's done the research."

The next day, Janie sat in front of one of the Journalism lab's two computers, staring at the blinking cursor. She had slept little, agonizing over what to say ... and how much to say. She began typing.

They sit next to us at assemblies, hurry down the hallways between classes, and try to keep their lives a secret. But if you look closely, sometimes their clothes don't match or aren't pressed. Sleeping in a car does that. Sometimes they may not smell good because washing up at a service station where you have to get a key to use the restroom isn't easy.

Memories flooded back.

Worse, unthinking students sometimes snicker at them for dozing off in class, unaware that living in a motel or being shuffled between relatives affects you physically as well as mentally.

Who are these kids we ignore? They are John C. Fremont's homeless students.

She stopped, fingers poised over the keys, and resumed writing. *I know because I'm one of them.*



My First Grade Teacher

by Jing Li, *Berkelev and Redwood Writers*

我的啟蒙老師

From head to toe, Mr. Shi stood three feet tall. He became my first-grade teacher because no full-body sized villagers could do mental math or write handsome Chinese calligraphy at my birth village of Red Stone Bridge, nestled in northern China's deep pine forest mountains.

After my blind great-grandfather, Lao Ye Ye, died, I lost my daytime refuge for shelter, fun, giggling, and laughter.

Trudging on her stubby three-inch bound feet, my paternal grandmother took me to the village's primary school by the roaring East River. "No, my granddaughter isn't too young to start school," Grandmother argued loudly with the principal, Mr. Yang.

That's how I became a first grader at age five in Mr. Shi's class.

A dwarf in physical size, Mr. Shi always stood out as a giant among all my teachers across half the earth from China to America. He not only taught me how to read, write and do math in my head, but also instilled a lifelong joy of learning and planted the seeds of self-confidence in me.

Year was 1961. China was at its heightened manmade famine, the world's worst.

Most of us first graders were in rags, our stomachs constantly growling, our hands and feet black with grime, and our unwashed hair covered with lice. Many of us were as tall as our teacher, Mr. Shi. Some older kids were even taller. He stood the same height as the miniature blackboard on the earthen wall by the pinewood carved windows pasted with off-white soft paper. But we all respected and feared our teacher just the same. In his hands he held the ruling symbol of authority, jiao-bian, the teaching whip. The thin, smooth, round wooden stick was the same length as Mr. Shi's entire body height.

Once someone becomes your teacher for a day, said the good old five-thousand-year-old Chinese proverb, you should treat them with respect and gratitude as you do your own parents.

Mr. Shi was our supreme ruler inside our first grade classroom. But I was dismayed to see my teacher teased by the village men outside the school. Every day when Mr. Shi walked down the street during breakfast time or lunch break, crowds of village men would make fun of him. Sitting themselves on the stone slabs in front of their houses, or against the back walls of the houses that lined up the

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village's main rocky dirt street, they'd yell at him, competing with one another.

"Hey, Teacher Shi, hurry up! You're late for class!" They'd burst out laughing.

"Mind you, I got it. Plenty of time, plenty of time!" Mr. Shi laughed back, flashing his bright toothy smile. His chubby legs, almost the same length as his feet, were shuffling hurriedly in tiny steps. His thick, heavy, square body tilted to the left, and tilted to the right. His pale long-fingered hands, almost the same length as his short arms, flapped back and forth, back and forth.

Despite its ancient history boasting its value on education, China did have some sayings unflattering to school teachers: As long as I've got five bushels of grain to keep me from starving, I wouldn't want to become the king of children.

The teaching-and-learning arena inside our first-grade classroom was on the brick-and-mud kang covered with a rough reed-woven thin mattress. The height of the kang was at an adult's hip level, but up to the top of Mr. Shi's head. He needed us to help him climb up to the platform so he could teach us.

"All right, kids, come on, lift me up," Mr. Shi would call out to us cheerfully, panting, as soon as he walked into the classroom for the first period of the day. His smile brightened up our bare, earthen-walled classroom and lifted our spirits. At his command, all of us kids rushed up to compete for the honor of helping our teacher. Some grabbed his tiny soft arms, some got hold of his short chubby legs, still others pushed him from behind. One, two three! We lifted Mr. Shi's heavy thick square body up to the edge of the kang until he half-crawled and half-scooted himself all the way up to the blackboard by the window in the corner of the room.

Holding his teaching whip, Mr. Shi automatically had the ancient power of a revered teacher invested in him over us, his obedient subjects. He executed swift justice for all offenders equally. Offenses included: not having remembered the lessons well, not smart enough to answer his questions correctly, looking away instead of looking at him or the blackboard, or whispering and chuckling with our neighbors. The most severe offense was coming to class without homework, usually committed by naughty boys. He'd pick out a bigger boy or two to have them hold the guilty one face down and bottom up. Mr. Shi raised his tiny arm and struck his enormous teaching whip on the bottom flesh under his raggedy pants. As Mr. Shi whipped, the offender would cry out his promise to never, ever do it again.

Half a century later in 2015, I went back to China to visit my birth village and got together with several of my first-grade classmates. We talked about our teacher Mr. Shi, our memory amazingly fresh and vivid. The guys merrily

told about Mr. Shi's fearsome teaching whip and how they tried to outsmart him.

"I would mill around the thick wooden pole in the center of the room that held up the ceiling. Mr. Shi chased me with his jiao-bian. But all it hit was not my butt, but the wooden pole! Ha-ha-ha," laughed Jia Cheng Cheng heartily.

"I'd cry out the loudest as soon as his jiao-bian landed on my butt, making it sound like I was dying of pain. So Mr. Shi would go soft on me." Wei Zhan Lu beamed proudly about his tricks.

But, yes, what a dedicated and efficient teacher Mr. Shi was. We all agreed.

I can still see my beloved teacher standing beside the miniature blackboard introducing us to math. Still ringing in my ears was a chorus of our crispy loud voices repeating after our teacher.

"Jia hao hao," Mr. Shi read out loud, pointing at the plus sign, making it a fun rhyme by repeating "hao," the sign, twice.

"Jia hao hao!" we shouted in unison, sitting properly with our feet tucked under our folded legs, our backs straight, hands in our laps.

"Jian hao hao," we yelled out the minus sign earnestly, our eyes fixed on the blackboard.

Inheriting Home

by Kristine Rae Anderson,
Orange County

When my father moved back
to the countryside of his past,
he sent my sister and me
vital parts of our childhood home:
box after heavy box, a sofa
too fancy for our lives now,
two stained and worn brocade-covered chairs,
a lead-weight marble-topped table.
We walked around those boxes tall as walls,
then bravely slit the top of one,
unwrapped newspaper from coffee cups
and candlesticks—lifting each to the light—
fanned away stale cigarette smoke,
the gathered dust, unsettled ghosts.

That day remains with me—
a maze of boxes in my mind.
Not for what we found in them,
but what they left behind.
What they whispered to me,
and how their warnings burrowed in.

“Deng hao hao,” we shouted out the equal sign ever so enthusiastically.

“Jia hao hao ... Jian hao hao ... Deng hao hao ... ha-ha-ha ...” How those upper-grade boys teased and laughed at us during recess time for our “baby” way of learning math signs like a nursery rhyme.

In the short first year of my schooling, Mr. Shi taught us to write calligraphy, count and memorize numbers, and a smart way to do math in our heads with double-digit addition and subtraction. He praised me in front of the class for remembering all my lessons well. The positive reinforcement was powerful. It shaped my own lifelong teaching career, with passion and compassion for kids of all ages in both China and America. The smart mental math skills Mr. Shi taught me firmly imprinted in my small child’s brain.

Today, I still do my American federal and state taxes in pencil and paper, without needing a calculator.

Mr. Shi built up my self-confidence in school like my grandfather did at home.

Every morning before class, the dusty earthen floor in our classroom needed to be sprinkled with water and swept with a broom. It was a chore for all of us girls who took turns taking care of our duty. But one morning, Mr. Shi was hard to please. Two girls in a row couldn’t do a good enough job. He said the first girl was too heavy-handed and splashed too much water out of the washbasin, muddying the floor. And he scolded the second girl for sprinkling too little water in tiny drops, not enough to dampen the dry dust.

“Li Cai Mei, come over. You do it,” Mr. Shi called my name. Having noticed the mistakes made by the first two girls, I tried to do it in a medium way, using my fingers, not the whole hand as the first girl did, or not just the finger tips as the second girl did. I flicked the water out of the washbasin as carefully and evenly as I could while the whole class watched.

I looked up nervously at Mr. Shi.

How elated I was that my teacher’s annoyed face broke into a broad smile.

“Very good!” Mr. Shi praised me loudly. “Did you all see how perfectly Li Cai Mei did that? Go on, finish up.” He then nodded at me, entrusting me with the honor of sprinkling the entire floor. With my grateful heart jumping in joy, I tried to lock my smile inside my mouth. Girls were not supposed to smile broadly but be modest and humble at all times.

At age eight, I was taken out of the village to live for the first time in the faraway city of Taiyuan and wait on my parents and two younger brothers. My mother needed a household helping hand and babysitter for my brothers. A couple of years later, I went back to visit my grandparents in Red Stone Bridge and one day ran into Mr. Shi while

walking around in the village with several girls. We were giggling and laughing and chatting happily when I spotted Mr. Shi in the distance. I didn’t know why but I felt embarrassed upon seeing my dwarf teacher walking up to me. I felt lost as to what to say to him.

Mr. Shi looked smaller. In my memory, his short, chubby body was a strong, thick square, but now frail and thin. My face burning, my head hung low, I tried to walk by, pretending not to see him.

“Isn’t this Li Cai Mei?” Mr. Shi called out by my village name cheerfully, stopping in front of me. “Hey, Cai Mei, you little rascal! How come you don’t talk to me? Huh? Don’t you remember me, your first-grade teacher? Is that what becoming a city girl does to you, forget your good old teacher? O, you little rascal you. How are you?” Mr. Shi was still the same with his heartwarming smile, looking up at me.

“I ... am ... fine,” I mumbled, feeling ashamed of myself.

“It’s so good to see you. Take care of yourself, okay?” said Mr. Shi ever so cheerfully, his eyes soft, his voice forgiving. He walked on, his long-fingered hands flapping back and forth, back and forth, his frail body tilting to the left, tilting to the right, just the way I remembered.

A few more summers went by. Grandmother told me that Mr. Shi had moved to the city of Taiyuan. “He stands in the streets begging for money and food. People were curious about him, tossing him money. He makes quite a bit every day. His nephew carries him on his back from place to place like a freak show.”

A couple of more summers later, Grandmother said Mr. Shi had died.

“Oh, no. What happened?” My heart sank.

“What else? He was just a crippled dwarf to begin with. He became too sick to stand in the street begging anymore. So he was carried home to die,” Grandmother said matter-of-factly.

Tears welled up in my eyes. Afraid Grandmother would ridicule me for being such a sentimental silly idiot “like your mushy-hearted grandpa,” I hurriedly stepped outside into the earthen yard to sit on the front steps of flat river rocks. Muffling my voice in my sleeves, I cried, feeling relieved that Grandmother didn’t interfere by asking me why I was shedding tears over a mere dwarf.

Rest in Peace, Teacher Shi.



“When I want to read a good book, I write one.”

- Benjamin Disraeli

The How and Why of Hello and Goodbye

by Susanna Janssen, *Redwood Writers and Writers of the Mendocino Coast*

If you can get through a day without saying “Hello” and “Goodbye,” or any of the variations like “Hi” and “Bye,” you might be a hermit in the desert, or a nun committed to a life of silent prayer. Where do these words come from? Did someone once decree them to be the official American formulas for our greeting and leave-taking? Is there “good” in “goodbye”? Is there “hell” in “hello”? No and no to those last two questions, and the country-western song with those lyrics has already been written.

Let us begin with “goodbye” because its evolution is simpler, and because Paul McCartney didn’t in his catchy song “Hello Goodbye.” (“You say yes, I say no. You say stop, and I say go, go, go . . .”) The original phrase was “God be with ye,” an archaic way of wishing one well as you took your leave. Folks in the 15th century said every syllable of that sweet expression, but by the late 16th century, it had contracted to “Godbwye.” (No record found as to how that jumble was pronounced.) With everyone already saying, “Good day” and “Good evening,” it was inevitable that the phrase would soon become completely secularized to “Goodbye.”

Losing “God” to “Goodbye” did not sit well with everyone; many viewed it as a trendy and degenerate utterance popular only among certain slices of society. However, as is our human bent, one year’s scandal becomes another’s status quo, and we have been saying “Goodbye” ever since. (The argument persists as to whether it should be written “Goodbye” or “Good-bye.”)

There is a striking similarity between “God be with ye” and the archaic but still widely known Spanish parting phrase, *Vaya con Dios* (“Go with God”). God has also survived in the standard Spanish goodbye, *Adiós*, commending one “to God” for safekeeping. *Adiós* is often reserved for more permanent or meaningful partings, while *Hasta luego* works for “Bye, see you later.” *Hasta la vista* is a less common expression among Spanish speakers, but is about as familiar in America as *Cinco de Mayo* and *enchiladas*, thanks to Arnold Schwarzenegger in his 1991 action flick, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. “Ahnold” made \$15 million for that role even though his entire dialogue consisted of only 700 words. Let’s see . . . that comes out to \$21,429 per word, and \$85,714 just for saying, “*Hasta la vista, baby.*” One stunning linguistic accomplishment!

In parts of South America, it is common to say *ciao* as a good-bye, but there, it is spelled *chau* or *chao*. In Italy, *ciao* is both a greeting and a farewell, and it came into the language via Medieval Latin as *s-ciàvo*>*sclavus*, meaning “(I

am your) slave,” a rather weighty commitment to proffer when all you really mean is “Hi” or “See you later.”

“Hello” as a greeting is a somewhat newer word than “goodbye,” but its roots reach far back. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “hello” first appeared in print in 1827, but its usage then was not as a greeting, rather as a way of getting someone’s attention, as in “Hello, look what you just did?,” or showing surprise: “Hello, Tom! Can your dog really shoplift?” In its many variations through time and place (beginning around 1400 in Old High German and also in Old French), it was a shout to attract attention, especially to hail a ferryboat: *halloo*, *hallo*, *halloa*, *hillo*, *holla*, *hollo*, *hollow*, *hullo*, *holà*, and so on. Yes, the Spanish word for “hello,” *hola*, comes from this same lexical lineage as well.

Now let’s examine the history of how “hello” became our formula for answering the phone, for such developments rarely happen by chance alone, and this one has a good backstory. Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Alva Edison were both born in 1847, and leapfrogged each other through the U.S. Patent Office with their world-changing inventions. Among his many patents, Bell’s credits include the metal detector, the hydrofoil boat, the harmonic telegraph, and, in 1876, the telephone. Edison patented the phonograph (imagine what it meant to replay sound!), the motion-picture camera (and movement!), the incandescent light bulb, and the microphone that made Mr. Bell’s

telephone into an apparatus that revolutionized business communication.

The early telephone was used exclusively for commerce, and the line was open on both ends at all times. For the caller to be able to get the attention of someone on the other end, several strategies were considered. The president of the Central District and Printing Telegraph

Company of Pittsburg pondered the merits of a call bell: ring-ring!, but Thomas Edison convinced him that the perfect word, spoken “cheerfully and firmly,” could be heard 10 to 20 feet away. Alexander Graham Bell agreed, and was adamant that word should be “*Ahoy!*” He stubbornly used it for the rest of his life.

Today, “*Ahoy*,” spelled *Ahoj*, is used to answer the phone in parts of Eastern Europe. Other early contenders for the greeting included “What is wanted?,” “Are you there?,” and “Are you ready to talk?” However, Thomas Edison’s perfect word won out and the first telephone books recommended it in their instructions to users. Just like that, “Hello” was the official way to start a telephone conversation, and it soon became the most popular way to



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greet people as well, altering forever the proscriptive 19th century etiquette of not speaking unless you were first introduced. “Hello” or a variation close in sound (as *Aló*) is used to answer the phone in nearly 40 languages, as diverse as Arabic, Cantonese, Danish, French, German, Hungarian, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, Persian, Polish, Russian, Thai, and Vietnamese.

With the game-changer of caller ID, while we’re not yet saying “Goodbye” to the telephone greeting “Hello,” for

many of us it has become rare to answer the phone if we don’t know who is calling. When we do, we tend to say a rather questioning, and unsatisfying “Hello?”. So, in honor of the amazingly inventive duo, Bell and Edison, and their many collaborators, assistants, and contributors, who pioneered the electronic revolution that has progressed beyond wild imagination, let us hereby resolve to make all future hellos “cheerful and firm,” and perhaps even throw in an occasional “Ahoj” for colorful good measure.

Birdwatching

by Donna Banta, *Marin*

Fletcher set out at a brisk pace, his breath puffing ahead in white plumes. The storm had passed, but clouds still clung low and thick to the sky, like frost to the ceiling of his mother’s old freezer. Sporting his customary coat and tie, he looked in keeping with his elegant Dallas address, not to mention his old-school Texan sensibilities.

As he approached Madeline Carruther’s bungalow, it occurred to him that, with the Kaufman’s house going on the market this spring, he and Madeline might be the block’s last two holdouts, resisting the local tendency to tear down perfectly good structures and erect McMansions, a trend that wreaked havoc on the land.

He considered paying her a call. Perhaps she’d like to take a stroll? He grimaced at his own hubris. The memory of her late husband certainly fresh in her mind, Mrs. Clive Carruthers would never entertain such an invitation from the likes of Fletcher McCall.

In the decade since his beloved wife died, Fletcher had been on a handful of dates, all arranged by his sister-in-law, all of them disasters. His options had been women with voices as loud as their dresses, and a penchant for exhibition. An awkward conga line came to mind. Also a karaoke rendition of “I Got You Babe.”

But even if paired with a more suitable choice, Fletcher knew he would find some way to embarrass himself. Soft spoken, methodical, and lacking in athletic grace, his attempts at flirtation inevitably felt comedic. Wisely, he devoted himself to nature, socializing with the birds and wildlife, wooing his shrubs and flowerbeds. For three seasons of the year he was the kindly retired widower, puttering in his garden, always on hand to help the neighbor in her yard.

Madeline seemed to welcome his agrarian overtures, chatting with him as he mulched or pruned. While he struggled to hold up his end of their conversations, Fletcher found he could listen to Madeline for hours, even when she was extolling some fool left-wing crusade or gushing over

the latest Rorschach test acquired by the Dallas Museum of Art.

But with the arrival of the dormant season, Fletcher could no longer fall back on his gardening pretext and lacked the imagination to invent something new. He did his best to keep busy, tending cuttings in his greenhouse, brushing up on the new organic remedies. The impending arrival of next year’s seed catalogs brought a quiver of anticipation.

When all that failed, there were the birds at his feeder. Goldfinches modeling their eclectic wardrobe, mockingbirds performing an ongoing opera, those bossy Carolina chickadees always bickering, the magnificent male cardinals tending to their elusive females. Even on the most tedious of days, Fletcher’s feathered companions entertained. Frolicking about his slumbering landscape. Lining up for his feeder like the incoming flights at DFW.

Only this particular winter had slammed in like a train wreck, a traffic-stalling ice storm that collided with the presidential election recount in Florida. Having devoted four years mid-career to a stint in the Texas state legislature, Fletcher had no patience for partisan bickering. The quarreling TV pundits just conjured up ghosts of the mindless gasbags he had served alongside. Fossil fuel worshippers who denied the existence of dinosaurs. Patriots who loved their country but hated its government. Fletcher had long since signed off on politics, and on religion, and on most people, for that matter. At first he managed to ignore the hanging chads and butterfly ballots, tuning in to the avian *Peyton Place* airing in his backyard. Then he ran out of birdseed.

Passing by Roy Flint’s pretentious manse, he scowled at the balloons attached to the Bush/Cheney sign. No doubt the master of the house was in residence, savoring his candidates’ victory, most likely in that tribute to taxidermy he called his study. Fletcher sighed. The room had more mounted beasts than an exhibit hall at the natural history museum.

In fairness, there had been times he’d envisioned Roy’s head above his own mantle. After he encouraged Fletcher to run for the legislature, for example. But then, Roy had

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seemed an almost reasonable man in those days. He was still married to his first wife, the formidable Dorothy, friend of Madeline Carruthers. Dorothy and Madeline—talk about a dream team. They didn't make gals like them anymore.

He stopped at the light, pushed "Walk," and then stretched sideways to relieve his aching hip. Recently, having seen him perform a similar exercise beside her flowerbed, Madeline suggested he join her yoga class. As preposterous as the invitation was, having come from Madeline, he had actually paused and chewed on it for a spell. The light changed and he crossed, revisiting the mortification. Yoga? Sure, he might could do that. Squeeze himself into a unitard and perform the dance of the prairie chicken on a psychedelic mat. Thank heaven he'd mustered the sense to decline her offer.

The fur was flying around Highland Park Village. Literally. A dip in temperature gifted Dallas socialites with a rare opportunity to parade their mink coats, a custom both bizarre and whimsical, as it lent his city the appearance of a five-star arctic wildlife reserve. Christmas music rang from the speakers and lights twinkled along the eaves and awnings. Fletcher struggled to remain upright on the slick walkways, marveling at the pelt-laden women who were accomplishing the same in heels. A sale at the dance supply store forced the infernal yoga suggestion back into his consciousness. He hurried past the spandex-clad mannequins and on to the grocery store.

The market buzzed with fur-draped homemakers replenishing their shelves after the storm. Fletcher took a plastic basket from the stack and filled it with a bag of birdseed, a quart of milk, a can of coffee, and a package of those little wienies he liked. He was lugging his heavy load to the express lane when a display next to the pharmacy caught his eye. Mindful of his recent flare up, he added a tube of hemorrhoid cream to his basket on his way to checkout.

Back outside, *Waltz of the Flowers* lilted from the speakers and shards of sunlight pierced through the clouds, transforming the shopping center into a sparkly ice adventure. Fletcher slowed to a stop, squinting in the reflected glare. In this sunshine, the thaw had already commenced, and it was no longer fur coat weather. Nevertheless, the Dallas elites, as if mindful of their waning opportunity, flaunted their billowing minks with increasing urgency. The giddy, surreal scene smeared past Fletcher at a dizzying pace. Designer Yeti on Ice! He blinked and refocused, briefly wondering if his prolonged captivity with the Florida recount had compromised his sanity. Then, blinking again, he spied none other than the dream team. Dorothy and Madeline, in the flesh. A smile crept across his face, and he cursed himself for not wearing a nicer tie.

Dorothy saw him first. "Fletcher. What a pleasant surprise." She was wrapped in a thick sable that suggested a

more intimidating arctic denizen. Alaskan muskox sprang to mind.

"Hello, ladies."

"How's my favorite former neighbor?"

When Roy left her for a younger woman, Dorothy developed an open contempt for men in general. For some reason, Fletcher managed to be the exception. He found that strangely insulting.

"I thought *I* was your favorite former neighbor," Madeline scolded. She wore a chestnut-colored wool coat that complimented her hair and eyes.

"What are you gals up to this morning?" Fletcher asked.

"Coffee. Gossip," said Dorothy. "Mostly gossip."

The audio played in Fletcher's head. Dorothy's bombastic hyperbole countered by Madeline's refined wit. Heaven help the fools who drew their disapproval. "Y'all gab about anyone I know?"

Dorothy reached inside her handbag, first pulling out a cellphone, then a hairbrush. "Madeline was dishing the dirt on your neighborhood."

Another audio played in his head. *I asked him to yoga and he took me seriously*, followed by a calliope of female giggles. He felt his cheeks color.

"We didn't gossip about you," said Madeline. She brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. In this light it had a reddish cast.

Of course they didn't talk about him. Why would they? "All my dirt's in my compost bin," he said, and then glanced aside, self-conscious over his lame humor and the polite laughter it inspired.

Dorothy continued to root through her handbag, her stack of gold bracelets tinkling like tiny cymbals. "So, the Kaufmans are fixing to move?"

"To Florida," said Fletcher.

Having located her car keys, Dorothy hooked her handbag over her shoulder. "Glad you're sticking around, Fletcher." She looked to Madeline. "Honey, I'd better get you home. I'm late for my appointment."

"Go on, then." Madeline brushed aside the stray hair again. "I can walk from here."

Dorothy frowned. "In this weather?"

"The sun's come out."

"It's slippery. What if you fall and can't get up? I don't want that on my conscience."

"I can see her home," Fletcher heard himself say, and then, drawing a breath, added, "I'm on foot as well."

"All right." Dorothy wagged her finger at Fletcher.

"She's your responsibility." She blew a kiss at Madeline.

"Now, honey, promise me you won't despair."

"I promise."

"Despair?" Fletcher asked, once Dorothy was out of earshot.

"The election. Her side won."



“Aha. Well, you seem in fine spirits this morning.”
“Taking things in stride.” She sighed. “Ironic isn’t it?”
“What’s that?”

“For a Democrat to survive in this neighborhood she needs the hide of an elephant.”

Fletcher laughed. “Touché.”

“Do you mind escorting a Democrat home, Fletcher?”

“It would be my pleasure.” His heart pounding, he transferred the shopping bag to his other hand and stepped aside to offer her the inside of the sidewalk.

Madeline blew out a sigh. “A president elected by the Supreme Court.”

“Bizarre times we’re living in.”

“Things can’t possibly get worse.”

“Politics can always get worse,” Fletcher replied, and then fell silent, distracted by a growing desire to take her hand. Instead he smoothed his hair and scratched a spot behind his ear. “I was just thinking that, with the Kaufmans fixing to sell, ours might be the last two cottages on the block.”

“Tearing down the Kaufmans’ house would be a travesty,” Madeline lamented. “It’s a *Dilbeck*, for crying out loud.”

“A travesty, indeed,” Fletcher agreed, at the same time wondering what in tarnation a *Dilbeck* was.

Madeline stopped and pressed a gloved hand against his arm. “You should join our church group.”

He gazed down at her, catching a whiff of gardenia. “The Unitarians?”

Madeline laughed, her clear brown eyes aglow with mischief. “Not the whole church, Fletcher. Just the interfaith committee we’ve started to promote local historic preservation.”

“Oh, right.” Fletcher noticed that the wool on her chestnut lapel was very smooth and fine, maybe even cashmere. When combined with the blush of her cheeks, and the hint of red in her hair, Madeline brought to mind the female cardinal. A creature of such subtle beauty, she compelled the flamboyant male of her species to wait upon her.

“Did I scare you, Fletcher?”

“A little,” he murmured. Then, backing away a step, added, “Sounds political!”

“Not in the least.” She rolled her eyes. “Our committee is strictly non-partisan. If you’re interested and have the time, I’d love to tell you more.”

Fletcher was interested, had the time, and would love to hear her tell him more. And he didn’t give a damn about the committee or the Unitarians. “Perhaps we could—”

“Madeline!” Dorothy rushed their way, her mink unhooked and flapping at her sides. “I’ve lost my cellphone.” She stopped and rested against a shop front,

panting and perspiring. “I probably left it at the coffeehouse.”

“Let’s go see.” Madeline took her arm.

“I saw you take it out of your purse just now,” said Fletcher.

Dorothy and Madeline stared back at him.

“When you were hunting for your keys, remember?”

“That’s right,” said Madeline. “You must have dropped it.”

They turned and started back in the direction of the coffee shop.

“There.” Madeline said. “Underneath that Cadillac.”

Fletcher looked to where she was pointing. The phone was lodged behind the car’s front tire. He considered setting his groceries on the sidewalk and then, seeing the tube of medicine surface, reconsidered. Bag in hand, he anchored one leg on the curb and stretched the other across the slush-filled gutter. He bent over, stretched his arm to its full extent and, just as his fingers reached the phone, an angry rip roared up the seat of his pants. Mortified, he righted himself, causing the heavy sack to yank him backward while his slippery feet flew forward. For a split second he was airborne. Then he landed in the gutter, squarely on his rump.

Gasping in unison, Madeline and Dorothy talked over each other. “Fletcher, don’t move.” “We’ll call 911.” “You may have broken something.”

“I’m fine.” He struggled to his feet, only to come down again, for good this time, and on his bad hip, affording the split in his trousers full exposure to the frigid air.

Events blurred. Dorothy called an ambulance. Madeline collected his spilt groceries. More high heels crowded his field of vision. Dorothy covered him with her massive coat. And then, for what seemed the length of another recount, he waited for the approaching siren, prone on the pavement, his bare and broken ass concealed beneath the hide of an Alaskan muskox.

Fletcher had been wrong. His ass wasn’t broken. He was merely sprained and bruised, in body and spirit. His brother and sister-in-law stayed with him the first night and then checked on him daily until he convinced them he could manage on his own. The neighbors brought food. Madeline was the first to take pity on him, dropping by with some homemade chicken soup. Similar donations followed, filling his freezer with a month’s worth of meals. He had a stack of nature videos, the seed catalogs had begun to arrive, and his bird feeder was full.

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Having spent his morning perusing the Antique Rose Emporium's 2001 catalog, he'd lunched on an unusual pasta salad prepared by Chloe Flint, Roy's wife number two, who evidently had not won her man's heart through his stomach. Now, his binoculars in hand, Fletcher stood at his window. Storm clouds crowded the sky, bruised the same colors as his backside. Beneath them, the scruffy-coated goldfinches queued up for landing. A mockingbird, perched high in the

pecan tree, performed his aria. Carolina chickadees flitted about the lower branches, engaged in their usual fuss. Then the male cardinal lit atop the back fence. No doubt his female lurked nearby, awaiting her daily pampering. Fletcher raised the binoculars and scanned his landscape, hoping for a glimpse of that subtly beautiful creature. She eluded him.



MOVING ON

by Richard Guthrie, *Central Coast Writers*

During my short-timer's thirty-day countdown, it was all I could do to restrain my rising anticipation. Now, even though my year was ending, awake or asleep, my head would unexpectedly swim in a confusion of overlapping film clips of carnage and mayhem I'd survived. These revenants weren't new. They'd visited regularly since our second week in-country. Now that I was due to rotate home, some of the scenarios even jacked up my anxiety with credible-seeming disasters that suddenly denied my eligibility to leave.

I held my breath when I signed in at the Long Bin Replacement Center, exhaling only after the baby-faced soldier behind the desk confirmed that my name was on the manifest for the next day's Freedom Bird back to The World.

Relieved, I heaved my duffle bag up to one shoulder and headed to the officers' billets with spring in my step. Now that our little family was about to be reconstituted, I realized I needed figure out how to put those raging nightmares behind me. Otherwise, the demons would interfere with my learning to be a father to Laura, the tiny newborn I'd met over half a year before during my week in Hawaii.

To me it seemed I'd need to get with some of the guys who'd arrived in-country with me and B Company, men who knew firsthand what went down in our piece of Binh Dinh Province this past year.

The barracks screen door slammed behind me and I eagerly walked the entire length of the narrow bay, studying every face in there. Failing to recognize a single man, I felt distraught, and dropped my duffle bag on a vacant cot. Seconds later, a pack of sergeants—REMFs¹ all—barged in to scramble us and our belongings out to the street. After badgering us into an open formation, a pair of them moved down each rank, dumping our gear onto the tarmac. With

the intensity of gold prospectors, they ferreted through every last Dopp kit, trouser cuff, sock, shoe and shirt pocket, before sidestepping to the next man's pile of grubby belongings where they repeated the process. They were looking for weapons, explosives, war souvenirs, any sort of contraband. This may have been a necessary procedure, but it royally pissed me off. After such a trying year, how could my Army allow harassment like this to delay our reunification?

The following morning after another formation and a second full-blown shakedown inspection, the sergeant waved me to the cluster of those who'd passed. Another hour-long wait and we were herded aboard a smelly, olive drab school bus that plunged into Saigon's streaming pandemonium of trucks, cars, taxis, motorbikes, mopeds—all honking nonstop. The chaos and cacophony so unnerved me that my shoulder muscles turned to hard, aching knots. I felt naked without a rifle, and for every instant of the two-hour, stop-and-go ride, I cowered in my seat, dreading the ambush and shooting I just *knew* was inevitable.

At Tan Son Nhut airport, our busload piled out to join other short-timers already waiting inside the dim oven of a terminal. Near a door leading to the flight line strutted another officious young soldier, high on the power vested in him by the clipboard he brandished. When he finally called out the flight manifest, he mumbled our names in a monotone that somehow managed to reduce us to a rank lower than his. Hearing my name, my heart pounded and I shouted "YO," and hustled into blinding sunlight on the steaming tarmac. Squinting, I joined the herd shuffling towards rickety metal steps. Our excited pack climbed with a vigor that set the battered staircase a-wobble, emitting a jangling chorus of chirps of rusty steel-on-steel and thudding the padded threshold hard against the aircraft's tender flank.

I ducked into the rear galley of the World Airways Boeing 707 and a sour mélange assaulted my nose. First came essence of old puke, the result of seasonal air turbulence above the Pacific. The sharp stink of fear that came next doubtless was deposited there by successive waves of new arrivals aboard the USA-to-Saigon leg of those earlier flights.

¹Rear Echelon Mother Fuckers

Adjusting to the dim interior light, I focused on grimy, frayed seats and worn carpeting. God, I prayed, let this grubby aircraft get me across the Pacific and safely home to my girls. That reunification was obviously my highest priority, what I most desired, but to disengage from this phase of my life, to close it out, I still needed to face-off against the damned nightmares. I couldn't do it alone. I needed guys intimate with Ten December, the Têt Offensive ... all the high-cost battles, and even the more prosaic losses to booby traps, stray sniper rounds, vehicle accidents.

Still lacking the words to describe those heartbreaks, I searched for the seatmate who wouldn't need a lot of explaining to help midwife my unburdening. Moving up the plane's narrow aisle, I scanned carefully. Encountering only strangers, I stopped at the first empty aisle seat and extended a hand. "Hey, I'm Dick Guthrie," I said with a smile. "Came over by troopship from Fort Hood with 1st of the 50th Mech Infantry. We went to the Cav's Second Brigade at LZ Uplift—south of Bong Son. Any of you guys spend time in Binh Dinh Province?"

The man in the middle seat shook my hand and told me he'd served his year in a Quartermaster Stevedore outfit that offloaded munitions from inbound ships at the seaport in Long Binh. Clearly, this guy wasn't the one I needed.

Across the aisle an artilleryman chimed in, "I was in 2nd of the 49th Field Artillery, he said. "Palace guard around Saigon. I spent time as an F.O. (Forward Observer) with a rifle company."

A fellow Boonie Rat who can help me unpack my terrors! Eagerly, I pumped his hand and sat down. "No shit?" I blurted, buckling myself in. "Who was the company commander?"

"Well, I don't remember his name," he said. "I was only with them for the week between the Christmas and New Year's cease-fires. Their regular F.O. was on R&R." My heart sank.

"By Têt," he went on, "I was already back at the firebase, man," he shook his head, "and plenty glad to be there." Clearly, this artilleryman wouldn't be the answer to my prayers.

I sat staring at the back of the seat in front of me. There wouldn't be a confessor for me on this flight, and I would not be unburdening myself on this day. A spectator now, I felt myself rise to hover wordlessly above the aircraft. Looking down, I watched my shoulders shrug and my head shake.

I didn't yet know it, but this intense frustration was practical preparation for what the future soon would bring. Like all who saw fighting, I was groping my way home in an overwrought emotional state. Like most, I desperately hoped

to fit back into some familiar, comfortable niche or role I couldn't yet define. I only knew I longed to get on with life as I'd known it before. I utterly ignored how impossible this would prove to be.

Too soon, we would all discover that the very compatriots who sent us over there wanted to hear nothing about our distress. Apparently, acknowledging our distress would lay back on them some of the responsibility for the bad decision to invade Vietnam. Their "welcome home" turned out to be a kick in the groin that would hammer me every bit as painfully as the endless closed-loop replays of mayhem that for years would invade my mind, uninvited, several times a day.

In the stuffy heat, the cabin air soon reeked of man-sweat. Near the cockpit, a stewardess materialized. All eyes snapped to her, and conversations shut down. She set out towards the stern and her energetic pace triggered enticing twitches of breast and butt. The sound of the men's sharp intakes of breath cascaded with her down the aisle. Passing by me, her wake exuded essence of *woman*, fortified with Duty-Free perfume. A hundred horny men mentally undressed her, and her Mona Lisa smile suggested she enjoyed it.

The plane's engines shrieked. At last, cool air flowed. The aircraft began to roll, taxiing for what felt like miles. I was giddy with the prospect of seeing Cynthia and Laura.

When the plane wheeled around onto the main runway, the pilot locked the brakes long enough to rev the jets one last time. I held my breath. The massive bird trembled. The brakes released and I felt the lumbering takeoff roll. We gathered speed and someone started a yell in rising cadence: "Go! ... Go! ... GO!" The runway's vibrations faded. We were airborne!

The spontaneous roar of applause and cheering nearly drowned out the engine noise. The nose tipped skyward.

Back to *The World!*

We love-starved warriors would too soon discover that America's welcome mat wasn't actually out for us. But for the moment, we'd cheated the Grim Reaper and we were *safe!* At long last, we were moving on!



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Just West of the Pass

by Brian Marshall, *North State Writers*

They'd claimed the front would track southeast. So that must be dandruff out there.

Alturas to Bozeman: 839 miles. A haul he'd made, over the last year, more times than he could count. But he'd only discovered this shortcut a few months back. Realized that, along with shaving a few minutes off the trip, it'd come around at the exact same time his eyes were starting to drift after all those hours on the interstate. So maybe it *wasn't* a shortcut but more of a wake-up call. Tight curves, steep grades, a narrow two-lane road. Something to get the blood flowing.

Which was fine in decent weather. But with the flakes now tumbling down, and a stiff crosswind off the pass, it wasn't the voice of some desk clerk anymore. More like an alarm clock. One of those godawful wind-up numbers with two brass bells on top. Plus, he'd picked up a shadow about a dozen miles back. Some asshole riding his tail. Perched in the exact right spot to blind him with those high-beams of his.

Normally, he'd just pull over. Let Asshole speed on by. But whoever built this hunk of road, they'd never heard of turnouts. So instead he keeps his eyes on the curves, ignoring the presence back there, focusing his thoughts instead on the long list of chores that await him. Running AC out to the shop. Plumbing the gray-water in. Maybe getting the storm-windows up, now that the white stuff is back. A list so long, so daunting, he could already use a nap.

So maybe that's why he doesn't see the buck until it's way too late.

A flicker, a movement, there on the left, at the very edge of his vision. A bulk, a shadow, darting out, breaking through the curtain of white. Veer left and he's in the oncoming lane, a blind curve waiting just past it. Veer right and he heads straight off a cliff, smack into his grave. All that's left is door number three. Slamming on the brakes. The back end fishtails, he's fighting the wheel, his toolbox slams into the cab. A ghostly moment as a huge black eye is framed there in the windshield. Then, somehow, he's no longer moving; the world just sits there, stock still. Followed by a clatter of hooves on asphalt as the buck scrambles down the slope.

He draws a breath. Lets it out. Decides he's still alive. Then makes the mistake of looking up, glancing into the rearview mirror.

He'd read somewhere, should you get hit, it's best you don't see it coming. That if you tense up, expecting the blow, it only makes things worse. So fine. Maybe next time

he finds himself in a similar predicament, he'll take that nap instead. Still, on his end, the impact isn't all that bad. His truck, it's a '62 Chevy one-ton, a whole lot of Detroit steel. Which means for him, the guy sitting up there behind the wheel, it's pretty much like before. A wake-up call. One that leaves him feeling a little surprised. A little stunned.

And more than a little pissed-off.

Before he knows it, he's unlatching his belt. Throwing the door wide open. Trading the stuffy air of the cab for a wind that scours his face. He's so hopped up, so angry, he almost slips, boot-heels finding wet slush. Grabbing hold of the Chevy's side panel, he tells himself to calm down. And besides, his shadow, his asshole, he's already been punished enough.

The car's some kind of small sedan, a Toyota or maybe a Nissan. Fine for your average morning commute, not so good as a battering ram. It has come in at a slight angle, hard enough to peel back the hood, but without enough mojo to unseat the block, or crush whoever was in there. Still, it's kind of hard to tell, because the impact had set off the airbag, and it was one thing to confront some moron face-to-face, read him the riot act, and another thing to vent your spleen on a big white plastic marshmallow.

He knows the smart thing would be to call it in. Wait for the EMTs. Because you do anything, try to help, and you get yourself slapped with a lawsuit. So why the hell is he reaching back and hunting around for his knife? The driver-side door, it's tweaked a bit, and the hinges try to fight him. An ugly squawk as he muscles it open, the sound of metal on metal. And that airbag. Aren't they supposed to deflate? He takes his knife, pokes it once, surprised at how tough it is. Risks another, deeper thrust, only to provoke a sudden hiss of air, and a vaguely chemical stink.

But it's not the sounds or the smells that throw him. It's the person behind the wheel. A girl, a woman, late twenties, early thirties. Young enough to be his daughter, if he'd ever had one. Darkish hair, shoulder length, a face that's almost pretty, though really, with the bag still clinging to her chin, it's not the best time to judge. And the fact that her eyes are closed, that she's still unconscious, that's another red flag. But there aren't any signs of an injury. No blood, no bones protruding through skin. More like she'd gone and thrown a switch. Decided it's best to play dead.

And then that same switch, it flips back on. He hears the barest whimper. Her eyes start to jerk beneath the lids, still closed, as her hand finds the shoulder belt. She cries out in a little girl's voice.

“Anne! Anne, come back!”

She tries leaning forward. The belt snaps taut. Straining, she pushes against it. Without even thinking, he reaches out, lays a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey!” she yells, pulling away. “Who the ... what are you ...?”

“Whoa, whoa, just calm down. You’ve been in an accident.”

She stares at him for a second. Recoils as though she’s been struck. Panicked glances, left, then right, as she peers through the windshield.

“An accident? What, you mean you hit me?”

For a second his anger’s back. “Actually, you hit me.”

The snow, if anything, is picking up. Scattered drifts to the side of the road. Another half-hour, and he’ll have to chain-up, and this is no place to do it.

“Look, I’m going to put some flares down before this turns into a three-way. Why don’t you get your bearings. Make sure you’re not hurt anywhere. Then we can come up with a game plan.”

He closes the door as best he can. Circles back around to the Chevy. Grabs his flight jacket from the cab and a kit bag from in back. Pacing it out, three feet to each stride, he starts to lay out the flares, finding the comfort that always comes from a simple thing done well. Next up it’s the reflectors. With him wishing that he’d bought that extra pair at Genco back during their big sale. And then, finally, he admits it. Why he’s taking his time. That dealing with this woman, this girl, it’ll make the storm seem downright pleasant. Needing some kind of olive branch, he ducks inside the cab. Grabs his thermos, the one he’d topped off at breakfast.

As a courtesy, he knocks on the glass. She seems to start a little. The motor on the window’s shot, so he cracks the door again.

“Here. This will help warm you up.”

She looks at the Thermos like it’s a bomb. He’s already regretting the gesture. Finally she takes it from his hand, but instead of pouring herself any coffee, she sets it on the floor.

“So. You think things over?”

“What’s to think?” she asks, dead-faced. “I’ll just call a tow-truck.”

Silently he counts to ten. Or make that two instead. “Have you tried your phone? Out here it’s one-bar country.” He watches as she leans away. Starts to hunt through her purse.

“Plus don’t you think, with weather like this, they’ll already have their hands full?”

Ignoring him, she digs out her phone. It’s a cute number in pink. She stabs at a few of the buttons, then sighs once in frustration.

“Fine,” she suggests. “So maybe you can call it in when you’re closer to town. And I’ll just wait here.”

She’s wearing a halter beneath her light sweater. Open-toed sandals and painted nails, the same color as her phone.

“And let you freeze to death?” He stops. Takes a calming breath. “Look, maybe you’d better re-think things.”

“Re-think? Why bother? Because you’ve already got it all figured out.”

“Actually, I do.” He pauses. Smiles. “And seeing as how I backed into you like that, the least I can do is give you a ride into town.”

They always say trust your instincts. Go with the gut, right? And it’s not like he’s giving off any pervy vibe, or planning on anything hinky. No, it’s more that guy thing. Father knows best or whatever. Like he’s done it all, seen it all, and you’re just some dumb little girl.

And the way it smells, once she’s inside the truck. Not bad exactly. Just intense. Oil, and grease, and old car smells, and decades of cigarette smoke, and a horsey thing which could be hay, or what comes out the other end. It makes her think of TV Westerns, everything in black and white, and how you could tell who was who by the kind of hat they had on.

Plus, come on, how much bad shit could one person rate? Whose god had she pissed-off? From the look of things she’d totaled the car. Ron would

be totally gouged. And chances were, his cheap-wad insurance, it wouldn’t cover with her driving. Catching the hound back to L.A. Walking into a major shit-storm. Praying that she still had a job, and that Ron wouldn’t kick her ass out.

“So where exactly you headed?” he asked.

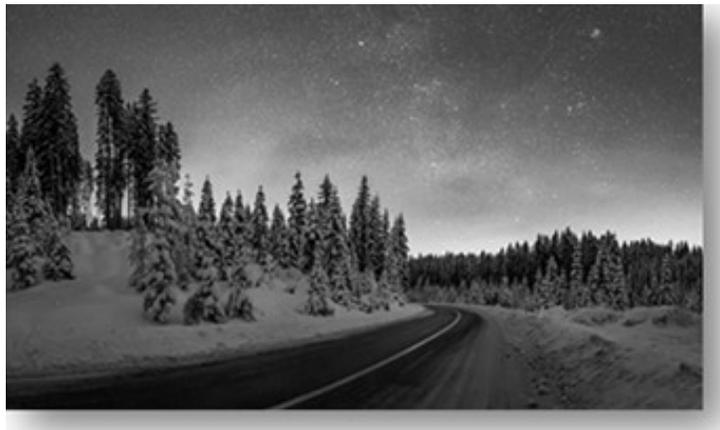
Shit. A talker. Girls she’d known, ones who’d worked on the side, they’d always claimed they were the worst.

“Reston. It’s this dinky little town. About an hour north of Bozeman.”

“And what makes Reston worth all this?”

Ron’s got an uncle, an older dude, who he kind of reminds her of. The jarhead brush cut. The baked-in tan. Kind of beefy, but not yet fat. And the way that people, they

continued



continued

match their dogs, it's the same thing with him and the truck. Like they're a package deal. One of those twofers at Target.

"Believe me," she tells him. "It's not."

"Then why ...?"

"Jesus, you always this nosey?"

"Only with people who rear-end me."

She's generally pretty much hated snow. Wondered how people lived with it. But seeing it now, caught in the headlights, it's actually kind of cool. Especially when someone else is driving, and you can just kick back. That porch-swing sway as the truck hits each curve. The quiet grind of the engine. A steady breath of hot, stale air, tickling her toes.

"So it's my sister," she hears herself say. "The reason I'm up here, I mean."

The guy just sits there, quiet.

"She's got this rare kind of cancer. The kind nobody can spell. They thought they'd finally whipped it, but now they're not so sure."

"And this would be Anne?"

It's like an ice cube down her back. She can feel her whole body pucker.

"How did you know that?"

"You said her name, back in your car, while you were still out of it."

She closes her eyes for a second. Feels her way on back. Something about Anne, a car in the water, her face as it sank down. A desperate look, puppy dog pleading, saying rescue me.

"Are you guys close?" the guy finally asks.

"Us? No way." She takes a moment to stare through the window. Wiry scrub rushing past. "She was always better than me. Always out to prove it. And when someone corners the market on good, all that's left is bad."

"Those are the worst ones," he agrees. "The people you can't stand. Because when they die, you blame yourself, you've been wanting them gone so long."

They've finally reached the top of the pass. The start of a long downhill grade. Rounding a curve, way off in the distance, she catches a flicker of lights. Which might be a town, which might have a phone, which might mean a tow for Ron's ride.

"So how do people live out here?" she wonders.

"Same way they live everywhere," the guy replies.

"Mostly by telling lies."

Another mile, a few more curves, and now she can see for sure. Civilization up ahead, or at least the next best thing.

"Mind if I give you a little advice?"

"Actually, I do."

"You. Your sister. Look, it's not like you have to fix it. Not like you ever can. But just admitting it's there, getting it out in the open, where it can get some air. You'd be amazed how much good it can do."

"And you know this how?"

He makes this sound. A kind of sigh. Like a tire that's losing air.

"Because we never did."

The gas station looks like they built it last week. Out here in the middle of nowhere. Some sick person's idea of a joke, just waiting around for the punch line. She tells him there's no point in sticking, but of course he does anyway, the Chevy blowing out gray smoke through a single rusty tailpipe. Once inside, she tries her phone, finds that the signal still sucks. Ends up using the one at the counter while the kid tries to listen in.

Up on 287? Just west of the pass? Hell of a place to break down. Just sit tight, we'll send a truck, pick you up there at the station. She passes the receiver back to the kid. He gives her this come-on look. Like maybe they could kill some time in the storeroom while she's waiting it out.

But she's got other ideas.

"So thanks again for everything," she says.

"Sure, no problem."

In the harsh florescent light of the bay he looks like an old man. Weathered face, calloused hands, gray stubble on his cheeks.

"And there's one more thing," he tells her.

He reaches into the glove box. Starts to paw around. Pulls out something she can't quite see, and shoves it in her direction.

"Here. Take it."

It's a stack of bills, tightly rolled, wound with a thick rubber band.

She stares down, shivering. "No. I can't."

"Yes you can. It's just money. And besides, most of it was hers."

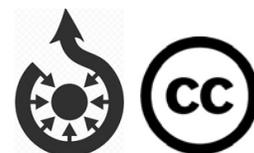
She reaches out. Grabs the roll. For a second their two hands touch.

"Thanks."

"Sure." He pauses. Clears his throat. "And next time don't tailgate."

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The Decline of the Classic Bank Heist

by Jenifer Rowe, *Sacramento*

Recently my morning paper told about a bank robber who turned himself in to police, having decided that the gig just wasn't paying enough to warrant the effort of avoiding capture. He had pulled off a couple of "teller jobs" netting him just a couple of thousand dollars. That's little more than the payment and gas money for a decent getaway car. Is it even worth the risk these days to try to hold up a bank, when so many transactions take place electronically in the safety of one's home or business? What's a brick and mortar bank robber to do?

Bank heists just aren't what they used to be. Former FBI special agent Jerry Clark, now an assistant professor of criminology at Pennsylvania's Gannon University, describes the 1930s as the great age of holdups. During the Depression, bank robbers such as John Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Baby Face Nelson held up numerous banks over several years. Along with the money they got away with, they acquired a status as folk heroes until they were killed. Today, the average take on a teller hold up is about \$4,000, and even the most talented bank robbers are lucky to last a year before being apprehended.

Much banking is conducted without the aid of a human these days. I rarely step inside a bank building, as automatic teller machines are both efficient and convenient. Bank lobbies are frequently so underpopulated that as soon as a customer enters, the bank's manager-on-duty rushes to offer personal assistance, kind of like a *maitre d'*. I pay my bills and receive my deposits electronically, so the little banking I do amounts to depositing random personal checks and getting cash, both of which I can do at an ATM.

In the early 1970s it was a different story. Banking hours were from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday, staying open until 6:00 p.m. on Fridays only. The idea of a bank being open for business on Saturday was heresy. The first automated teller machine (ATM) was invented in 1969, but they didn't become widespread until the 1980s. For another 15 years, people continued to line up at a bank window for cash. Day workers used their lunch hours to transact business, or else fought the lines on Friday after work.

In the fall of 1973, I was a college student at the University of Wisconsin, planning to relocate to San Francisco at the end of the semester. My intention was to work for a year and earn state residency; I hoped to enroll at the University of California once I was eligible for in-state tuition. I figured I would support myself as a waitress during my "sabbatical." I didn't expect to have anything to do with the banking industry.

Soon after I moved to San Francisco in January of 1974, a group of Berkeley radicals known as the SLA (Symbionese Liberation Army) kidnapped 19-year-old newspaper heiress Patty Hearst, the granddaughter of famous publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst. She was locked in a closet and subjected to brainwashing for weeks. When her captives finally let her out, Hearst joined the SLA and began calling herself "Tania," after the girlfriend of Cuban revolutionary leader Che Guevara. That April, she was photographed holding a rifle during the robbery of a Hibernia Bank branch in San Francisco, from which the group obtained more than \$10,000.

The news was riveting for a city steeped in the history and legacy of the Hearst family. I was a new resident of San Francisco, also 19 years old, and the story captivated me as well. I was a small-town Wisconsin native, working as a waitress. I couldn't imagine what it would be like for an heiress the same age as myself to keep an entire nation enthralled by her misadventures.

The next big headline occurred in May, when six heavily armed members of the SLA, including founder Donald DeFreeze (Cinque) and Angela Atwood, died in a shootout and fire that consumed their Los Angeles hideout. Hearst and two other gang members had been stopped at a nearby store for shoplifting and were not involved in the shootout.

In June, a friend of a friend recommended me for a job as a teller at a Crocker Bank in San Francisco's Mission district. (I knew nothing about banking, but at least I spoke Spanish.) Hispanic residents in 1974 generally did not favor checking accounts. So every Friday, hundreds of people lined up to cash their paychecks, and they kept the lobby filled well past 6:00 p.m., locked in with the employees until the lines disappeared. Obviously, the cash nature of these exchanges meant that plenty of currency was outside the vault and in the hands of the tellers. The circumstances were prime for bank robbers. Fortunately, that branch was never held up while I worked there.

Throughout the rest of that year, authorities kept looking for Hearst. Police reported on all possible leads, even consulting psychics, but she remained in hiding. Then in April of 1975, the SLA was again in the news when they pulled off the robbery of a Crocker National Bank in Carmichael, near Sacramento. A 42-year-old customer named Myrna Opsahl was killed during the hold-up. One female attacker "entered the bank with a firearm and kicked a non-resisting pregnant teller in the stomach. The teller miscarried after the robbery," police documents stated.

Two months after that, in June of 1975, I applied for a teller position at Wells Fargo's Civic Center branch, and a woman named P.J. Foster hired me. She was African-American, and in 1975 a black female bank manager was a

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rarity. I remember her as a dedicated, hands-on manager who took the time to mentor her employees.

Our clientele at that branch included business owners around the Civic Center who, rather than cashing checks, were often depositing large amounts of currency from their day's intake. Once again, lots of cash floated outside the vault. Conditions were ripe for a holdup, and this time I wasn't so lucky. But I'm getting ahead of the story.

At that time, the banking turnover procedure was for the resigning teller to train the new hire and turn over his or her cash drawer—a quasi-formal “changing of the guard.” My trainer, soon to depart, was a young woman named Kathleen Soliah. I remember she seemed plain, with straight brown hair and a quiet, almost mousey demeanor—very professional, and otherwise not notable in any way. She performed her duties according to standard procedures, and I took over her teller window after she left.

She not only left Wells Fargo—she fell off the radar. We learned almost immediately after her resignation that she was a member of the SLA. She had joined up soon after the May 1974 shoot-out in Los Angeles, where her close friend Angela Atwood had been killed. After she quit the bank, she and her brother Stephen, a fellow SLA member, went underground and stayed there.

When P.J. was informed of this news, she was floored. She had unknowingly been employing a terrorist. If she had been vigilant about her duties before, the effect was compounded by this news, which was not made public for security reasons. She was on her guard.

A couple of weeks later, the television series *Streets of San Francisco*, starring Michael Douglas, asked for permission to use our branch for a scene in one of their episodes. We were geographically very close to San Francisco's City Hall, so they could get some good exterior footage before heading indoors for a robbery scene. Looking less than thrilled, P.J. informed the staff of this request on a Friday afternoon. The level of excitement among the tellers was high, as we were anticipating the prospect of being on television with Michael Douglas. Alas, when we returned to work on Monday, P.J. announced that the deal was off due to “logistical difficulties.” The difficulties were never explained, but I didn't think P.J.'s recent near-brush with notoriety left her inclined to take risks with “her” bank.

A month or more passed with business proceeding as usual. Our branch, as all others, was packed during lunch hours and on Fridays. Late one Friday afternoon, with the lobby crammed full of customers, a sudden flurry of activity caught everyone's attention. Heads turned as P.J. threw open the front doors with a bang and dashed out onto Market Street, leaving her high-heeled shoes lying on the floor. None of us knew what had happened. Then one of the bank officers announced that the branch had been robbed and moved to lock the doors. Next the police showed up

and proceeded to interview absolutely everyone in the bank, both customers and employees. The process took hours.

The robbery had occurred two windows down from mine, where a teller who was seven months pregnant was confronted with a note and a gun. No one was harmed, but we were all concerned that the shock might affect the victim's pregnancy. Fortunately, she suffered no ill effects. Despite how close to me the robbery had occurred, I was completely unaware of it until I heard the announcement. P.J. had immediately taken off down the street after the getaway car and managed to view the license plate, aiding in the suspects' arrest. The SLA were not the culprits.

Very soon afterward, on September 18 of 1975, the FBI captured Patty Hearst in San Francisco. The following March, she was convicted of robbing the San Francisco Hibernia Bank; she served two years of her seven-year sentence before the sentence was commuted to time served by President Carter. She was later given a full pardon by President Bill Clinton on January 20, 2001, his last day in office. By the time Patty Hearst was convicted, most of the SLA members had been killed or arrested. These facts might suggest that teller hold-ups are not a fruitful way to finance a revolution.

Kathleen Soliah's story, however, was not over. In June of 1999, Soliah was arrested in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she had been living under the name of Sara Jane Olson. She was married to a local physician and the mother of three grown children. A huge outpouring of local support bore witness to her contributions to society during her time in St. Paul. The testimonials were not enough to save her from prison time.

In October of 2001, Soliah pleaded guilty to intent to murder police officers by bombing Los Angeles police cars in retaliation for the 1974 shootout that killed her friend Angela Atwood. In January 2002, Soliah and four other SLA members were charged with first-degree murder in Myrna Opsahl's death during the Crocker Bank robbery. Soliah pleaded guilty to second-degree murder. She was also identified as the attacker who kicked the pregnant bank employee, causing her miscarriage.

By the time Kathleen Soliah was released from prison after serving seven years at Chowchilla, the banking industry had undergone some radical changes. Banks are still not theft-proof, but they have figured out how to better limit their losses in a teller hold-up. These days, computer hacking across many industries (often, but not always, involving monetary theft) is a bigger problem with no easy answers. At least the hackers aren't coming after us with guns; they're more likely to be sitting at home in their pajamas, coding away. The job description for bank robbers is changing, and it requires a whole new set of skills. Vocational re-training may be required.

Rex's Demise

by John T. Rethke, *Central Coast Writers*

There were four of us in the field that day: three generations of my family were represented and one dog. His name was Rex and he was nowhere in sight.

Of all the small grain crops we grew on our two farms in eastern South Dakota, wheat was the heaviest; 60 pounds per bushel. One hot August afternoon in 1968 my grandfather, Henry Rethke, and I were in a 100-acre wheat field, kitty-corner from Twin Brooks, South Dakota, getting ready to pull two fully loaded four-wheel grain trailers back to my grandparents' farmstead.

My grandfather wore faded blue striped bib overalls, a well-worn red and white plaid long sleeve shirt, soft orange-colored cotton work gloves and a tattered broad-brimmed straw hat with a quarter moon piece of transparent green plastic sewn into the front brim. He was not a big man and at his age, he wasn't getting any bigger.

The light green, 200-bushel, four-wheel steel grain trailers were hitched in tandem behind our big green and yellow John Deere 4010 diesel tractor. Each trailer weighed approximately 13,500 pounds loaded.

I was seventeen years old. My grandfather was eighty-four years old and to my great chagrin still got to drive the tractor based on his seniority. I was relegated to riding shotgun next to him, on the tractor's high flat right-rear fender. I also knew I was respectfully "watching out" for my white-haired grandfather.

While we were waiting for my dad to harvest and unload one more hopper of wheat from his combine, I climbed up the side of the rear trailer and grabbed a handful of plump, warm wheat kernels. Before popping it all into my mouth, I carefully picked out the pieces of chopped-up grasshoppers, weed seeds and miscellaneous chaff. I chewed the handful of kernels for about one minute until they all coalesced into one glutinous mass. It was like making unsweetened gum from scratch. As I walked back to the tractor, I noticed Rex sleeping in the shade of the rear trailer.

My dad, Quentin, was operating the big John Deere 45 combine. The combine had no operator's cab or power steering. Using a self-propelled swather a week earlier, the stalks of wheat had been cut six inches from the ground and laid out atop the wheat stubble into windrows to dry. It took all my dad's strength to wrestle the combine around the field, following these long windrows. The combine was a moving cloud of grain dust, with my dad in the middle of it. The combine ingested the windrows of wheat, threshed out the individual kernels of grain and spit the chopped up wheat straw out the back. Even though the temperature might be pushing 100 degrees, my dad wore a one-piece

coverall over his normal work clothes and kept a red handkerchief tied tightly around his neck. He also wore a tan pith helmet, like a British soldier, which always seemed a little odd to me, but it kept his head cool and out of the sun. He loved to combine our fields of grain, but hated getting grain dust on himself.

He had just pulled up alongside us and unloaded a hopper of wheat using the combine's long horizontal auger, topping off our rearmost trailer. On the western horizon, huge dark backlit storm clouds were forming over the Chateau Hills just above our Whetstone Valley farmland. An ominous easterly breeze had just kicked up. An east wind always meant rain. Leaving the combine idling, my dad carefully climbed down off the big diesel combine, through the drifts of accumulated wheat chaff on the combine's stair steps, and took a swig of ice-cold home-brewed Lipton ice tea from an insulated plastic jug we carried on the tractor. He told us, "You guys get these trailers home and backed into the barn." *I knew who would be doing all the 'backing'.*

Backing a four-wheel trailer into a barn took some skill and practice. Complex geometry came into play. My dad started teaching me was I was about seven years old. I had been honing my backing skills with my 4-H club, The Melrose Midgets, and had participated in the tractor-driving contests at our county fair for the past two summers. The contest involved driving a tractor pulling a four-wheel trailer forward and backward through an enclosed course outlined by eight-foot high wooden stakes with golf balls balanced on their tops.

The two front wheels of each four-wheel trailer were interconnected and steerable. They were connected to the long tongue (hitch) of the trailer, which in turn was attached to the tractor. If backing up, steering the tractor's front wheels right or left would move the tongue of the trailer in the opposite direction, left or right. If you were facing back toward the trailer, moving the long steel tongue to your left moved the front of the trailer to your right. If the front of the trailer moved to your right, the back of the trailer moved to your left. Imagine sitting on the tractor, looking over your shoulder and trying to back a heavy grain trailer into a narrow barn alleyway.

To make this whole process easier, we had a strong hitch point fabricated by our favorite welder and attached to the front of the tractor. This way we were looking forward over the long front hood of the tractor and didn't have to look over our shoulder while backing up the trailer.

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After another refreshing drink of ice-cold tea, Quentin climbed back up onto the dusty combine and drove off to harvest one final hopper full of wheat before following us home.

My grandfather carefully shifted into first gear, opened our tractor's hand throttle, giving the diesel engine extra fuel, and slowly released the tractor's clutch. Thick black smoke rose from the tractor's single vertical exhaust stack and our "heavy grain train" began to inch forward over the soft black dirt and crew-cut like golden wheat stubble.

We hadn't moved forward more than a few feet when we heard a terrible high-pitched yelp. We immediately stopped; I jumped off and ran back to investigate. I'll never forget what I saw. Behind the rear wagon tires were two freshly rutted trails, several inches deep, of crushed wheat stubble. Rex's lifeless black body was lying halfway across with his mid-section "embedded" in one of the deep ruts. He must have been sleeping peacefully in the cool shade under the rear trailer when we started to pull forward.

Rex had been my grandfather's faithful dog for a number of years. Rex was nothing special, except that he was. He was a mongrel, about half the size of a German shepherd, with all-black long hair, dark brown eyes and a long, floppy, wet red tongue. Whenever my grandfather drove his red Dodge half-ton pickup the two miles into Twin Brooks for supplies, Rex would happily run beside him in the grass-filled road ditches. Rex's specialty was running; running really fast. Rex could easily maintain 20 miles per hour and, if needed, reach a brief top speed of 30.

As I stood there, stock-still behind the wagons, there was no doubt in my mind; Rex had been squished to death. I gently stooped to pick up his sad, limp, rutted body. I gently cradled him in my arms like a big furry child. His red wet tongue lolled out the side of his tooth-filled mouth. His lifeless black tail hung straight down. I walked forward to the idling tractor and slowly, sadly glanced up toward my grandfather. There was nothing to say. I could see the horrible deep pain in my grandfather's teared-up eyes. Still holding Rex, I carefully climbed up the tractor's steps and handholds to my unofficial seat on the fender. We sat there for a few long seconds listening to the idling tractor. My grandfather did not look over at Rex. There was nothing we could do but to slowly continue along with our deadly heavy load.

Using a narrow road ditch driveway at the northeast corner of the field, we carefully drove up out of the field and slowly turned onto the paved two-lane county road. Our big heavy lugged rear tractor tires squeaked in protest on the hard pavement. My grandfather shifted into eighth gear, or as we called it "road gear," leaving a sad trail of black smoke above and drifting behind us. We began trundling along in

an agonizing funeral-like procession, not trying to speak over the tractor's roaring engine. With Rex's limp body hanging from my arms, it was an agonizing long ride to my grandparent's farmstead.

As we slowly rolled up the long gravel driveway, my grandmother, Emma, came out of the two-story, big square farmhouse onto the small concrete front porch, wiping her wet hands on her ever-present checkered apron. She stood there silently, as if she knew something was wrong, watching us draw closer. We rolled to an idling stop in the mixed gravel and grass farmyard, a short distance from the farmhouse.

"What's wrong?" she shouted.

Gathering himself for a second, my grandfather shouted back, his voice cracking hoarsely, "Can't you see? Rex is dead!"

At that grim announcement, like the Biblical miracle of Lazarus before him, first Rex's head and ears shot up, then his limp body and tail sprang back to life. He exploded out of my arms, flying down from the tractor's high fender.

His four newly energized paws dug into the loose gravel and crab grass as he began to race in ever-larger circles around our tractor and trailers. My grandfather and I watched, pivoting our heads side-to-side in silent and total amazement. Rex tore around us, gravel flying from his paws, going so fast that he was leaning into the turns, like an Indy racecar driver.

After two laps, I could see my grandfather slump forward against the tractor's tilted black plastic steering wheel, let out a big sigh and slowly begin to shake his head. I know we both felt simultaneously: totally foolish and yet oh so mercifully relieved.

I watched my grandmother slowly turn, shaking her hair-netted head, open the screen door and disappear back into her kitchen.

Rex continued romping around the farmyard, enjoying his resurrection.

One at a time, my grandfather helped unhitch and re-hitch each trailer to the front of the tractor. I successfully backed both heavy trailers into the big red barn's narrow alleyway, just before large cold raindrops began to splash down on the long warm hood of the tractor. Roaring down the driveway, my dad arrived shortly afterwards with the combine and we quickly draped a green waterproof canvas tarp over the hopper full of wheat. We had no building space tall enough to safely accommodate the combine inside. Once out of the rain, we related Rex's resurrection story to my dad. He was equally dismayed and impressed.

Crazy Rex had two new specialties; somehow he had completely fooled us *and* he'd cheated death! He lived and ran happily ever after for at least five more years ... even settings some new speed records.



Meet Our Contributors

KATE ADAMS (“Everything I Know”) is the unknown author of ten thousand poems and a middle-school Spanish teacher. callmeishy@comcast.net

KRISTINE RAE ANDERSON (“Inheriting Home”) is an award-winning poet who writes and teaches in Southern California.

MARLENE AUGUSTINE-GARDINI (“The Doe”) is a short story writer and advocate of animal rescue and spay/neuter programs.

DONNA BANTA (“Birdwatching”) has published novels available on Amazon. She lives and writes in San Francisco.

ARTHUR CAREY (“Fry Baby”) likes to write for publications with interesting names such as *Pure Slush* and *Clever Magazine*.

SIMONA CARINI (“Total Lunar Eclipse”) writes nonfiction and poetry. Originally from Italy, she lives in Northern California. <https://simonacarini.com>.

GLORIA CONLY (“Camp Fire”) is a poet and novelist who survived the Camp Fire, and feels herself the luckiest of women to be alive with her dog and horse. Starting over—glodawn1@yahoo.com

JAMES MICHAEL DORSEY (“Jordan’s Bull”) has published three books and 500 essays while writing for numerous international publications. www.jamesdorsey.com.

JOAN GOODREAU (“My Son with Autism Evacuates”) writes about the challenges of life on the Spectrum in *Strangers Together* and *Another Secret Shared*.

RICHARD GUTHRIE (“Moving On”) enlisted at 17, and would serve 34 years; commanding B Company in Vietnam marked him most.

LIV HAUGLAND (“Skin Color Matters”) is a Certified Ghostwriter. She grew up in Taiwan and Norway and is passionate about multiculturalism.

JOHN GRAYSON HEIDE (“Going Down”) lives on a Sonoma mountaintop and authored the novel, *The Flight of the Pickering’s*.

SUSANNA JANSSEN (“The How and Why of Hello and Goodbye”) is an award-winning humorist and educator, writing about language for brains, hearts, and funny bones.

JULAINA KLEIST-CORWIN (“Life Support”) teaches creative writing classes, has won short story awards, and published two books available on Amazon.

RUSTY LA GRANGE (“Turning Point”) is a diverse writer and author planning her next step to create a commercial digital magazine.

JING LI (“My First Grade Teacher”) has just completed writing her memoir, *The Red Sandals*, in English, her second language. She grew up in China. JingLiTheRedSandals.com

BRIAN MARSHALL (“West of the Pass”) was born, has lived, and will die. Everything else is up for negotiation.

RICHARD E. McCALLUM (“Thomas Edison’s Last Invention”) is a prolific writer of short stories and novels; please see samples of his work at <https://remstoriescom.wordpress.com>.

MARK MEIERDING (“Unlike the Thing Itself”) is an author of imaginative poetry and a medieval fantasy novel, *The Seven Diamonds of Sawalon*.

ROBERT POIRIER (“Malone”) is a retired Navy veteran, enthusiastic novice author, gratefully continues acquiring knowledge from supportive CWC Mt. Diablo colleagues.

J. T. RETHKE (“Rex’s Demise”) is a retired Air Force pilot, aircraft owner, interested in all things flying. Memoir in progress: *South to Alaska: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?* He is ready to share life’s stories.

MARINA ROMANI (“When Voices Sang”) is the author of two books of poetry; individual poems of hers appear in literary magazines available on Amazon.

JENIFER ROWE (“The Decline of the Classic Bank Heist”) has published both fiction and non-fiction short pieces, and is currently finishing a novel.

JULIE ROYCE (“The Unconventional Recruit”) is the author of *PILZ*, a crime thriller, and *Ardent Spirit*, a historical novel. www.jkroyce.com.

RUTH WILDES SCHULER (“Poetic Landscape”) is a poet, short story and novella writer and novelist, published worldwide. Published an international literary magazine for eleven years.

RUSSELL SUNSHINE (“A Man, A Boy and Their Hawk”) is launching a new blog that celebrates a positive approach to seniority, agileaging.net.

ANITA TOSH (“The Locked Door”) lives in Sunnyvale with her husband, children, grandchildren, and a schnoodle.

NANCI LEE WOODY (“California Was on Fire and Paradise Is Lost”) wrote the prize-winning novel *Tears and Trombones*, and has published many short stories and poems.



THE CALIFORNIA WRITERS CLUB, a 501(c) 3 educational nonprofit corporation, was founded in 1909 out of the lively literary scene in San Francisco's East Bay region in the first decade of the 20th century. Various factions and factors contributed to the birth of CWC, including the Alameda Press Club and informal gatherings at the home of Joaquin Miller that included noteworthies like Jack London, Ina Coolbrith, George Sterling and John Muir. CWC was incorporated in 1913 and has been holding meetings for over 100 years. Today, CWC boasts some 2,000 members in 22 branches throughout the state, and is considered among the oldest organizations for writers in continuous operation in the nation.

CWC's mission is to educate writers in the craft of writing and the publication of their work. Unlike many other writers' organizations, CWC membership is open to writers of all interests, levels and genres. We pride ourselves on our wide-open door, and on the friendly atmosphere at our meetings. Our website, calwriters.org, has specific information about membership and links to the individual branches.

Branches and Meeting Locations

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Central Coast (Pacific Grove)
Coastal Dunes (Nipomo)
East Sierra (Ridgecrest)
Fremont (Fremont)
High Desert (Apple Valley)
Inland Empire (Ontario)

Long Beach (Long Beach)
Marin (Corte Madera)
Mendocino (Mendocino)
Mt. Diablo (Pleasant Hill)
Napa Valley (Napa)
North State (Chico)
Orange County (Orange)
Redwood (Santa Rosa)

Sacramento (Rancho Cordova)
San Fernando Valley (Woodland Hills)
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LITERARY REVIEW

