



KOAK

Marcia Adams

My father left me
his battered White Chief
stainless steel measuring tape
with its tight scored finish
filled with his brown grit.

This cold square memeto
fits right inside my palm
where a simple midlife sweat
can create a mysterious mud
thicker than our blood.

Her Crown

Anita Lechuga

Aquamarine, bits of red brick and Cuban sugar cane. Children noticed her crown shining, a lit up Empire State Building. They'd cry oohh and ahhh, I'm thirsty and do you want to platy? Her crown played you're it, listened, catching the biggest fish stories, and rubber stamped peanut-headed grasshoppers and tarantulas to paper. Sometimes her crown got wild, wandered down to Los Vaqueros Cantina, whirled the floor with a few broken beer bottles, got all sweaty to a sexy black haired Suavemente, where one sweet summer afternoon...San Francisco's El Rio Club...Her crown slid down some stranger's brown breast. When her crown felt lopsided, she'd glance at the pieces of poems on her bedroom wall...recite Langston Hughes' Juke Box Love Song one more time, or read Sandra Cisneros' Black Lace Bra Kind of Woman again, smear on red hot cha-cha lipstick, run out to rumba. Now and then her crown gathered a little rust. With a few Congolese drumbeats or Afro-Cuban chants of Mambo Yo-Yo the rust became crystalline jewels. Once during an earthquake the aquamarine jewels and bits of brick rocked, rattled, returned firmly in place on her wavy brown hair.

Pat Jordan, Looking Back on Laos



Oh Say Can You See

Dane Cervine

Lightning bugs glint as buoys on a dark sea, currents of air
roiling as waves from an approaching storm this fourth of July,
where Ohio and Kentucky meet, where cousins greet;
children shoot each other with water, pistols leaking
from the kitchen sink all the way outside. It is calm,
the smoldering light from Johnny's cigarette dancing
a tango in summer, tattoos gleaming as brands.
Lost cousin, he is a kind of steer, wild approaching tame,
one missing finger a medal of sorts from the Asian war,
the reason why he still loves guns,
his ten thousand bucks worth of bullets—
but it is the firecrackers that crack his smile now, parachutes,
black jack crackers. He stands too close to everything, everybody,
the slap-happy wide eyed stare of those who have seen too much,
can never see less again, are sure some jackpot lies deep in you
because there is nothing much left inside of them, good anyway.

Then you wonder, examining the bright yellow paint
on his 67 Chevy truck, the black Harley-Davidson leather interior
immaculately detailed, a single yellow metal chair chained to the back
behind the cab—*at least he keeps some things clean.*
You visit his house—not the bachelor bungalow you expect;
it is immaculate, gun racks ordered and dusted, but it is the flowers
in the back, an acre of flowers, that stump you—
the best thing to battle all the bad he says,
especially the black roses, fine and rare.

But you remember at dinner all the reasons to fear,
especially his fear, the rioting blacks in Cincinnati
after another young man is gunned down, but Johnny
works downtown, saw the white woman pulled from the car,
beaten, says *get back you mutha-fucka before I show you what's up,*
and in his eyes I see Viet Cong dancing behind bamboo,
behind them a father strict as a bomb, behind him a president
who gave the order, and further still those who really are responsible,
it was all of us

felt uncomfortable around Johnny, but no one would say much,
he was family, held down a job, big heart, would do anything
for you, would do anything

and then the storm came, lightning cleansing the sky

of lesser light, thunder following as great pool hall balls
cracking, breaking again and again, the moon hanging
in the sky like the last glint of Johnny's cigarette,
glowing, glowering, gleaming in our night,
this celebration of war, the chances we take,
how it all ends up.

Two in The City

Debra Spencer

1. Les Miserables

In front of the theatre the beggars
put out their hands. One walked beside me
and said, "You know, last week
I saw my mother driving down the street.
She was in a limousine, she rolled down the window
and I saw her diamond ring. She was
so beautiful." He smelled bad, his skin was grey,
his jeans looked stiff and shiny. I had to go in
to meet someone at the Grand Cafe,
where I paid seven dollars for a glass of wine.
When my friend and I left, the same beggar
found me. I gave him two dollars
even though he hadn't asked yet. He said,
"I saw my mother again the other day
in the lobby of the Mark. She was walking
with her escort of United States Marines,
so many people crowded around her! She wore
a mink coat and a tiara. When she passed me
she didn't see me, even though her fur brushed my hand."
I fingered two fives in my pocket. It was a warm night,
and I went into the crowded theatre.

2. Near Union Square

In a crush of people I waited for the light
at Powell and Ellis. A beggar loomed up,
dark-skinned, young, good-looking, and held out
a giant palm. "Ma'am, could you spare . . ."
He watched me rummage in my pocket.
"Oh, you're gorgeous," he said, "you know that, right?
You're so gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous, I've never seen
anyone so gorgeous in my life." I laughed, hoping
no one around us heard, wondering why my heart
leapt when he said it. I handed him a dollar. "You know you're

gorgeous, don't you?" he said, and elbowed me gently in the ribs. The light changed, I crossed the street, and he called from the curb, "Gorgeous!"

Possessed

Cathy Warner

This is what it's like to be possessed,
you are crazy with the itch of people
parading through your head.

They shout through breakfast and aerobics and laundry
until you write them out of your ears and eye sockets
down ladders onto paper.

They tap you on the shoulder
during intimate marital moments
and laugh when you shoo them away.
They don't sleep, rest or disappear,
obnoxious and complaining,
every last one of them,
even the sweet old lady who lives in the right brain.

You wash dishes and they talk to you.
Tell me again, how did you describe my dress?
They make you repeat phrases in your head
over and over until you explode words.
Then they say, you've got it wrong,
the dress was periwinkle and not lavender, after all
and the difference is incredibly huge.
The difference is what stands between you
and the garbage disposal and the National Book Award.

But your writing time is over.
You have responsibilities, and a family
real people
you remind the pathetic creatures that live in your head.
They don't care.
Mrs. Right Brain wants gin
and a dented primered Impala
You can't possibly, that's so out of character.

It's time to help your daughter with her homework:
If Sam has twenty-seven shirts, and twelve of those shirts are white
and another six are green, calculate
the percentage of Sam's shirts that are blue.

You think Sam should calculate his own damn shirts.
Speaking of shirts, says Mrs. Right Brain
I'd like one of those gauzy ones with bells on the sleeves.

Get a life, you tell her then yourself.
You had a life but it's been appropriated permanently.
It terrifies you to think in this manner
you are not one for chronic conditions, terminal diseases
or permanent relationships.

Now this nagging backache, puffy-eyed
sleep robbing, energy dragging disease has taken residence
underneath your pores inside your cells.
This thing, demons, or creativity, or writing
will live curled at the base of your skull,
stretching tendons into your brain pan,
the absolute rest of your possessed life.

You turn to Mrs. Right Brain and ask,
How about a nice Toyota four door?



Jamie S. Uyematsu

Saturday Evening: England 1949

Jeanne Johnson

Cathy cautiously drew aside a corner of the heavy net curtain. In the street below, several children were playing a noisy game of tag. She had watched and listened to their playing so often that she knew all of them by sight and most of them by name. But she was always careful to remain hidden, because they knew her name too. If they saw her at the window they would stop they're playing and call out, "Cathy! Cathy! Cathy the Catholic!" It was not their teasing taunt that she minded, for as they shouted they usually waved a cheery sort of greeting. But she hated them to know that at six o'clock of an evening, she had already been put to bed. Not just tonight, but every night.

She'd realized a long time ago that she was different from the children playing in the street below. They had real mums and dads, she was adopted. They went to the school just around the corner; she went across town to the convent. They had friends, aunts, grannies, brothers and sisters; she had no one. They were allowed to play outside on Saturday evenings until it was nearly dark; she was always in bed by six.

Cathy turned from the window and began pacing quietly around the room. As her bare feet traced the faded pattern of the old, frayed rug that covered the small space between the bed and the chest of drawers, she listened for names to be called out from the game of tag below. And repeating each one as she heard it, addressed her imaginary friends.

"Janet, shall we walk to school together tomorrow?"

"Frances, Mum says you can come to tea on Friday."

"Robert, would you like a ride on my new bike?"

It felt good to give these make believe invitations. After all, the children were real enough. But it was hard to do without the satisfaction of a reply, and she didn't much care to answer on their behalf. She was, in truth, a little unsure of what their response might be, and she didn't want to risk a refusal, even in her imagination.

The street became quiet and Cathy stopped her pacing. She returned to the window to see what was happening, and saw the children lining up against the curb for a game of giant's treasure. As they crept and scuttled silently across the road behind the back of the one who was "it", Cathy longed to shout a warning. "Watch out, Sarah! Jimmy's nearly up to you!" But instead, she put the corner of the curtain between her teeth, and breathing in its damp mustiness, looked on in silence. She watched Jenny, who always wore a pretty dress and ribbons to match, with particular interest. She had decided many weeks ago that Jenny would be her special friend. She imagined being in-

vited to her house, and after a wonderful snack of chocolate cake and ice cream and fizzy pop, being allowed to try on some of her beautiful dresses. Perhaps even being given an old one to keep.

She looked at her bathrobe hanging on the back of the door and suddenly had an idea. She pulled off its corded belt, tied it tightly around her waist and flounced her nightgown up into it. Satisfied with the way the hem flared out when she twirled around, she took down her rosary from its nail above the bed and placed it, crucifix to the rear, around her neck. Next she opened the only drawer of the old chest of drawers which opened without creaking, felt under its newspaper lining and brought out a small piece of red chalk. Pursing and stretching her lips in front of the cracked and flaking mirror, she covered them in chalk. The taste was like that of the musty curtains, but the effect was satisfying. She smiled tightly and patted the chalk lightly onto the roundness of her cheeks, then slowly, as if it needed time to dry, she applied it to each fingernail. Wishing she did not bite her nails, but otherwise satisfied with the effect, Kate (for that's what she called herself at moments like this) put the tiny piece of chalk back in its hiding place.

Returning to the window, she considered draping the net curtain around her head as a bridal veil, but as several children were still playing in the gathering dusk, decided this was too risky. So, hidden as usual, she watched until the last of them was called indoors. Called not to bed but to supper, to listen to the radio or, for the lucky few, to watch television. She knew that it would be a while until they went to bed, and even longer before they were told to switch off their bedroom lights.

Now that the street was silent, she turned her attention to the familiar pattern of sounds within the house. Hearing her mother going through to the kitchen to put the kettle on, and her father shuffling along the hallway in his slippers to lock the front door, Kate knew it was time to clean off her makeup. From under her pillow, she took the carefully folded sheet of toilet paper she had hidden away earlier, moistened it with her tongue and began to rub the red chalk from her lips, cheeks and fingernails. As she breathed in the familiar disinfectant smell of the harsh, shiny paper, she wondered what it would be like to remove her "make-up" with real cold cream and soft cleansing tissues. Like the ladies she'd seen in the glossy magazines at the doctor's office.

She heard her mother carrying their usual evening snack of tea and cake from the kitchen into the living room, and the series of bleeps and whistles from the radio as her father tuned it in for their regular Saturday night listening. There was never an evening snack for Cathy. She'd had her last meal at five o'clock; the remains of the baked fish and parsley sauce that she'd not been able to force down at lunchtime. Strangely, it had been easier to eat cold. Or maybe it was knowing

that if she didn't finish it then, she would once again have to sacrifice her dessert. And to Cathy, even a small bowl of lumpy rice with a tiny blob of jam was worth the effort.

However it was neither rice pudding nor tea and biscuits that Kate had on her mind at that moment. As she heard the strident blast of the tune that heralded the Saturday evening serial on the radio below, Kate knelt beside her bed and slipped her hand carefully under the mattress. Her fingers searched for the tiny hole left by a missing button, and she drew out a penny coin. Every Saturday evening she found a penny there. No, it wasn't a miracle. God would have made a far larger gesture to compensate for poor Cathy's earthly deprivation. And for certain, it was not placed there by a parent with a benevolent sense of fun. Kate the bold had put it there!

Although she was never given pocket money, she nevertheless managed every week to acquire a treasured penny to hide in the mattress. Occasionally she would earn a penny by running an errand for an elderly neighbor, although if her mother found out she would take it from her. In return, she would cheat her mother by keeping back a penny from the change when she'd been sent to the corner store. But, more often than not, her mother would notice, and she would have to pretend to return to the store to put right the discrepancy. One Saturday afternoon, when she had almost given up hope, she found a penny on the front doorstep. As Cathy, she felt sure that the sad faced Jesus who lived in the church with Mary, his mother, must have had something to do with it, because she had prayed to him so often to help her. However as Kate, she wondered, just a little anxiously, if the devil might have had a hand in it.

But now it was Saturday evening, she had her penny, and she was definitely Kate. She dressed herself in the clothes she had taken off a couple of hours earlier. Then gathering up her nightgown, bathrobe and old, battered, but ever smiling, china doll, arranged them in a Cathy shaped bundle under the quilt. She looked at her sleeping effigy, nodded with satisfaction and then stood, one hand ready on the door handle, motionless and listening. She was waiting for the actors' voices on the radio below to rise to a crescendo, for the suspenseful ending music, the announcer's calm, reassuring tones, and the short silence. Waiting for her parent's favorite Saturday evening program to begin. She knew the routine so well. The magic passwords were about to be spoken.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Henry Hall speaking, and tonight is my guest night." The signal for action! As the band's struck up it's usual opening number ("It's Just the Time for Dancing") she picked up her penny and turned three quick pirouettes for luck, then she cautiously opened the bedroom door and began to creep down the stairs. The ninth stair from the top always creaked in

the middle, so she counted down carefully and kept close to the wall.

The band swung into a popular quickstep, and she kept time with the beat of the music as she tiptoed along the hallway to the back door; which fortunately was never locked till last thing at night. Slipping noiselessly out onto the concrete pathway she had to immediately crouch down below the living room window. The curtains were drawn, but she dared not risk casting the slightest shadow. The main danger over, she turned quickly into the narrow passageway to the front of the house, and out onto the relative safety of the pavement. Her heart beating fast with excitement, she ran along the now empty street and into the little store at the corner.

The storekeeper, almost ready to close for the night, looked up from his sweeping and walked towards the ice cream cabinet. Every Saturday for several weeks now, this little girl had come running into his store at exactly the same time. On the first occasion he'd been concerned that some disaster had befallen her family; for in all the years he'd lived on this street, he had never seen her out so late. But now he smiled as she came in.

"Good evening, Ma'am. Will it be the usual order?" he asked, sliding open the glass lid of the ice cream cabinet in anticipation of her reply.

Kate's eyes were bright as she handed over her precious penny. "Yes thank you, one penny ice-lolly. A blue one, please." she smiled.

It was always a blue one. Strange, because all the other children seemed to prefer the red or green. As he took the lolly from the cabinet she politely asked, as usual, for it to be put in a bag. Strange again, most children ripped open the wrapper and began sucking immediately at the frozen juice. However, a bag she asked for and a bag he always gave her. He nodded at her polite "thank you", and walked with her to the door. As he watched her running back down the street he wondered about this thin, wistful, dark eyed little girl. She'd told him her name was Kate, but his children said she was called Cathy. The neighbors hinted that she was not too well cared for. He'd never felt inclined to mention these Saturday evening meetings to the little girl's mother. Somehow he sensed it was his and Cathy's - or should he say Kate's - secret.

Kate repeated her silent journey in reverse. As she reached the back door the radio was playing a waltz, but she had no time for such leisurely footstep now. She dashed along the hallway, up the stairs and into her room. She listened for a few breathless seconds to make sure that she'd not been heard. Then, since all seemed well, she took her precious purchase out of its bag, carefully peeled back the wrapper and began to suck the sweet, blue juice. She savored every cold, delicious mouthful, turning the lolly skillfully round and round so as not to waste the slightest melting drop. The lips that had earlier been

chalked so vividly red were now stained strangely blue, and the eyes that had looked so wistfully through the net curtain were now shining with delight.

The moment she had finished the last flavorsome drop she carefully wiped her mouth with the little paper bag, screwed it together with the damp wrapper into a tight ball, and hid them in the pocket of her Sunday going to church dress. The evidence of her secret purchase would be disposed of tomorrow morning as usual, on the way to mass. As she approached the cathedral she would look up at the kindly figure of the Virgin Mary standing high atop the big arched gateway and say a brief, silent prayer for help and forgiveness. Then in one swift, well-practiced movement, she would bend as if to pull up her sock, and push the little ball of paper into a convenient crevice in the crumbling sandstone wall.

Her evening mission accomplished and her morning plans made, Kate was now ready to get into bed. She undressed, pulled on her nightgown and slipped contentedly between the sheets, her battered but faithful old doll beside her. She should have said her rosary, as she did every other night; but somehow that was for Cathy not Kate. Tonight was her night of rebellion. Tonight she was Kate the bold. She would save her prayers for the morning.

As she settled down to sleep she wondered if her Saturday night secret would ever be discovered. How much longer she would be able to keep up her weekly gesture of defiance; for it was as much that as the sweet taste of the lolly, that motivated her to take such a risk. Soon she would have to take her first communion; and that meant confessing to the priest. She had learned from her preparation classes that once she had confessed, she must not go on repeating a sin. She lay there tussling with the dilemma of whether or not a little girl creeping out of her bedroom to buy an ice-lolly on a Saturday evening was a mortal sin. But that was too profound a question for a tired eight year old to answer.

She yawned as the voice of Henry Hall closing his radio show came up from the room below; and as his band began to play the first few familiar and comforting bars of "Here's to the Next Time", she drifted into an untroubled sleep.

Male Displays of Sensitivity Work for Bird

Ace Boggess

The Lexington Herald-Leader, Jan. 31, 2002

I will not throw my wings about
like madness, run like a shot
of *Bacardi* past your lips.
I will not chant the fight song
of the satin bowerbird, dance
beneath fists that launch
 their fireworks at night.
I will be tender as the earthworm,
soft as moist black burrowed soil.
I will sing only ballads, my satin love,
 when your expression pleads for less
 of the noise of men.
I have spent the day buzzing—
fire pulsing in my throat—
wailing the bowerbird battle sutra,
 the haunting warbird melody.
I announced my approach to branch &
beetle, rodent & root, to the sun
that raged & stars that come.
I will be less of me now to be
near you, to woo you as a slick-
haired gent, a tuxedoed Giovanni,
 delicate at stare's reach from
 his feathered muse.



Andrew Barker

The Dead Arrive

Marilyn Robertson

when you least expect it,
motoring up the long road to the house.
Iris nod in the breeze of the passing car.
Everything pauses:
the cat halfway to the bird,
the bird halfway to the worm.
Hands lifting the white sheet to the line,
eyes hunting the trowel.
The driver parks in the shade of the oleanders.
The car door opens, a familiar scarf
trails on the gravel.

Or maybe in a cafe, near the newspaper rack--
you notice the tilt of his head, the bowler hat.
If he would only turn.
You bury your suspicions in a waffle.

A dog with three heads crosses the street.
A woman sticks a flower behind her ear.
Her eyebrows touch.

What are we to do with them,
showing up like this just as we open the mail,
take the casserole from the oven?
Remaining dead may not be
as easy as it seems.



Lori J. Haraldsen
the mysteries of life and death

Heather Wilkerson



Meeting My Heart

Sarah J. Diehl

I lie on my side, robe dropped open;
the technician presses the metal eye
under my ribs. On the gray fuzzed screen
one angle of my heart appears, a dark
padded chamber with a white match
striking curved graphite. I hang by that reed
pendulum flicking, the four valves
pumping five quarts per minute, sounding
like a washing machine when you lift
the lid—the cha-cha-cha of submerged
socks and blouses. In the shadows,
where the persistent ache resides,
I glimpse lost loves still at the age
we parted: one middle-aged woman,
deep brown eyes misted with sorrow,
sits with the five-year-old girl I couldn't adopt.
She makes a rocking chair of her body
for the drowsy child as she chats to an early-30s
man in a navy pinstripe suit held
over from an affair of the intellect.
My aunt murdered as a teenager, known to me
only as an echo of my own face in a dim
photograph, appears to report, "there are angels
but no wings." She means just ordinary
mysteries exist: the electrical impulses
like fingertips that spark into motion
this dutiful muscle flexing my memory.

They Say That Touch

Lauren Crux

reaches through the layers of the body to the spirit
that because of this one must be cautious
when touching to not do damage

She was asked: how do you like to be touched?
soft medium deep?

not how well is your soul protected?

She liked the spaces inbetween
attention unspecific wandering

the space of spaciousness

sometimes she liked touch to be very specific
there right there

but this time
this time it was the lack of specificity
that seemed gentling
an arm here a leg there
tracing the line of muscle
from thigh to
knee the knotted shoulder
the mournful sound of cello
the flute that circled

and all that space

all that silence

the pain
that lay inbetween



Sara Friedlander

When Love Is On Your Mind

Francisco Ramirez

The door opens. She stands in the doorway looking around. Her eyes swim back and forth, up and down. She searches for a light switch. As the lights turn on she see no one, and everything is silent. The lights seem dim and that worries her. Carefully she takes a few steps to enter the apartment. As she walks in, she's still looking around wondering what she'll find. A sensation of coldness rushes through her body, so she stops to look around once again. She can't rid herself of the feeling that she's been in this apartment before. She begins to think that maybe she should just turn around and leave. She hates this place, but she can't stop herself from looking around. Why doesn't she leave? She should turn around and get out now. But she doesn't leave. She can't.

For no apparent reason she thinks about her dog, Powder, a white German Shepherd; did she feed him before leaving the house? Did she leave enough water for him in his water bowl? He's a smart one, that Powder. When he was seven months he'd learned how to open the sliding screen door. At eight and a half months he was opening the patio door too.

She notices a burgundy leather sofa that is exactly like hers. The sofa reminds her that she should be sitting on her own sofa with her dog lying next to her. Powder enjoys watching *Seinfeld* and *Suddenly Susan*. As she's thinking about Powder lying next to her on that cozy sofa watching TV, she thinks out loud, "Did I forget to turn off the oven? Shit. It's a little late to worry about that now."

She discovers something on the living room rug. It looks like a large bloodstain, but the lighting is very dim, so she can't tell for sure. She looks around again. Everything is still pretty quiet, dead quiet. She bends down slowly, and feels the texture of the stain with her right hand. It feels stiff, whatever it is. To be precise, it's kind of dried, but not completely, and it has a rough feel to it. She looks at her fingers, and then smells them. The odor is pungent, and very nauseating. She knows that there is something definitely wrong with this entire situation, but she can't pull herself away from it. She makes her way to the kitchen, and tries a light switch. The light turns on for a second or two, and then it begins to flicker on and off. She tries the switch again, but the light continues to flicker until it goes out completely. Again she tries the switch, but this time, nothing happens.

In the dark, she's still able to notice that everything appears to have been moved, or tossed around. As she walks carefully, that pungent nauseating smell from the stain in the living room is in the kitchen as well. The smell, however, is much stronger. Her intestines begin

turning and twisting. Something inside her wants to come up through her throat. It finds its way up into her mouth onto her tongue, and all around her teeth. She fixes her eyes on the sink, and rushes over to it. From her mouth it gushes out, finding its way into the sink. It leaves a horrible taste on her tongue. Some of it manages to find its way through her nose. She wipes herself off with a kitchen rag that's lying on the counter beside the sink. She sips some water from the faucet, then rinses her mouth, and spits out the remaining stomach juice that lingered into the drain. As she spits into the sink, she notices that there's blood mixed in with the bile from inside her belly.

Making her way out of the kitchen, she almost loses her balance as a nebulous picture flashes into her head. It's so intense that she has to hold onto the wall while it subsides. Blood and water seem to be mixing together in an endless torrent that drenches her entire body. When this image finally retreats from her head, it takes her a few seconds before she is able to move freely once again. A shroud of apprehension embraces her body, and then goose bumps spread over her arms. What does this image of blood and water mean? Why does it flood in on top of her? It's as if she were drowning in it.

She's in the bedroom now, and as her eyes look over in the direction of the bed, she notices how large, very large the bed is. It's a, California King bed. She knows this because she owned one once. Oh if only that bed of hers could talk. It would reveal all the pain she'd dealt with when she was married. Sure there were moments of beautiful love, but mostly he was brutal, and she hates him for that. The marriage lasted two, three, maybe four weeks? She's not quite certain now; she only knows that it lasted far too long. But it doesn't matter. She's rid of him now, so it really doesn't matter anymore. She enjoys living alone, with her Powder, her faithful Powder. The two of them are happy enough.

On the bed she sees a stain just like the one on the rug in the living room, but this time she refuses to touch it, not for anything in the world will she touch it. As she gets close to the bed the nebulous picture flashes into her head once again. The image eventually fades away, but it leaves her feeling tired, and maybe a little hungry. She finds it strange that she feels hungry. No, not hungry. She's tired, very tired. When she sits on the end of the bed to rest, the nebulous torrents in her mind start pounding her into an ocean of blood and water. She begins to drown in this ocean: pictures and memories of herself as a little girl suddenly develop, and take shape around her.

She sees herself playing with her baby brother, and it almost brings tears of joy to her eyes. She likes to hold him and help him walk. He can't walk on his own. Whenever she lets go of him, he plops right down on his butt. Sometimes he hurts himself. He hits his

head on the coffee table, stops the fall with his chin, or the side of his face. He's three and he still can't walk on his own. Polio, the polio had dried up his legs. They're skinny. No, they're thin, extremely thin with no muscles whatsoever.

He wears the smallest leg braces she's ever seen. And his shoes, they're so tiny too. Her father said her brother's feet will never grow, and if they do, it won't be that much. She loves her baby brother dearly. Other times, however, she hates looking at him with his bony gnome like feet. But most of all, she hates him when he needs her help to go to the bathroom. Sitting him on the toilet makes her sick to her stomach. She throws up every time she has to wipe the shit off his butt. The stuff she vomits tastes and smells like vile juice she left in the kitchen sink, but without the blood. The hatred doesn't last long though. Before she knows it, she's holding and playing with him as if nothing were wrong.

Her mother can't handle him, so she takes over without being asked. Sometimes, she really doesn't mind it at all. Her father works endlessly. She hardly sees him at home. Her mother eventually leaves. Her mother leaves the three of them. No. Her mother leaves the two of them. She finds true love. She left them alone. It becomes her job to make certain that her brother gets on the M. R. bus on time. She's sixteen and he's seven. Sometimes she thinks about all the work she has to do. It's a lot of responsibility for a teenager. She doesn't mind helping him. Not one bit. She loves her baby brother.

She has a boyfriend now. At first it seems to be going fine between them. He comes over and helps her put her brother to bed. They watch television, maybe make out a little. Feels her up, and fingers her a bit. But that's as far as she lets it go. She's not ready to go all the way yet. It still scares her. The thought of something like that inside her body turns her stomach. The relationship doesn't work out though. She doesn't really like him that much anyway.

The bed she's sitting on seems familiar now, but she doesn't understand why. She's twenty-three, when her little brother goes on his first date. Her father dies a year earlier. Alcoholism, liver failure, or cancer, she doesn't want to remember. She doesn't need to remember. Her father's dead and that's that.

Her brother no longer uses braces. They don't help him anyway. They just make it difficult for him to get around. Besides, in his wheelchair, her brother can move faster than his legs could. Nothing will stop him now. He can and will achieve everything and anything his mind desires. She will still help her little brother no matter what. She hasn't lost him: she won't lose him. It's funny how she never gets around to dating someone again. There's no need to. They're all inconsiderate of her feelings, of her brother's feelings. They don't mat-

ter. She hasn't lost much.

Every now and then she does find someone, good looking, pretty, and yes, sometimes even handsome. But these men, these boys, have no names; they're nameless. It's better that way. It keeps her free to take care of her baby brother. He needs her: he'll always need her. Of course, there are some moments when she lets herself imagine what her life might be like without him. But those moments never last long at all. She never lets them last. She's happy, her baby brother is happy, that's all that matters.

Her brother finally falls in love and marries. His new bride really isn't that attractive. But he loves her, and that's all that is significant. At first they're content. The two of them: the three of them. For the first year everything goes smoothly. Her brother and his new wife, they make love. She can hear them in the next room. She hears them making love in his room, where she would often watch him play. His room where she often helped him play games of make believe. It was their room.

She begins to resent his bride's presence there. She hears her tell him late at night, "We need a place of our own where I alone can care for you. I can't bathe with you, cook for you, and make love to you without your sister hiding in the shadows." So her brother leaves, and finds a new place to live with her. She can't stop him; she won't stop him.

Her brother's happy now. She can see it in his eyes on his face, he is happy. She finds happiness too. Her boyfriend is dashing handsome, deep blue eyes, thick black hair, and tall, well maybe not that tall, but tall enough. She's happy. Her happiness doesn't last. She marries him, but her happiness dies. In her bedroom it dies. In her heart, his heart, the happiness dies. How long does it last, two, three, maybe four weeks? Her husband's a brute.

She starts losing her breath. The blood and water surrounds her once again, it suffocates her, it drowns her. She knows she must fight to stay alive, so she swims upward because upward is always the only way out of an ocean.

Suddenly she's back in the bedroom on the bed. When she manages to gather her thoughts together, she realizes that she's tired of sitting there at the end of that California King. She starts feeling dizzy, her legs won't help her up. Maybe they're her brother's legs now. Maybe she's traded legs with him. When they were kids her legs were his legs. She walked for him. She carried him wherever he needed to go.

Her brother's marriage fails. He's devastated. His wife doesn't love him anymore. He tells her, "I've found someone new big sister, someone much better than her." But this new woman leaves him. She

leaves heart broken, in tears, with nothing. This new woman leaves him in a stinky dirty motel room with no cable. She asks him to come home now because she will take care of him like before. But he won't come home; he can't come home. She begs and pleads, "Come home." He can't, he doesn't.

It's late at night when someone calls her. She was sleeping, dreaming of her baby brother. "He rolled himself over a cliff." The officer said. "Just rolled his wheelchair right up to the edge and rolled off." She had to go and identify the body, his body. Down over the cliff, his body, his wheelchair crashes against the rocks. She had to look at his twisted broken body. Poor thing, he never should have left. She feels nauseated once again. The bathroom, she needs to go to the bathroom. She struggles to get up from that big ass bed.

Slowly she rises. She walks, holding on to the wall, and she makes her way to the bathroom. She stumbles into the bathroom and falls to her knees in front of the toilet. She sticks her face into it without lifting the seat. Over and over she tries to vomit, she wants to vomit, but nothing comes out. As she heaves once more, blood rushes out of her mouth, from her stomach, from her entire body it pours out. She can't catch her breath; she's suffocating. She struggles to control this choking, drowning sensation that's trying to take her soul, her life.

After a couple of minutes she's able to control the heaving in her stomach. With her eyes half-closed and full of tears, she turns her body and lets herself sit on the floor and rests her back against the toilet. She closes her eyes completely and wipes her chin with the back of her hand. When she opens her eyes, the scene before her leaves her frozen. As she stares at it, she's unable to move.

She sees two bodies. Then in a quick flash, a thousand memories crash in on her. She remembers dropping the phone. She remembers opening the drawer to her nightstand and reaching in for a straight razor. Her father's straight razor. She walks back to the living room and sits on the rug. She calls out to her beautiful Powder. She hugs and kisses him with same love and intensity that she gave to her little baby brother. Carefully she cuts Powder's throat with her dead father's straight razor. She sits there on the living room rug with her back against the burgundy sofa. She sits there with Powder's head on her lap, waiting for him to die. Her hands are covered with blood, his blood.

She gently lifts his head off her lap and puts it down on the rug. She gets up, walks over to the kitchen, and picks up a rag that's on the counter by the sink. She walks back to the living room, and kneels down on the rug. Her mind feels completely at ease as she wraps the rag around Powder's neck. She picks him up with little difficulty and carries him into the bathroom. She puts Powder into the

bath tub, and removes the rag from his neck. She takes the rag back to the kitchen and places it on the counter by the sink.

When she returns to the bathroom, she turns on the water, and makes sure that it's hot enough to relax in. She likes the water nice and hot. As the tub fills with water, she removes all her clothing. Before she steps in, her eyes become fixed on Powder's blood as it mixes with the water. Steam is rising from the tub. She stands there awhile. It isn't until the blood and water thoroughly blend together that she steps in and sits down.

Sitting there in the hot tub with her beautiful Powder, his head resting on her belly, she takes the razor in one hand and cuts one wrist and then the other. She lays both hands on her Powder, tilts her head back, and closes her eyes. When she opens them again, she's looking at herself and at her precious beautiful Powder in the tub. Now she realizes what this is all about. She gets up from the cold bathroom floor and lets herself drift back into her body, the body in the tub. She's looking at her Powder now. She smiles, closes her eyes, rests her head back, and relaxes as the hot blood embraces them both.



John Click



Good Neighbors

Elaine G. Schwartz

We chat
when time and weather permit
across the gray block wall
separating our properties
words carefully measured
like a neighborly cup of sugar

Two new ingredients war and terrorism
unhinge this tenuous relationship
Silence settles across the neighborhood
The gray block wall
assumes fortress like proportions
We who eschewed politics
to wear the mantle
of good neighbors
find ourselves voiceless.

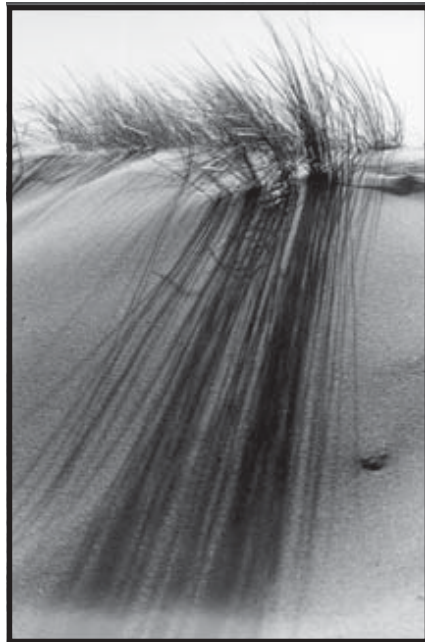
Tropic

Roxan McDonald

It was days where I didn't wear shoes
spent hours searching out men carrying
jugo de zanoria on their head
It was nights ruled by vibration
and light
crawling through sand
drunk
mornings with my back
banging against
red tile as trees fell
and monkeys screeched
It was an afternoon on that
hill with red ants
crawling up my leg
and him saying "Ay hormigas"
and swatting them off
it was him not letting go
holding me on that
hill and begging
don't
don't leave
with my baby inside of
you
don't take this chance
at what?
whiteness?
a visa?
hope?
It was me there figuring
out what it was to be American
what it was to be
a woman
and what it was to
be
a mother
Oscar,
I will leave with
Your tiny bundle
Just big enough to
Spot on radar

Just big enough
To find and exterminate
I will see you till the
Day I die
With your hands
On my legs
and that red ant's fangs
Deep in your flesh

Kelly Woods



Why Mom?

Jillian Eugenios

How many times will I see you,
and convince myself it just cannot be?
When will I stop crying each time I look into the mirror,
while green eyes that died stare back at me?
Why are you gone,
where did you go,
why am I alone?

Help me to know how to quell the cries of the immortal fifteen-year-old
who lurks deep within my soul,
fighting for the last breaths of her mother.
How long can she cry?
How many tears can my pillow absorb?
With each tear that streaks my face,
it is a slow, burning testament
to the sudden loss of my childhood innocence.
Piece by piece,
memory by memory,
tear by tear.

How can I live this life when a part of myself died,
and remains locked with you in fading memories?
How can I navigate through the life you gave me
without your guiding hand?

When memories of you return,
will they overwhelm those of your emaciated body in the hospital bed?
Do I want them to? Do I want to forget?
Can I ever forget those memories engraved in my heart,
etchings that witness the cancer slowly murdering your body,
your mind?

The question that forcefully
burns itself into my soul and through my eyes,
a hysterical, desperate cry,
of how a heart that loved so much,
could possibly fail?

I find myself existing in different places on this world,
a dead person in a live person's body,
sometimes feeling, sometimes numbing,
how it is to be a motherless daughter and a teenage girl,
both of who lost their mom far too young.