

**Note:** Unfortunately, our funding has been severely cut, so we will be requesting \$5.00 per submitter, and \$5.00 per copy next year.

Donations to the cause should be sent to the Cabrillo Foundation

## Introduction

Welcome to the 2003 edition of *The Porter Gulch Review*. This annual project was established 18 years ago with the purpose of showcasing novice and experienced writers from Santa Cruz County and beyond. The students of David Sullivan's English 1B class at Cabrillo College edited this year's edition of the PGR. In total, this year's PGR received 500 written pieces and 250 artistic works, and as always all of the pieces were chosen anonymously to ensure an unbiased selection. The staff of this year's PGR would like to give a thanks to all of those who submitted to the Review, as well as everyone else who has contributed to making this edition of the PGR a wonderfully colorful collaboration of literary and artistic works. A huge thanks also goes out to Cabrillo College, whose funding makes *The PGR* possible.

Friends of the S.C. Libraries Prose Award: Helene Simkin Jara's *Josefina*

Poetry Award: S. Christopher Johnson's *Poems*

Graphic Arts Award, on behalf of George Ow Family Properites:

Maureen Quinn's *Photography*

Pajaro Valley Arts Council Visual Arts Award:

KOAK's *Drawings*

## Submission Guidelines for PGR 2004

We invite submissions of short stories, poetry, excerpts from novels, screen plays, plays, photography, and artwork for the 2004 issue by December 1. All prose (two maximum per writer, 5,000 words), and poetry (four maximum per writer), must be single sided, typed, single spaced, in triplicate, in 9x12 envelope with your name, address, e-mail address and telephone number on cover page *only*. Also include the titles of submissions in the cover letter. Do not staple or use paper clips on *any* pages. Please put your name and contact information on the back of each piece of artwork. Original artwork can be retrieved at the PGR public reading. All written entries must include a computer disk, which exactly duplicates the hard copies, but include your name. Regretfully, we are requesting a \$5.00 donation reader fee to support the PGR with the impending budget cuts. Send to: Porter Gulch Review, Cabrillo College, 6500 Soquel Dr., Aptos, CA, 95003.

## PGR 2003 Staff Members

Vanessa Aispuro, Kelly Alexander, Jessica Baker, Christopher Dykmans, German Estrada, Nicole Frager, Kelly Galli, Sonya Gonzalez, Tristan Gregson, Jeffrey Harper, Clare Hayford, Rita Jones, Nathaniel Kotila, Chloe la Fortune, Zachary Patten, Jeff Phillips, Vin Rideout, Mellissa Santé, Erica Scott, Amaya Swanson, Joanne Toth, Martha-Victoria Vega, Eric Wallace, Steve Zoerner, Maureen Quinn, Bonnie Maddalon. The English 1B instructor is David Sullivan. Beth Truso and Janet Thelen assisted in the production of this year's PGR; it wouldn't exist without them! Thanks all!

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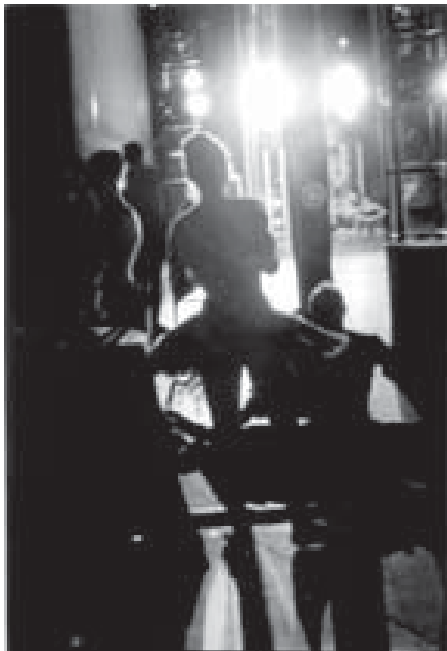
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The online version of PGR can be accessed through Cabrillo College's English Division homepage.

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Maureen Quinn,  
Sugar Plum Fairy



## Life is the Oyster

Jamie S. Uyematsu

Souls and late-night conversations,  
With those who would change the world.  
With those who are changing the world.

Laying on floors,  
Sitting on counters.  
Under streetlights.  
In parked cars,  
Empty parking lots.

We are those who are free.

We are the ones who have escaped entrapment.  
We are the movers, the shakers, the thinkers, the speakers.

Our power does not come from finite finances,  
But from something far more vast.  
Our power comes from the most potent infinity  
Of possibility itself.

We are those who carry the hearts of humanity forward with  
our inspiration.  
We are the voices of passion, of emotion, of struggle.  
We are the toil, the pain, the pleasure, the joy, and the  
ecstasy.  
We are the celebration of imperfection in all of its glorious  
beauty.  
We are the oddballs, the outcast, the freaks and the  
entertainers.

We are the dreamers.



## Bruises

Charles Schubert

The cold coffee tastes  
like the end of  
a convention, long  
nights in yellow halls where  
every cough echoes  
and  
the mouth longs to rinse  
bitter plantation dust  
from gum lines. Coffee  
cures the ache  
I associate with sleep,  
pain of not knowing  
unobstructed smell  
of 3 am.  
Caffeine sharp light  
in the window, the only  
window lit,  
hyperactively  
cleaned blank to look  
out at a world that knows  
when to quit  
this game called day.  
The irony called  
consciousness:  
those awake to the world are  
those who don't sleep much. We  
wear the badge  
of bruised eyelids, suspicious  
of anyone, who, unlike  
me knows when  
to put the cup  
down  
and get some damn rest.

## The Soul

Ann Keniston

It's how the body might  
have disguised itself, unable  
to imagine something wholly  
unfamiliar. Why else would it  
keep hovering near the useless  
hospital bed like a human body  
with wings and tiny  
shimmering hands and feet?  
Or wait outside the windowpane,  
rattling it so faintly  
the inhabitants don't notice  
the miraculous already beginning  
to unfold just past  
where they can see. Within  
the girl convinced no violation occurred  
despite her body's evidence,  
pain is a nub about to be  
transformed by blooming.  
Her soul, if that's what  
saved her from knowledge, acted  
as her body did, but more deviously,  
like a well-meaning friend  
who can't help tiptoeing  
away from any scene  
violence has intruded on.

*Line Dancers at Boot Hill,*  
T. Mike Walker



Notes for a Poem  
That Fits in the Palm  
of my Hand

Lauren Crux

*The great function of poetry  
is to give us back the situations of  
our dreams.*

—Gaston Bachelard

# 1

The house that  
shelters daydreaming  
fits in the palm  
of my hand

it is a very large  
house  
and I have  
a very large  
hand

but not big enough  
for a house?

well, no            but, yes

big enough for a poem  
of muscularity

and  
memory

#2

I grabbed for my thesaurus  
packed it carefully in my  
suitcase with my paper,  
my pens  
only to discover  
upon unpacking  
that I had brought  
instead  
my Spanish/English  
dictionary

A need  
for this other language  
*para mi corazón*  
my heart  
*y mi alma*

# 3

I write, missing her,  
am embarrassed  
to feel both old and  
young in the same  
moment

—*te quiero*—

*What does that  
mean?* she asks  
and I whisper  
close to her ear  
in translation

#4

I place nouns verbs adverbs  
side by side *by side*  
but in my palm  
they spill over  
so instead  
I lay them  
one on top  
of the other  
the way I lay  
my body  
on top  
of hers

Will the words  
weigh heavily  
like *cunt*  
or drop delicately  
tiny spiders  
on thin lines  
of spit?

#5

this poem  
could be very tall

and light  
if made of spiders

#6  
with the generosity  
that comes  
of love  
I give words away  
like Felix Gonzales-Torres  
who stacked his photographs  
an unending supply  
so that each visitor  
could take  
the art  
home

*stairways  
reverberations/  
las resonancias  
gesture/  
el gesto*

#7  
I have held many things  
in the palm of  
my hand  
nickels, quarters  
held  
my lover's trust  
the rent check  
but never a poem  
that fits just  
so  
    softly  
as if cradling  
a baby bird  
or a baby dragon  
(oh but their tails  
are too long and  
there's the problem  
of fire)  
#8  
This poem  
vertical

reaches from cellar  
to ceiling  
holds a candle  
that casts  
shadows  
on the walls  
of your breast  
of your breath

# 9  
It makes me shiver  
these shadows  
of basements  
black and immense  
of attics  
in which  
I dream  
day and night  
and cannot  
be civilized

#10  
But these words  
one on top of the other  
lead me back inside  
to this warm  
substance  
of intimacy  
this house-poem  
this hand-held  
language  
*del ensueños  
of daydreams*

and it fits  
just  
so



Noelle J. Correia

## Saturday Night at The Cha-Cha Club

Julia Alter

I believe in my girlfriends.  
In the scream, sing and crazy wildgirl dancing we do.  
How it heals to be out here shaking our asses, our curves.

Out here strumming our dreams like boys' backs or guitars,  
licking tequila from our fingertips, licking salt from our own  
hands.

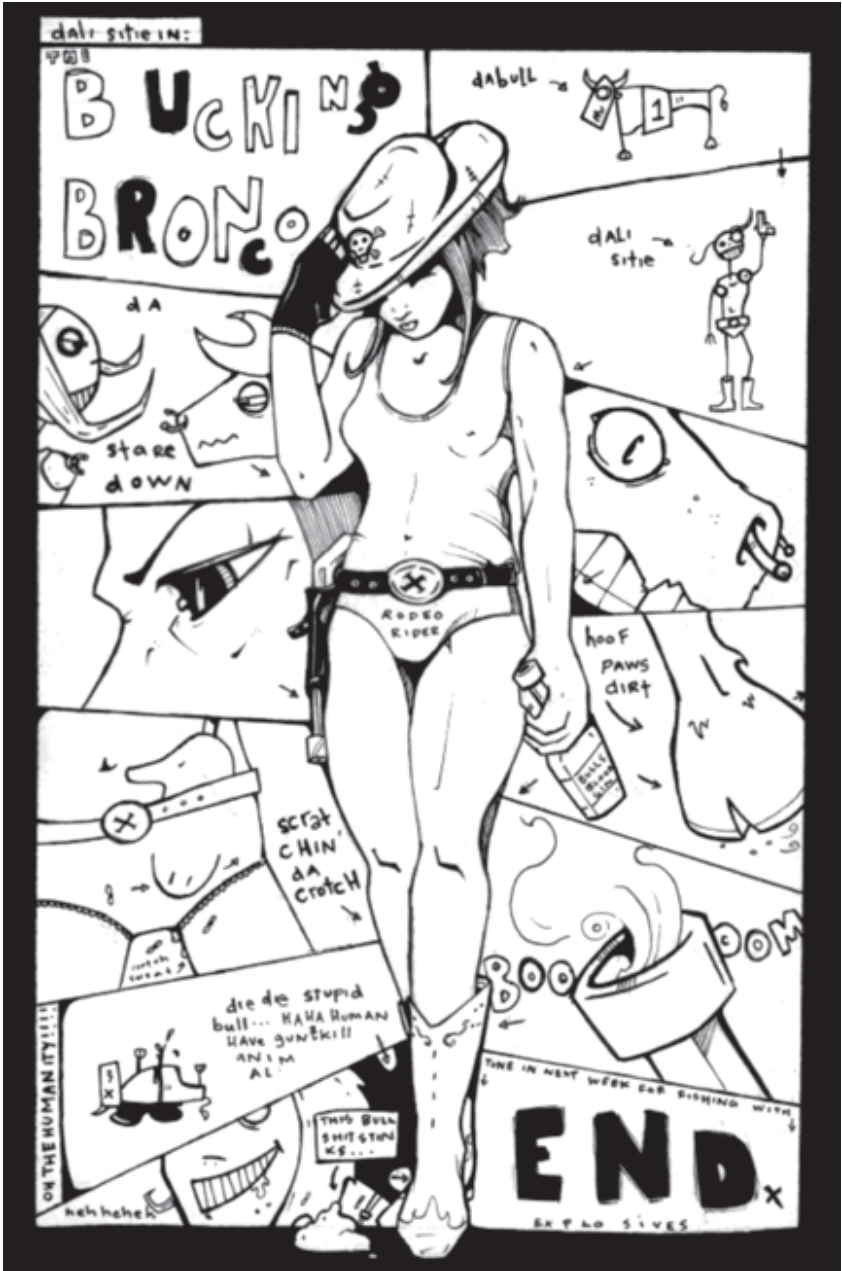
We are one mass of ass and backbone. We are dancing to  
carve ourselves  
into this world. We dance because the answer lives in that  
man's eyes  
right there, that man  
dancing back at us.

We dance because he asks and in those au lait eyes  
the birth of some spring, promise of skin. And the one in the  
red shirt? He is mine tonight and the one with joy written on his  
jeans, the one who moves like a leopardsnake—I dance for him  
and for the stockbroker dancing with the travel agent in tight  
khaki pants.

We are dancing to look good and to honor these knees,  
dancing from the elbow to the hinge of the groin  
and we hinge on this shared dream: together out here dancing,  
we are *new* bodies. We are brand new, holding onto the slip of  
the groove  
the needle in the record.

I dance for the crazy blessing it gives my heart, for the wild  
forgetting,  
for the orchid dying slow on the sill. I dance because the  
saxophone  
told me to and because the guitar said, Girl, Dance!

I'm dancing because my friends are learning what makes them  
move  
and for our friend at the bar who says she can't dance—  
I'm dancing for ten minutes from now when she's out here  
on this dance floor with us, stomping her heart out on the  
word *shy*,  
glinting like glass, shaking that thing cause she's alive.



KOAK

## If They Chop Open My Body

Julia Alter

If they chop open my body

they will find an engine the size of Tavarua.  
They will find a navy seal, then a little girl  
in a magenta pinafore saying out loud  
over and over, *I'm getting tired*  
*of walking.*

A road of misshapen stones, tulips springing out  
between my ribs, all tongue-tinged, the color of my gums.  
They will find that all along, a woman named Rita  
has been in there doing the Cha-Cha in a swishy black dress  
and turquoise beads.

They will find a stop sign, a bolt of corduroy,  
a field of sunflowers, an olive tree, an unopened  
pack of Djarums, a half drunk bottle of Grand Marnier,  
a tattoo of a giraffe on the inside of the heart, a bag  
of marbles, a silver suburban with the keys  
in it, idling there by the vertebra.

And I wondered why I could never meditate or fall in love.  
For years wondering what the hell was wrong  
and they are lifting from my body the sleeping child,  
the jackhammer and the sickle moon.



Debbie Blessing

# Junkies Walk Like Dead Among Us

Charles Schubert

The first time

you were junk blue,  
eyes already leaving.

I thrust air

to small spaces  
where the sickness  
hadn't found you.

Though we never met,  
I kissed life

to your lungs.  
\$29 hotel room bed,  
sheets in bloom  
with hourglass blood.

Your heart restarted,

stubborn motor  
with unseen cord.

Skin pale,

warming to normal,  
needle grown  
from forearm.

Somniferium, flower of joy,  
purple petals of advent.

Birth of a new Christ,

holy trinity of addiction:  
stick, charge and plunge.

The last time we met

you weighed less than your habit;  
a sum of need,  
you joked about prison  
while jailed by shakes.

I cannot breathe  
you from this bed

you are consumed  
by quiet granite

You sleep,

a voice reduced  
to breeze through headless  
stems

left next to your picture.

## Clues

Marcia Adams

His name was Ivanhoe  
and they called him Dave  
his eyes seem blue  
and his hair maybe red  
although it's hard to tell  
what's real in old sepias  
they know it was rabbit blood  
smeared on his Oldsmobile  
left on a Sacramento levee  
and those who still ache  
tell terrible stories  
about how his father  
found him hiding in Idaho  
dragged him back to face  
babies, bankruptcy trials  
and a temporary widow  
turned into unforgiving  
divorcee hell-bent on never  
speaking his name aloud  
and when he snagged himself  
under a fallen log, fishing  
on the Klamath in 1923  
my mother lost a little girl's  
daddy she insists  
to this day  
was a good and  
loving man



Amy Feron Mathews

## “Little Boy Lost, Presumed Drowned in Lake”

Brenda J. Lee

I smiled at the imagined headlines  
turning my face quickly so that  
Mother would not see my delight.  
As she grabbed my hand,  
my shoulder yanked forward  
and I fell into step with her  
sensing what in my mother  
could only be called outrage  
then dread of what she'd discover  
as we neared the lake—Swallow Lake  
I thought to call it now  
having consumed so hungrily  
my four-year old brother, nuisance that he was.  
Already his erratic footprints  
were filling with black water  
and I wondered how much of it  
one could swallow before drowning  
how the watery ooze must be  
slipping coolly down my brother's throat  
in choking gurgles  
even as he would struggle  
to swim free.

“Still no body recovered”  
the TV reporter would say.  
As light faded away to dusk,  
Mom continued to cry her own dark tears... I know,  
I would cheer her with a song  
but meanwhile gather up his toys  
and put them in my room.  
And so I was a wicked child with wicked thoughts.  
Mother never forgave me  
for deceiving her this way—  
the little angel waited in the closet  
where I had put him,  
and I never bothered  
to retrieve his pair of white sneakers  
engulfed by Swallow Lake.



the entering  
 the filling  
 press of knees  
 to mattress coils  
 press of diamond eyes that stare like stars  
 barely blinking  
 barely breathing  
 press of tangled bodies  
 quickened pulses  
 frenzied breath  
 fists clench sheets  
 toes curl  
 voices cry  
 out  
 press of exhausted bodies  
 finding rest  
 press of cheek to chest  
 ear to heartbeat



Bradley Wise

## The End

Katie Holman

Alcohol pisses me off.  
Nice, sane, graceful people can become assholes  
somewhere after just enough  
and as far into I-hate-you-land as they care to go.  
It's really a shame it had to end this way.



KOAK

## Done

Katie Holman

I've reached the point where I don't want to call you back  
Am tired of the 2-hour fix-it conversations over nothing of any  
significance  
Have begun to be irritated by your overly sensitive ego  
Your damned beer breath  
The way you know every button, and exactly how many times to  
push it  
Before I clock you in the head  
And you fall And I no longer care.

## Sweet Sixteen

Orion Denley

I know what happens when you die:

What you were doing when last alive  
Will last forever.

Some people spend eternity  
On an Iron Lung  
Dreaming of cigarettes  
And beaches.

So for Laurel  
I pray  
That what I know of death is true  
And that the last party  
Was the best party,  
Ever.



Jamie S Uyetmatsu

## A Year After the Diagnosis

Bonnie Aldridge

You lie in your hospital bed  
the poison they say  
that drips into your veins  
is to save your life

What kind of poison is this that saves?

my neighbor's poison  
kill their lawn  
tell me they will plant anew in the spring  
a new lawn  
no weeds

I am supposed to believe  
that Lorna's poison  
will kill her weeds  
leave her enough lawn  
to reseed  
to flourish  
heal over the wounds

I watch as she sleeps  
the warrior that she is  
I witness the scars

Ash gray skin  
bloated face

In a moment's lapse,  
I imagine her head filled with helium  
I release her  
into our collective soul  
But it is not her time

I smell the death of the hospital's disinfectant  
this poison too  
kills to save

I am dizzy with contradictions

The clock on the wall is stopped  
An eternal 1:07  
"Would that be A.M. or P.M.?"  
I chuckle

There is no time  
when you are on hospital time

Lorna's eyes open  
we look into each other  
past the hospital, through our  
marriages, hippy chicks on the  
strip and into the orchards of our childhood

Where we slice our fingers and rub  
the blood together into one  
claiming our sisterhood

We lay our hands together in a tender grasp  
she speaks with difficulty  
as sores in her mouth  
fester from the chemo  
and the tumors  
press on nerves  
interfering with speech

She says, "You are here"  
and smiles.



Skies of an Afternoon Nap, Lorie J. Haraldsen

## Houses of Sorrow

Marilyn Robertson

You can't tell from the outside.  
Stucco or wood, curtains or blinds;  
inside one a painting of trees, every door  
locked and bolted, in another an old dog  
lies on the couch shedding all its hair.

A woman has arranged an armchair  
in a garage so she can smoke in comfort.  
Settled among its cushions she reads the old news.

Her stepson lives in a board and care home.  
The city allows him a free bus pass.  
He crosses town to visit his brother  
who never knows what to say.

Her daughter collects lost men,  
then loses them. Her boys ask,  
Where are our fathers?  
They look everywhere.

The Victorian on the corner fills with furniture,  
then empties. A For Sale sign goes up.  
Swings are dismantled, too rusty to be appealing.

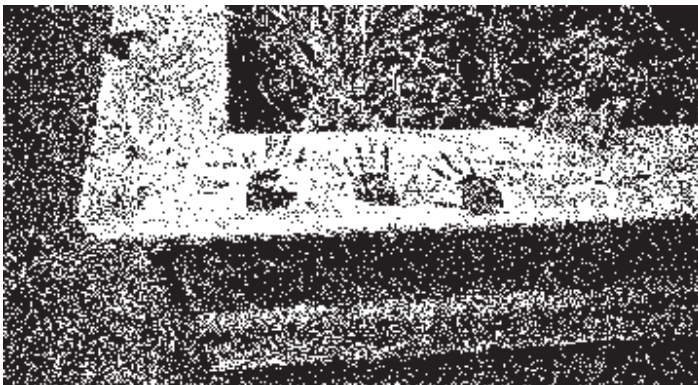
A trailer pulls into the neighborhood after dark.  
Masking tape keeps out the wind,  
blankets cover the windows.  
By morning it is gone.

A child draws a house that fills the blank page,  
flowers big as windows.  
Smoke curls from the chimney.  
Live here, says the lopsided door.

## Three Children

Constance Hanstedt

How innocent we look, three children  
in the faded photograph. On the left  
a boy of five with blonde crew cut and  
straight-ahead stare, lips unbending  
and resigned. On the right a girl  
almost two years older, whose light  
brown curls bounced until the warning  
to “just-sit-still-a-minute” while the photo  
was snapped. So she calmed herself  
and her curls settled in a cluster  
around the wide curves of her mouth.  
On their laps a baby was propped,  
her questioning eyes fixed on a point  
in the distance, her open mouth round  
and silent. We were freshly scrubbed,  
spotless, like just-cut gardenias.  
The boy started fights with neighbor  
kids, pummeled the arms of his little  
sister, and felt the slap of his parents’  
anger. The older girl drew hopscotch  
squares on our narrow sidewalk, then  
ran joyfully beyond the backyard’s  
boundary of thick raspberry bushes.  
And the youngest child surveyed  
her world as if a wary visitor, unsure  
of her importance while treading  
timidly through rooms of butter yellow.



Janet Thelen

Diana Simpson Mattison

The street is bleeding  
Saliva is seething between my clenched teeth  
The rats feed on each others' needs  
And fists enclose over thin air  
To grasp at the nothing that was never there  
All we're told is that we had better come prepared  
For heartaches and toothaches and feelings we thought  
Were never there  
Try again  
The machine ate your quarter  
Try again  
And avoid contracting a psychological disorder  
Mom says therapy is the cure for me  
I say everyone's happier when the cook's getting laid  
Less temper is lost and everything's brilliantly made  
Laugh if you will  
Cry if you must  
Die if it fits the circumstance  
And always give into lust  
That's the evil running deep  
Speaking through this pen  
No one could be foolish enough to listen  
To the ramblings of a demon among men



Jamie S. Uyematsu

## No Major Holidays

Shalom Victor

"No major holidays," my daughter Elizabeth announced to me during a particularly grueling phone call. I felt as if a wasp had stung me and it was only later as I sat staring at a fine crack on my bedroom wall that I felt a pale circle of pain work its way towards the center of my chest.

I imagined her lying across her California king, her elbows resting on the beige damask pillows, turning the pages of a first rate novel. Through her bedroom window a breeze carried the strong perfume of the pink cabbage roses, their blooms as large as salad plates, which are tenderly cared for by her gardener. Everything in southern California takes to life, even in the winter.

Fresh from a shower she is wearing her white terry bathrobe, the one as soft as melting marshmallow, on which her initials are scripted in satiny blue thread. She is twisting her sapphire and diamond ring with the fingers of her right hand. Her nails are short and clean, as you would expect to see on a doctor's hands.

As we spoke, a fierce December rain battered the canker-rusted pines that sat above my small house on the central coast of California, three hundred miles north of where she lived. I was wearing my old bathrobe, its pink and blue stripes made invisible by so many washings. I had just brushed my teeth and felt disheartened to see how yellow they had become. I didn't understand that; I thought aging whitened everything.

When she said what she said, all I could mumble was, "Oh, I see." I normally need a few hours after I'm bruised to feel the pain.

"Oh, Trevor," I sobbed and could not contain myself. "That's it, no more; I'm done, finished." Trevor's my second husband. He thinks clearly, which enables me to see the bigger picture. He's also the most sympathetic guy I know.

"Sleep on it," he said.

"I'm not sure I can, but I'll try."

Elizabeth's father and I were divorced when she was eight years old. It was then that I left New York for California with his blessings. He didn't want to see his daughter go, but he understood my need to begin again. After all, he had just remarried, and was beginning a second family.

Living in Los Angeles opened up something inside of me; there was no one to oversee my actions, so I did what Californians are always accused of, I experimented. I went to a nudist camp and I slowly took my clothes off, and sat in the hot tub. I was in the midst of couples who held each other, kissed, and touched one another above and below the water.

“Want to come with me to a nudist camp, honey?” I had asked Elizabeth. I was hoping she would agree, as I wanted to see her become more open. I told her that there would be other children there and we could have a picnic on the grass. She was a shy eleven year-old child, an observer, who didn’t say very much. Her usual posture: standing with her arms folded across her chest, her shoulders pulled up to her ears.

“Uh, I don’t know,” she said, looking terrified. But, in the end she came with me. Either because she was afraid of disappointing me or because she didn’t want to seem like a wimp. As I sat nude on the blanket, my body exposed to the sun, and to the others, Elizabeth stood nearby, fully dressed, her arms tightly folded across her chest. I was sorry I had dragged her with me and I never did it again. I also figured she was pretty mad at me.

I dated a lot in Los Angeles and hired babysitters to spend time with her, sometimes for as long as an entire weekend. One girl, Nina, was just thirteen, and she described herself as a ‘mother’s helper.’ The mother’s helper is there when you’re there, but often I was not. I had a job I loved, working for an advertising photographer as his representative. I had to fly to other cities to show his work. On one occasion I went to Chicago. Nina was the only babysitter available. She came days and Elizabeth spent the nights with the downstairs neighbor. I even got to go to Europe; my first time ever. Elizabeth stayed with a family I did not know, but the parents came highly recommended by a good friend. They seemed nice enough. Pete, the dad, had a bottle of beer in his hand when he opened the door. Lots of guys drink beer, I thought.

One evening I checked my medicine cabinet for some expensive make-up I had bought in Paris. It was gone. Nina had been at our house for a few hours and was just leaving as I emerged from the bathroom.

“Did you take my lipstick and eyeliner, Nina?” Said politely, of course.

“Uh, no, I didn’t.” She looked sheepishly at me, pressing her pointy chin into her small chest. I turned to Elizabeth, squeezed my lips together and put the same question to her. She shook her head without speaking.

“Are you sure?” I said, badgering her.

“No, I didn’t.” She stamped her bare foot. I reasoned it could only have been Elizabeth. I couldn’t imagine Nina stealing anything. She was so retiring.

Nina moved quickly to the front door and let herself out.

“No dinner tonight,” I said. And no television.” Elizabeth turned around and went into her room. She was steaming, I’m sure. An hour later I was sorry I had imposed such hardship on a child, but

how could I retract my statement without compromising my authority? As usual, I didn't know what to do, so I buried the incident.

I liked my life, but I wasn't so sure my daughter liked hers. She had one friend, though, someone in her class. I would often hear Elizabeth and Dee Dee giggling in Elizabeth's bedroom. I was glad she had a friend and I felt reassured. Dee Dee would keep Elizabeth happy and I wouldn't have to worry so much about her being lonely and bored.

For Christmas break that year Elizabeth went to New York to spend time with her father, Larry, and stepmother, Margaret. They had a daughter, Chelsea. She was just going to be gone for two weeks. On the day before I was to pick her up at the airport, I received a phone call. I was sitting at my desk in the studio. It was raining needles of silver. The fronds of the royal palm, now brown and disgraceful, flapped outside the window; they hung by a thread.

"Riva?"

"Yes. Is this Larry?" I quickly recognized the high thin voice.

"Listen, I need to talk to you about Elizabeth," he stammered. I knew this was going to be a tricky conversation. He only stuttered when he had to give me bad news or when he felt guilty.

"Well, what is it?" I said, feeling my stomach contract.

"Eliz... Elizabeth doesn't want to leave. She wants to live with us." I could hear his breathing; it was shallow and quick. I couldn't say a word. He continued. "She asked us if she could stay; it was her idea."

"Ummm, are you sure?"

"No question. We had a great visit. She wants to take ice skating lessons and gymnastics and she loves Chelsea." The line went dead. How uncanny at a time like this. I didn't call him back. Instead, I screamed. There was no one else around. I suppose I thought this was the thing one does when your child chooses not to be with you, but with the other parent. I was shocked but not surprised. Elizabeth was smart; she chose the better life.

I didn't see her for years. On one visit to New York I went to the apartment on Park Avenue she was living in. The doorman opened the door for me and I entered a regal lobby and took the elevator up to the sixteenth floor. There was the only apartment on the floor. I waited in the library for Elizabeth to show up. When she did she barely spoke to me. I hid my disappointment and my tears. Later, I understood how difficult it must have been for her to see her mother. I was dressed like a flower child; a tie-dyed shirt, moccasins and porcupine quill earrings.

I sent her gifts for every occasion. For her birthday one year I made her a pillow. I bought a big swatch of black velvet, a few yards of white lace, a package of fiberfill and some rhinestone studs. It was tricky getting the lace to fit around the perimeter of the square pillow,

but I did it! I wrote her name with the studs. Holding it up in front of me, I shook my head, severely discouraged. It looked like something that you might find in a free box. The filling bunched up into little balls, her name was off kilter, and the stitching was obvious. I sent it to her anyway, foolishly hoping she would find something about its softness that she could nuzzle against her cheek.

When she turned nineteen and agreed to visit me for the first time in years, I welcomed the chance to get to know the young woman she had now become. Exhausted from the long flight from New York to California, she lay daydreaming on the sofa. I approached her and attempted to kiss her cheek. She turned her head away, then rolled over onto her stomach, pushing her face into the cushions.

She hardly faced me during the four-day visit. On the day she left for New York, something I did rankle her. At 8:00AM I ran in a race without paying the \$10.00 fee. I didn't think it was a big deal.

"Why couldn't you be a 'normal' mom?" Tears, the first I had seen since she was twelve, slid down her face. To see one's own parent as fraudulent must have been very painful to her. She was right, of course. Whenever money was an issue for me I would try to get away without paying.

Her eyelids became so swollen I could hardly see her lovely brown eyes. I put my hand on her arm and she pulled it away. I felt hurt. I walked into the kitchen, removed ice cubes from the fridge, wrapped them in a towel and offered it to her. She nodded and applied the ice to her eyelids.

"Elizabeth, I'm sorry," was all that I could come up with. I knew there was more to her tears. She pushed the ice hard into her eyes to stop the flow of tears.

"Is there more?" I asked guiltily. I wanted to cry, but I held back, to give her a chance to say whatever was on her mind. I knew, then, that she had buried years of pain, and one visit would not erase it.

"You left me with virtual strangers when you went to Europe." I saw her chin shudder from the memory. Elizabeth took the tissue I offered to wipe her eyes.

"The father..." but, then she paused and stiffened. "He was a jerk."

"How?" My heart was beating hard.

"It was a long time ago. It doesn't matter now." And that was as far as she would go.

After her visit, I felt that we had made some progress. I called her and she spoke to me. I felt warmth in my chest; a tiny flicker of hope for us. We did not speak often while she was in college and then in medical school out of the country. I was happy for any contact. I was proud of her; she was working hard, and I understood my position; I

was on the back burner.

Yet, when Elizabeth was engaged to be married she brought her betrothed to visit us. She was now living in Los Angeles and practicing medicine. I was sure she was a competent and sensitive physician.

I was thrilled that she wanted me to meet Bruce. I got a glimpse of them as he was parking his Mercedes in our driveway, which wasn't really a driveway, but a knot of thick pine tree roots, which you had to negotiate like a scree slope. I knew from his license plate – BIG TIME — that I was going to have to work hard at this. I was as nervous as a kid on a blind date. Before their arrival I made sure that the house was spotlessly clean.

Sleek, that's what I thought about Bruce. A perfect squash-player's body, a Harvard graduate in business. A smoothly shaved face, coarse dark hair, French eyewear with steel frames. He smiled at me with slightly parted lips, but mostly he just looked serious, as if deliberating whether to like me or not. We all went for a walk and Bruce walked by my side. It was just after we had attacked Saddam Hussein so I figured this would make for good conversation.

"Bush only wants the oil in the Middle East. We don't care about Kuwait."

"How do you know?" he said, in a tone that scared me. When I turned to face him, I noticed him looking down his nose at me, which was only anecdotal 'til then, and nothing I had ever experienced. He had the perfect nose for the job. It was straight and broad, the nostrils tight and steady.

"Uh," and I played for time. "The WILPF organization seems to think this is the case."

"What's WILPF?" I could feel him withdraw. I was spouting words that I myself wasn't sure of to a person I wanted to impress.

"Women's International League of Peace and Freedom," I said, stumbling unconvincingly over the name. I knew, then, that I had goofed. I should have stayed in my own backyard, which was basically apolitical.

Then the wedding invitation arrived. At first I didn't think too much about how it read. "Mr. and Mrs. Larry Vogel and Mr. and Mrs. Charles Strauss invite you to attend the marriage of their children...."

"Elizabeth, oh, I'm so happy for you," I said with a lot of feeling during my phone call to her. I was feeling hopeful about us; she was older and getting married and the ground was more even. "Can I help in making you a wedding shower?"

She said, with not much hint of an apology, "Uh, no thanks, my friends are getting one together for me." I thought this was a reasonable explanation. Nothing more was said. I wasn't invited, but we

lived so far away I assumed she didn't think I would make the drive.

I went shopping for a dress to wear to her wedding; a designer friend was marking down this year's clothes. I was glad to find a three piece rayon outfit in a lovely salmon color and perfectly priced. I colored my hair a dark auburn. Sitting up in bed sipping tea one morning, I casually picked up the invitation. It was very beautiful. The names were engraved on fine ivory stock. Then, as if I were looking at it for the first time, I took in what I had not realized before; the exclusion of our names. I felt a punch to my stomach. We were nobodies. Just invited guests.

Trevor isn't her dad so he could care less.

I saw it all very clearly. Our family stationed in the last row during the ceremony. Trevor's socks mismatched. His belt brown, his pants gray. My outfit, to tell truth, hung funny. Elizabeth's father and his wife, Margaret, would walk down the aisle with her, their arms looped through hers, a smug, satisfied smile on Margaret's face as she swooped by and saw me.

They would stand under the wedding canopy on one side of the couple, Bruce's parents on the other. No one would even know that I was Elizabeth's mother. It has happened since, that when Elizabeth introduced me to someone she runs into on Rodeo Drive, she pauses, and then says, "This is Riva – uh – my mother." The person stares at me, obviously having difficulty putting two and two together. The mother that they thought Elizabeth never had.

A week before the event I couldn't get out of bed. I was experiencing such severe fatigue that I thought I must have a serious illness. Food lost all its allure. My face was flushed, and my eyes were small and colorless, lacking their usual animation. The rest of my body was pale and tremulous. I had to shut the blinds against the light streaming into our window, as if it were the harsh intrusion of fluorescent tubing. I called my doctor.

"Has this ever happened to you before?" I had just been in to see him for a routine physical. The tests were negative.

"I don't think so."

"You sound depressed," he said. I thought depression was having the blues. No, I reasoned, I just have the flu. I swallowed Ibuprofen, sipped tea; nothing helped. I had a severe, ongoing headache; I couldn't read, write in my journal or watch T.V. It became clear to me that I wouldn't be able to attend my daughter's wedding.

The hardest part had to be making that phone call. I waited until the last possible minute. I rehearsed my speech for hours, then I put off calling because I thought I might feel better. I wanted so much to be there, even in a tiny way. It was countdown, twenty-four hours to go, and I knew I couldn't procrastinate any longer.

The phone rang. *Please, God, let it be Elizabeth who answers.*

However, a bride never answers the phone on the day before her wedding.

“Hello.”

“Margaret?”

“Yes, this is she. Oh, hi, is this Riva?”

“Yes.” Margaret had never sounded so friendly toward me.

“May I speak to Elizabeth, please?”

“Oh, sure,” she said, still sounding perky. “Just a minute.”

“This is Elizabeth.” I could tell by the way that she registered my name she was glad to hear from me.

“Uh – Elizabeth,” I stammered. I was alone in the room, my head resting on the pillows, which were damp from my perspiration. My heart rate was up. I stared at myself in the mirror across from my bed, and I saw my weight loss reflected in my haggard face.

Her voice dropped and then there was a few seconds of silence. “Yes.”

“I can’t come.” I waited for her to respond, but all I heard was the white noise on the phone line. “I’m ill.” She didn’t answer me immediately.

“I’m really disappointed,” she said, and I believe she meant it. “But if you’re sick I guess you can’t.” Said with a doctor’s cool detachment.

“I wish I could. I’m very sorry.” During the silence that followed, all I could hear was my own pathetic apology. Something inside of me knew that what ailed me was not the flu, but another kind of sickness. The excruciating sadness of the gulf between us. Also, the knowledge that in not attending her wedding our relationship would be thrown back into the dark ages. I thought I might never hear from Elizabeth again.

When the phone rang one morning I was ecstatic to hear Elizabeth’s voice.

“I’m pregnant.”

“When, when?”

“November, the beginning.” She sounded friendly, but cool. I didn’t know where we were at now. I never knew. I called her a few weeks later. A few weeks after that she called me. And this is the way it was until the baby was born.

\* \* \*

The grown-up Elizabeth lives in a neighborhood with high white walls skirted with bougainvillea, which buffer residents from neighbors who pass by walking their dogs. I am proud of her, more than I deserve to be, as I had little or nothing to do with her becoming a physician. Or maybe I did in an oblique way, because she saw that she needed something that no one could take away from her. Something all her own.

She has a lovely face, still girlish at thirty-five.

After Lucy's birth I received a call inviting us to see the new baby. Elizabeth was standing by the door, her arms folded across her chest. As I moved closer to the house, I felt scanned. She took in my shoes, my waistline, our car. Not my face.

Lucy, a darling baby who resembled Elizabeth when she was three months old, was the only safe subject on which we could focus. I wasn't sure if I was an official grandmother. Was it okay for to change her diapers, pick her up, and sing to her? I felt uncertain if these rights applied to me. I badly needed to know how *they*, the parents, regarded me, but since they did not refer to me as "Grandma," I didn't know how to proceed. When Lucy, and then another child, Julie, grew older, they did address me as Grandma, but my phone calls to Elizabeth still followed the same course.

The last time I saw her for a brief visit – she has a very busy schedule – was a year ago. Trevor and I stayed in their guest house. Bruce mostly ignored me and I him. Elizabeth and I seemed to be moving towards congeniality; perhaps, I hoped, a friendship.

On one occasion I invited her to visit with us where Trevor and I met and married.

"*You must* come to Taos this summer! It's such a great place; I know you'd love it. It's not at all like when we lived there in the seventies."

Silence. Thirty seconds of it.

"Elizabeth?" Maybe the line went dead.

"Yes, I hear you. I'm not sure. I'm on call so many weekends." I let it go at that.

Then, when I had rested the phone in its place with a shaky hand, I realized how foolishly I was doing a dance. Whom was I kidding? We don't have the kind of money to put her up in a chic hotel. We stay with friends who still do not have indoor plumbing and have to heat water to wash the dishes. When we lived there, our homes were a tipi, a school bus and a one-room adobe house with clay dust coating the furniture.

Unfailingly, when I speak to her I always make sure to sound happy and positive, a person who doesn't notice that my daughter keeps me at arm's length.

"I'm great!" I was always great. "How was Aspen?" I said enthusiastically. I knew what she would say, "Wonderful. The girls are marvelous skiers, we saw our good friends, you know, Body by Jake, and his family." Jake was a muscle-bound fitness star on television. All their friends were people in the entertainment field. Among a dozen curiosities I had about her life, the one that most interested me was what her marriage to an arrogant, high achiever like Bruce was like. They displayed no outward affection to each other, but then again

many couples do not.

But I'll tell you the real problem: "No major holidays."

There is no way one can be prepared for devastation. On that wet December morning, weeks before Christmas I felt ready to test the waters; our relationship was on more solid ground. We spoke monthly and visited one another.

"We're going to be in Los Angeles, Elizabeth. We're visiting Trevor's brother." I waited but all I heard was quiet breathing from the other side of the line. (The turbulence of an El Nino storm slapped against the panes of my bedroom window; the pines stood quaking from their roots, as if a giant hand was strangling the life out of them.) I continued with my request. "So, I was wondering if we could stop by to see the children on Christmas Eve?"

"It's not a good time," Elizabeth said evenly.

"And why not?" I could feel the rush begin. The build-up to a tsunami, a pull generated by a deep disturbance, which is imperceptible, dangerous and unstoppable. I could not run away from it; my legs were not fast enough. The years of her childhood when she wouldn't speak to me, or send me thank you notes, choosing *them* over me, being the last to know of her marriage, being refused a chance to help her with her bridal shower, the blank space on the wedding invite, the last to hear about her pregnancy, the poor, poor relations who could not travel with the clan. Never invited, hardly ever asked about my life, my work, my ideas. A duty, not a desire, blood as thin as ocean water.

I thought the line was dead then, but I heard Elizabeth cup her hand over the mouthpiece and say something incomprehensible to someone nearby.

"What do you feel about me?" I felt a tear tickling my cheek, but I kept it in check.

"You are my mother," Elizabeth said in a hushed tone.

"So, then, how come I can't come?" I pushed, the wall of water getting higher. "I *really* want to know."

I heard a sharp sound, like a pair of scissors cutting steadily across paper, but it was just an inhalation, Elizabeth's, and then I heard the paper rip. Her voice, no longer even, was now raspy and hot. The growl of a mother bear when an intruder comes too close.

"You *can* come." Then a pause and a full breath released. "But no major holidays."

## Old Juan

Joan Safajek

Bare back gleaming in noon sun,  
old Juan digs up dry grass  
for drought starved cattle, his hoe  
handle polished smooth with use.  
No rain for months, he laughs  
and shrugs, bemused black eyes  
clear as the desert sky.  
What more can he do, he asks.  
Unpredictable as rain, women  
come and go, cattle and children  
die. What more can he do  
but clear and plant  
chilie pepper fields  
with machete and hoe.  
He smells like sweat and sage,  
hands so tough he holds cut pieces  
of cholla cactus without gloves.  
He points with a hint of pride  
to the long red scar  
that divides his belly.  
A cancer operation, last year.  
It doesn't matter that this ranch  
where he was born belongs  
to a rich man from Tiajuana.  
He's still alive, still able to hear  
cattle bells ring, rhythmic  
and reassuring in the cool  
quiet of night.



Sara Friedlander