

***Diverse Voices Quarterly***

***Volume 2, Issue 5***

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#### Editor's Note

I tried to get this issue out earlier in April, but some personal issues came up. I hope these pieces were worth waiting for! Even in honor of Mother's Day, there are some interesting stories in here, dealing with being a mother and dealing with mothers. Hope the spring season treats you all well!

Best,

Krisma

*Diverse Voices Quarterly*, Volume II, Issue 5

Cover art: *The Space Between Us Is Small* by Chantel Schott

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Jenn Blair** is from Yakima, WA. She teaches at the University of Georgia, and lives in Winterville with her husband David and daughter Katie. Her chapbook *All Things Are Ordered* is now available from Finishing Line Press.

**Chloe N. Clark** is currently a creative writing major at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is not very good at writing bio statements.

**JoyEllen Freeman** is a first-year at the University of Georgia. She is pursuing a major in English and a minor in Spanish. As an undergraduate researcher, she conducts research for the Civil Rights Digital Library. She has a passion for writing poetry and is a member of the *Mandala Literary Journal* team at UGA. Her hobbies include reading, writing, listening to music, and playing the piano.

**Chelsea Rebekah Grimmer** is a student in the Honors College at Oakland University pursuing a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is currently a Program Director for Beyond Basics, a nonprofit organization that tutors children in Detroit Public Schools, and created weekly writing workshops for the students. Grimmer is working on her thesis, which will depict the importance of creative writing as a necessary field of academia, especially for disenfranchised individuals. Her favorite pastimes are drinking a warm pot of tea, making breakfast, going to the Detroit Zoo, and watching her two cats—Meeka and Mocha—bicker.

**Melanie S. Hatter** is a former newspaper journalist who currently works in corporate communications. Her essays have appeared in *Moxie*, *ACE Dialogue*, and *Emerge* magazines, and her short story, "Obsessed with Claudia," won the May 2000 First Annual Romantic Tales Writing Contest. She has completed her first novel *The Color of My Soul*.

**Linda Hudson Hoagland** has worked most of her adult life in various jobs from bartending to clerical duties in a large metropolitan area and the small town that she loves. Hoagland has proudly earned three associate degrees from Southwest Virginia Community College. Hoagland is a mother of two sons and is currently employed and has been for twenty years, as a Purchase Order Clerk for the Tazewell County Public Schools in Virginia. Hoagland has earned many awards and certificates for her writings and has had many essays, short stories, or poems published. Also nominated for the 2008 Governor's Award for the Arts and for the Library of Virginia Literary Awards for 2007 and 2009.

**Jason Joyce** recently graduated from the University of Wyoming and is pursuing a career in event management and planning. He plays music in the band Save My Hero, enjoys lemonade, and is working on his first full-length collection of poetry. You can find out more about his writing at <http://jasonrjoyce.blogspot.com>.

**Shareen Knight** is an artist, poet, and playwright, who, after an earlier life in California, now lives in a remote part of British Columbia with her dog and cat. She is renovating a 1910 farmhouse and remembering all the stories. Some recent work can be seen at *Cezanne's Carrot* and *Oregon Literary Review*.

**Allen Kopp** is a technical writer and lives in St. Louis, Missouri. His fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Foliate Oak Literary Journal*, *Temenos*, *The Legendary*, *Danse Macabre*, *Bartleby-Snopes*, *Skive*, *Hoi-Polloi*, *Conceit Magazine*, *Dark and Dreary Magazine*, *A Twist of Noir*, *Sunken Lines*, *The Storyteller*, *The Bracelet Charm*, *The Ranfurly Review*, *Superstition Review*, *Short-Story.Me*, *Abandoned Towers Magazine*, *Scruffy Dog Review*, *Deadman's Tome*, and Black Lantern Publishing. Kopp is a Pushcart Prize nominee for the story "Hermaphrodite Ward" and was a contest finalist in the *Bartleby-Snopes* dialogue contest.

**Catherine McGuire** is a poet, artist, and art therapist with a deep interest in the psychology of CG Jung, especially where it concerns creativity and the unconscious. She has had more than 140 poems published in venues, such as *New Verse News*, *Melusine*, *The Quizzical Chair* anthology, *The Smoking Poet*, *Portland Lights* anthology, *Folio*, *Tapjoe*, and *Adagio*. She has published a chapbook, *Joy Into Stillness: Seasons of Lake Quinault*, and works from home for the nonprofit Oregon Green Schools Association.

As a recent graduate of the University of California, **henry 7. reneau, jr.** is only beginning his quest to reveal some of the great mysteries of the universe. in a way, he often thinks of himself as a poet warrior, always prepared to do battle with an internal rhyme, or a turn of a phrase. And he's also fond of rottweilers and Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk.

**Anjoli Roy** writes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry and is a recipient of the Myrle Clark Award for Creative Writing. From Pasadena, California, she put down roots in New York City, where she encountered rats in various shapes and sizes. She is currently pursuing her master's in English, with a concentration in creative writing, from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hawaii Review*, *Drill Press*, *The West Fourth Street Review*, and *Brownstone Magazine*.

**Chantel Schott** is a self-taught abstract artist based in Queensland, Australia, who has worked on projects both collaboratively and individually since 2005. She was recently a finalist in the 2009 Acquisitive Kath Dickson Art Award exhibition in Toowoomba, Australia, and runner-up in the Rock the Art Vote competition at sweetriot in New York. Her artwork *At Sea* appears on the cover of the 2010 McGregor Summer School brochure, and she was the featured artist at Long Island Arts online gallery in New York. Last year she sold an exclusive collection of her greeting cards to the Darling Heights Post Office in Toowoomba and in 2010 Schott will appear in several publications, including *Kurungabaa Journal* based in Sydney and *Fally Rag* in the UK. Schott enjoys working with acrylic, pastels and mixed media with her major focus on creating abstract art. She is inspired by fairy tales, fantasy, and sea creatures. Her work can be viewed at:

<http://www.redbubble.com/people/billgabee> or <http://chantelschott.daportfolio.com>

**Maheshwar N. Sinha** is a graduate from Ranchi, India and has exhibited several solo and joint exhibitions.

**Cynthia Staples** is a Boston-based freelance writer and photographer. For nearly fifteen years she has worked with local education and environmental nonprofits as well as with national sustainability organizations. When she is not writing, she has a camera in-hand exploring the natural world and her local environment. Her

photography has appeared in several online and print publications, including *Creativity Portal*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Life Images*, *Redivider*, *Rockhurst Review*, and *Verdad*. View more of her photography at <http://www.photosbycynthia.smugmug.com> and follow her creative journey and musings at <http://www.creativity-portal.com/articles/cynthia-staples>.

**Nicole Taylor** has attended college in Salem, Oregon, where she lives near her siblings, mother, and other family, and has been published. She is a dancer, an artist, and a volunteer.

**TK Turner** is a 21-year-old psychology student who works as an advocate for victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. She has been (or will be) published in the *Monsters Next Door*, *Silverblade* magazine, and in *Pill Hill Press* for fiction. She will soon be featured in a horror anthology by *lamegoatpress*, and her erotic poetry can be found at *Bare Back* magazine and *Dark Gothic Resurrected*. She blogs about feminism and cannibalism at: <http://thevegetariancannibal.blogspot.com>.

**Dallas Woodburn** is the author of two collections of short stories and a forthcoming novel. Her short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in the literary journals *Monkeybicycle*, *Arcadia Journal*, *flashquake*, and *The Newport Review*, among others. A recipient of the national Jefferson Award for community service, she is also the founder of the nonprofit foundation Write On! For Literacy and the youth publishing Write On! Books. Find out more at <http://www.writeonbooks.org>.

**Brittany Zick** is a sophomore in college and plans to major in business. She enjoys writing, reading, and arguing with her boyfriend in her free time. She has been published in *Chrysalis* and Friends of the Pasadena Library. She lives in Texas with her two pet rats, Sausage and Pirate.

**Fredrick Zydek** is the author of eight collections of poetry. *T'Kopechuck: the Buckley Poems* is forthcoming from Winthrop Press later in 2010. Formerly a professor of creative writing and theology at the University of Nebraska and later at the College of Saint Mary, he is now a gentleman farmer when he isn't writing. He is the editor for

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**How I Do Know  
(inside)  
I Match You:**

Your fingers press up  
(your glasses)  
by the side rim: so slim and black!

I tap your nose  
(like an experiment in Chemistry)  
and with each touch—

of only my finger's tip—you blink.  
And (yesterday) my cat stopped purring.  
I pressed (so tired) lips against

Your neck to hear your warm pleasure.  
Then (later) I bit (hard) into a parmesan  
block and accidentally munched the rind—it was bitter,

and your laugh was warm, too,  
(my cold blood needs red iron)  
but my lips are a somehow natural blue.

Sometimes, my system is faulty,  
(some faltering mechanism)  
stemming surely from my make,

but you pour oil (hot) into  
a pan, and fry an egg (over easy)—  
this (never) fails.

—Chelsea Rebekah Grimmer

## LET'S NOT GET MARRIED

Volume

on her fingers

butterscotch,  
steam feather windows

Blue mosaic table

tumble dry treble notes  
on a high back stool,  
pin down a set list

Owls on a nylon power line

A case for safety,  
wooden floors  
and way far away

We hide from the dark,  
my mouth flowing powdered sugar  
like a sieve

—Jason Joyce

## ANONYMITY

by

Allen Kopp

Frank's wife took a sleeping pill after drinking two or three martinis and went into her bedroom and closed and locked the door. She would sleep soundly until morning. He changed his clothes and crept downstairs in the dark to the kitchen and called a cab. When the cab pulled up in front of his house, he was waiting at the curb so the driver wouldn't honk his horn.

He was going to a part of the city where he had never been before. He had the driver let him out a couple of blocks from his destination, and he walked the rest of the way. Where he was going was an old three-story brick building, looking forlorn with one small light beside the door doing little to illuminate the darkness. He went up the three steps to the door, took a deep breath, and rang the bell.

Nothing happened for what seemed a very long time but couldn't have been more than a minute. He was about to ring the bell again, when the door opened, and standing before him was a large woman with bright-red hair, wearing a kind of old-fashioned, silvery evening gown. She gave him a welcoming smile and motioned him inside. She told him her name was Blanche White and that she was the hostess for the evening. She took him into a little receiving area off the front hall and pointed to a settee for him to sit down. She sat beside him and leaned in close and spoke confidentially to him, as though telling him a secret that should not be overheard. He could smell liquor on her breath and perfume like lilacs.

She told him the rules of the place and asked him if he agreed to them, and he said he did. She had a coarse voice, and he suspected almost at once that she was not really a woman, but he couldn't be sure. She was heavily made up and, even if she wasn't a woman, she gave that illusion. He paid her the cover charge in the amount she specified, and then she gave him a little badge to wear above his pocket with the word *GUEST* on it. This was to let people know that he was not one of her own boys. Then she gave him a reassuring pat on the knee and was off to greet the next person coming in at the door.

He went to the bar and ordered a drink and sat down on a stool that had just been vacated. Barely audible jazz music played in the background. Several people sat at the bar, looking straight ahead, quietly smoking their cigarettes and drinking their drinks. He finished his drink and, finding that it relaxed him, he ordered another one and moved off with it into the lobby.

It was a large dim room not unlike the lobby of an old hotel that he remembered from his far-distant past. He sat on the end of a sagging leather sofa next to a fern and glanced around. The three or four other people standing around or sitting in the lobby didn't look at him and, in fact, didn't seem to notice that he was there. Not being noticed made him feel safer and more as if he belonged. He took a few deep breaths and felt a pounding in his head.

From where he sat he could see the staircase that went up to the rooms. Two men came down together and parted at the bottom as though they didn't know each other. A distinguished-looking man in formal attire went up the stairs, carrying a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a toilet plunger in the other. A man dressed as a cowboy came down and then went back up with somebody who had been waiting for him in the lobby. Another man in a baseball uniform came down the stairs and scanned the lobby with his eyes and then sat in a chair in the corner and lit a cigarette and picked up a newspaper and started reading it.

He took small sips of his drink, trying to make it last. He told himself that when the drink was finished he would leave and wouldn't have another one. A very young man, barely twenty, approached and asked him if he was waiting for someone and he said he was and the young fellow walked away shaking his head.

After he had sat on the sofa for close to an hour and was beginning to regret the wasted evening, another man, an older man than before, walked out of the shadows and sat down near him on the couch with a foot of space between them. He turned toward the man and saw he was wearing a red shirt and had very short, dark hair and stubble on his face as though he hadn't bothered to shave for three or four days. He gave Red Shirt a strained smile and finished his drink in one nervous gulp and set the empty glass on the low table in front of him. He was about to stand up and leave when Red Shirt asked him if he could get him another drink. In that moment he knew that Red Shirt belonged there, that he was not just another "guest" like himself.

"No," he said. "I'm going home now."

"Am I intruding?"

"No, it isn't that."

"You've been sitting here for some time. I've been watching you."

"Watching me? Where were you?"

"I was over there," Red Shirt said, pointing toward the bar.

He looked to where Red Shirt pointed and said, "Why would you be watching me?"

Red Shirt shrugged and looked bored. "I don't know," he said. "There was nobody else to watch."

"I was just thinking about leaving."

"I know. You said that. You're not going to have another drink?"

"I've had enough. Two are my limit."

"I think it would be nice if we had a drink together. You're not really in a hurry to leave, are you?"

“Well, I—”

“Come on,” Red Shirt said. “Live a little.”

“I guess I could have another drink,” he said, glancing nervously at his watch. The time was irrelevant to him, but looking at his watch was something he did when he didn’t know what else to do.

Red Shirt went to the bar to get the drinks and when he came back he looked amused, as though he was secretly having a good time. He handed one of the drinks to Frank and sat down beside him again and punched him familiarly on the arm as if they were old friends.

“What are you so afraid of?” Red Shirt asked.

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

“You should see yourself. You look like you’re about to jump out of your skin.”

“I guess I just don’t belong here,” Frank said.

“Would you like to come upstairs to my room with me, where it’s private?”

“No.”

“So, you just came here to while away some time and have a couple of drinks?”

“Something like that.”

“Why didn’t you go to your neighborhood bar where you wouldn’t have to pay a cover charge, instead of coming all the way down here?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to come here, I guess.”

“Hoping for a little action?”

“What kind of action?”

Red Shirt laughed. “If you didn’t know what kind of action goes on in this place,” he said, “you wouldn’t be here.”

“I don’t know why I’m here,” Frank said. “I’ve got a—”

“Don’t say it!” Red Shirt said. “I don’t need to hear it.”

“How did you know what I was going to say?”

“Would you like to come upstairs with me to my room?”

“No.”

"I can get somebody else for you. Would you rather have a make-believe cowboy or a make-believe fireman or a make-believe sailor?"

"I've had enough of this place," Frank said. "I'm leaving now."

Red Shirt leaned in close to his ear. "Look," he said almost in a whisper. "I'm only going to ask you this one more time. Do you want to come upstairs to my room with me? I think you do, or I wouldn't still be here."

Frank gave a tiny nod of assent. Red Shirt stood up and headed for the stairs, motioning for Frank to follow. At the top of the stairs, Red Shirt turned to the right and went down the hallway to the last room. He stopped and turned and waited for Frank to catch up with him before he opened the door and reached in and turned on a light. Frank followed him into the room, and Red Shirt closed the door and locked it.

The room was very small. There was a bed and a chair and a table with a lamp on it. Red Shirt gestured for Frank to sit. He sat on the edge of the chair and clasped his hands together and took a deep breath.

"You don't need to be so scared," Red Shirt said.

"I'm not scared. I'm just a little worried that I won't be able to find a cab this time of night."

"Stop worrying," Red Shirt said. "There's nothing to worry about." He stood up and pulled the red shirt off over his head and removed his shoes. He unfastened his pants and let them fall to the floor and then stepped out of them. He was wearing sleek black swimming trunks with a white stripe up the side. He sat down on the bed.

"Now," Red Shirt said. "Don't you want to come over here?" He patted the bed beside him.

Frank stood up and took two steps to the bed and sat down beside Red Shirt. He looked at Red Shirt's bare leg next to his own. It was lean and muscular and hairy.

"Do you have a name?" Frank asked, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

"You can call me Carl."

"I don't believe that's really your name."

"It's my name as long as I'm here." He put his hand on Frank's shoulder and said very quietly, "Don't you want to touch me?"

"I don't think I should."

"For the love of—" Carl said, but he didn't finish the sentence. He reached over and took Frank's right hand and put it on his own left thigh. "It's all right," he said. "Nobody will ever know about this. Just let yourself go."

Slowly, Frank ran his hand along Carl's inner thigh from his knee to his groin. Then he gripped Carl's bicep, first with one hand and then with the other. He trailed his hand from the arm to the chest and down the chest to the abdomen. His fingers grazed the top of the black trunks and stopped there.

Carl stood up and turned off the light and slipped off the black trunks. Frank lay back on the bed, seeing only bursts of red in the darkness.

Frank didn't know how much time had gone by. It seemed like minutes but also like hours—time that didn't pass in the usual way of things. At the end of the allotted time, Carl got up from the bed and put on the black trunks again and turned on the light. He lit a cigarette and sat down in the chair and blew out a cloud of smoke and leaned his head on his hand and looked down at the floor.

"How long have you been doing this?" Frank asked from the bed. He was more than just making casual conversation; he wanted some answers.

Carl looked at him as though he had forgotten he was there. "Oh, a while," he said. "A little too long."

"Can I see you again?" Frank asked.

"That isn't very likely. I'll only be here for a few more days, and then I'm gone."

"Where to?"

"Oh, I'm tired of this racket. I've got a real job waiting for me out West."

"If I come back tomorrow, will you be here then?"

"I might be," Carl said, "and I might be busy."

"Won't you tell me your real name?"

"I told you. It's Carl."

"I'd like to know your real name."

"I can't tell you that. We don't use real names here. You want your anonymity, and so do I. I might run for political office some day, and I won't want anybody to know I was ever here."

"You're making a joke."

"Yes."

"Just tell me your name, and nobody will know you told me."

"That's against the rules. You don't want me to get fired, do you?"

"You're leaving anyway."

Carl stood up and put the red shirt on again and slipped on his pants. "I don't mean to rush you," he said, "but we haven't got all night. I'll walk downstairs with you."

After Frank was dressed again, he opened his wallet and took out two bills and handed them to Carl. Carl took them and folded them and put them in his pocket.

"I want to go with you," Frank said.

"What?"

"When you go out West to your new job, I'm coming with you."

Carl laughed. "I think you've had a little too much to drink," he said.

"No. I'm completely sober. I want to come with you."

"We just met an hour ago. You don't even know me."

"I know enough."

"When you come here again, you'll meet somebody else that you'll like a lot. All the other guys are ten times better than I am."

"I'll give you my name and telephone number, and I want you to think about it and call me tomorrow."

"I can't take your telephone number," Carl said. He put his hands on Frank's shoulders and turned him around and pointed him toward the door.

They walked down the stairs together, through the lobby and to the front door. At the door they shook hands like business associates. Carl knew they would never meet again, but Frank believed otherwise. Frank went out into the cool night and walked down the street. Much to his relief, a cab was waiting on the corner for its next fare.

\* \* \*

In the morning he awoke at the usual time and got out of bed and put on his bathrobe and went downstairs. His wife was in the kitchen, cooking breakfast. Her hair was flattened on one side where she had slept on it, and she had a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. She looked at him and then looked away. He knew she suspected nothing.

He went to the front door and opened it and stepped out onto the lawn, even though he was wearing only his bathrobe. He bent over and picked up the morning paper and opened it and glanced at the front page without much interest. A car went past and he didn't duck back into the house to keep from being seen, as he ordinarily would have. He looked up at the sky and at the tops of the trees and at the houses on the other side of the street and at the parked cars. Everything looked different to him somehow.

## **BOWING MY HEAD IN NOTRE DAME**

Guys always say  
“If I could suck my own dick  
I’d never leave the house”  
but they’re not committed  
don’t really mean it

I do  
so here I am  
sitting cross-legged  
on the beige tile floor  
of my parents’ bathroom  
bare ass cold  
trying it out  
because the idea of staying inside forever  
sounds so sweet.

I force my head down  
with the palm of my hand  
and hunch my back  
like Quasimodo  
trying to drown himself  
in a lapful of tears  
hoping Mom doesn’t walk in  
because these outstretched lips  
inches away  
will be hard to explain.

Am I gay?  
Well  
it seems I won’t be happy  
until there’s a dick in my mouth  
so it’s 50/50  
yes and no  
because I’m out of breath  
my butt is beginning to freeze  
and it looks like I’m destined  
to leave the house.

—Mateo Amaral

### **an extraordinary machine**

a dragonfly's erratic hyperbole  
and da Vinci imagined helio-copters,  
repeatedly traveling a metaphorical tightrope  
from the whorls at his fingertips.

sycophantic angels cited divine condescension  
from some eternal watchmaker  
creating worlds under thumb;  
but helio-copters carry Hellfire missiles,  
an extraordinary machine.

—henry 7. reneau, jr.

## ON LANGUAGE

I think that I should begin to  
believe in silence and then words will  
fall out of the sky, heavy with  
meaning, and never quite reach  
the ears of those they meant  
to caress. I think I'll take  
threads of cotton candy and  
sew up my lips so that my  
tongue can't offend when it  
curls up with language and  
tries to give away its words  
as if they are gifts in tiny  
carved boxes that only reveal  
their beauty when opened  
and inside they are filled up  
with pieces of who I meant  
to become: The box should  
contain the desiccated shell  
of a cicada who left behind  
its first skin with hardly a  
shrug, a button gently tugged  
loose from a shirt with each absentminded  
twist, a tiny pebble smoothed down  
from years of being kissed by  
the crash of waves, a skeleton key  
found in the dirt and filled with  
the promise of a door that will  
never be found, and, maybe, a  
tiny slip of paper with my name  
written on it so that I won't  
forget how it used to feel to  
have the ability to taste words  
as they fell from my lips.

—Chloe N. Clark

## OCCURRENCE

A boy in Des Moines  
grows cloud full  
trips on his shoe's battered laces  
and goes down singing.

A girl in Columbus swallows her throat  
cuts arms out of redyellow calico  
pins wrist to bone and spins and spins.

Bird claws make a lone appearance on green grass  
start curling around an invisible pencil.  
holdholdhold

A man wearing ink-smudged temples  
watches one hour  
rip brass tongues out of bells  
as iron swiftly goes  
flowing past the last visible edge.

Downstream, a woman  
suddenly bids the blood in her  
rise. Proclaim  
the sometimes startling beauty of the world.  
Every unasked for thing.

—Jenn Blair



*Boy and Bird in the Boston Public Gardens*

—Cynthia Staples

## MY FEATHERY PRAYERS

They become like small birds  
nesting within the branches  
of my soul—whip-poor-wills,  
chickadees, morning doves  
cooing praises for assurance  
from the sun, the quick dance  
of light rainbowing along  
a blackbird's outstretched  
wing, humming birds lapping  
up the morning's first small  
pools of honey and dew.

— Fredrick Zydek

## IF I WERE A TREE

I could not be a spruce or pine,  
those emerald cloud-stabbing arrowheads,  
snagging the wind and stirring the blue;  
not an aspen, those thin white bodies that run  
in clumps, sticking out like the bleached bones  
of a hillside. Nor a poplar,  
single-pointedly straining for Heaven,  
as focused as laser on the sky.  
Nor yet an elm, well-rounded, picturesque,  
posing in the lee of a wall.  
And I would tire of willowing,  
turning earthward as I grew.

If I were a tree, I would be  
an oak, with nuts in my hair,  
my heavy arms drooping,  
curved like hammocks  
made for reading the seasons  
or dreaming summer dreams.

—Catherine McGuire

## STAR GAZING

by

Linda Hudson Hoagland

“Mom, KISS is going to be in Johnson City next month? I wish I could go.”

“Johnson City? What day?”

“It’s on a Friday night, the twentieth, so it won’t make you miss work.”

“How much are the tickets?”

“Thirty dollars a piece.”

“Jeez, Eddy, that would be a hundred and twenty dollars for all four of us to go.”

“Aaron won’t go. He doesn’t like my music.”

“We’ll see, Eddy. I have to figure out where I would scrape up the money because I would also have to give your brother some extra money if he stays home. He’ll probably buy a computer game. It’s only fair that I spend on him the same amount that I spend on you.”

Eddy was still in the recovery stages from a bad car accident where he received a head injury. We, as parents, were inclined to do anything that made him happy no matter the cost.

Iron Maiden and KISS, heavy metal and hard rock bands, were not in the same category as Travis Tritt, a long and strong representative of country music.

I found it very hard to believe that my son, a lover of loud, noisy, and sometimes profane hard rock and heavy metal music could tune his abused ears to the tame and docile music, in comparison, of Travis Tritt.

When Eddy was a teenager, my husband and I sat through endlessly long performances of Iron Maiden and KISS at concerts that were over a hundred miles from our home. Rather than let Eddy find a ride with some of his untrustworthy friends who were into drinking and smoking dope, we took him to the concerts and subjected our eyes and ears to the abuse of the noise and explosions of Iron Maiden and KISS.

As a teenager, Eddy claimed a very strong dislike for country music in any way, shape, or form. It was a shock to me to discover, fifteen years later, that he hid his musical taste for the songs of Travis Tritt.

“Eddy, we’re having a yard sale. Do you have anything you want us to sell for you?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a bunch of old tapes and CDs I want to get rid of.”

I discovered that Eddy had this fascination with Travis Tritt when he gave me a shoebox filled with Travis Tritt cassette tapes to be sold at that yard sale.

Apparently, Travis Tritt’s topics in his songs struck a chord many times with Eddy’s predicaments. His songs told stories of lost love, lost life, lost souls, and rediscovering that there were good times after all of the trials and tribulations life had to offer.

It was still hard for me to imagine that Eddy would purchase a CD or cassette tape with only country music screaming forth when he played it on his boom box.

Our local country music radio station was sponsoring a homecoming concert in which Travis Tritt was the main attraction. The homecoming in no way reflected the fact the Mr. Tritt would be coming back to his home—which our town wasn’t; but instead, it was meant to gather the people from several small towns in the surrounding area to a common ground for a homecoming of local people.

This was a big event for us in this rural part of the county and this section of the state that celebrities, with the exception of politicians who usually planned to visit once before Election Day, seemed to pass over because we can’t fill up a stadium with a hundred thousand people. We don’t have a facility that large within a hundred mile radius. We’d be lucky to get ten thousand warm bodies gathered together for a major event.

“Sonny, get us a couple of tickets to go to that concert. We’ll use what’s left out of our income tax rebate after we pay for our eyeglasses. There should be enough to get the tickets from that.”

“Great, I’d love to go to the concert. It’s the first time their so-called homecoming is not being held out of state and the first time that we can actually afford to see it.”

The cost of \$21 per ticket probably wouldn’t have been available to us if we hadn’t received that once-in-a-lifetime tax rebate check. The purchase of the eyeglasses for each of us would have been delayed another year if the check hadn’t materialized as the result of a campaign promise from the newly elected president.

When I told Eddy about the concert, the mention of the name of Travis Tritt sparked an interest.

“I’d like to see Travis Tritt but not everybody else. I can’t go anyway because I have to work,” he said, with obvious disappointment.

“There will be six different sets of musicians including Travis Tritt. See if you can take the time off, and I’ll buy you a ticket. You don’t have to see the whole concert. We’ll take an extra lawn chair. Travis Tritt will be the last act, so you don’t have to get there for the whole day.”

“No, I don’t want to see all those other people. Saturday night is a bad night for me to try to take off work.”

Eddy worked nights as a stocker in a local supermarket, a chain store based in North Carolina. He rarely took time off from his scheduled workdays.

Actually, I think Eddy wouldn't go to the concert because he didn't want all those other people in the audience to see him at a country music event. He would have been embarrassed to admit to anyone that he, the lover of hard rock and heavy metal, attended a presentation of strictly country music.

The topic of conversation changed, and I never discussed the concert again with Eddy.

When the day of the concert arrived, Sonny and I—along with our lawn chairs and jackets—sat and watched five different musician acts consisting of three up-and-coming stars of the future and one grizzled veteran of the country music world.

The day was much cooler than anticipated, and a wind had decided to gently push its way through the festivities. The sun seemed to be playing peekaboo among the clouds, allowing the chill to last most of the day, which was normal for an autumn day in September.

The grizzled veteran, Ronnie Milsap, was enough to draw a hefty crowd and was the real reason I had wanted to see the concert. I had heard of Travis Tritt and had seen him on television a couple of times, but he didn't leave a lasting impression with me.

Mr. Milsap's performance was excellent and was truly appreciated by the crowd that had assembled, but the star of the show was Travis Tritt.

Then, the long anticipated appearance of Travis Tritt finally arrived.

The tension caused by excited, waiting people could be felt all around us.

Everything that day was being held outdoors, inside the confines of a minor league baseball field with the large portable stage positioned slightly left of center field.

The roar from the crowd was tremendous as Travis Tritt entered the stage area from a flight of steps to the left and walked onto the stage in front of the excited crowd. The beat of country music was coming from the banks of enormous speakers positioned on the right and left sides of the stage, representing one huge rapid heartbeat of the massive crowd.

Massive by our rural standards was anything over a couple of hundred people. This crowd was pushing enormous when over a thousand were standing and sitting on the green grass, awaiting the arrival of the star of the show.

"Now I see why Eddy's a Travis Tritt fan," I whispered loudly to my husband as I leaned toward his ear so he could hear what I was saying.

"Didn't you know why?" Sonny whispered back to me.

“No, I never thought about it before now.”

Travis Tritt was the image that Eddy wanted to project.

The country music performer stepped onto the stage in front of the throng of people who were whistling, screaming, and clapping in front him.

Mr. Tritt was dressed from head to toe in black. Eddy’s favorite clothing color.

His jacket was black leather with long fringes hanging down over black jeans and black leather boots with higher heels than normal.

Travis Tritt had long, very long, dark hair streaming down, swaying into his face and dancing on his shoulders and back with every movement he made.

He wore a black western hat and sported a mustache on his upper lip.

I stared at the man with my mouth open as I watched him move effortlessly around the stage entertaining the crowd.

Eddy was a copy of Travis Tritt with his long dark hair, mustache, and propensity to wear black clothing. For years Eddy had tried to teach himself how to play the guitar without much success, but now I knew the reason why.

As I watched Travis Tritt perform, I smiled the knowing smile of a mother who has discovered a secret—wanting to always remember this concert so I could forever see in my mind my thirty-year-old son’s hero.

## **PAPER PRISON**

This paper is my cage, trapped  
in a murdered tree. Lines bind me with secrets,  
I wish I could break free.

I'm caught in a web of recycled life, this  
paper can't hold my lies. In this prison, desperate,  
through paper walls, hear my cries.

This diary dredges up dark things—the memories,  
they constantly gnaw. The paper refuses to let me forget  
the horrendous events I saw.

So I scribble down soundless words, carving  
my thoughts with dull pieces of lead. Erasers cannot free me—  
these words claw at my head.

I'm trapped alone in here, trapped  
in a paper cage. Words grip me tightly, my  
body bound by page.

—Brittany Zick



*Passionate Rainfall*

—Maheshwar N. Sinha

## RED

by

Dallas Woodburn

Grace knocks the nail polish off her bedside table and onto the carpet and that is The End. She crouches there, as if paralyzed, watching the Maybelline “Carmine Red” soak into the white Berber, the teardrop-shaped stain slowly expanding, like blood seeping into a Band-Aid.

Grace sits there, rocking on her heels, watching and waiting. For what, she doesn’t know. When nothing happens, she gets up and goes to the kitchen for some paper towels.

\* \* \*

The rain spattered softly against the car windows. Grace watched the windshield wipers dance, back and forth, forth and back, like her piano teacher’s metronome. She sat with her knees hugged up against her chin, trying to minimize the contact of her skin with the cold vinyl. “Mom,” she said. “It’s raining cats and frogs.”

“You mean cats and dogs,” her mother corrected, never taking her eyes off the road.

It was still raining when they arrived at the park. Grace stared out the car window and imagined they were inside a giant aquarium, except filled with birds instead of fish.

Her mother turned around and smiled at Grace in the backseat. “What a perfect day,” she said, “to fly a kite!” Grace could tell she wasn’t joking. Her mother never joked about important matters.

Part of Grace wanted to stay in the car, but the other part of her won out. She pulled the strings on her sweatshirt hood so tight that her face was scrunched and there was only a keyhole of an opening where the rain could get in. Then she tied the strings in a bow—double-knotted, the way Grampa had taught her so it wouldn’t come undone.

Grace tightly held her mother’s hand as they trudged together up the rain-slickened hill that overlooked the playground. She had never been to the park in the rain. It was deserted. Like a magic kingdom that belonged only to Grace and her mother. “We’ve always got each other, hon,” her mom said whenever Grace asked about her daddy. “We girls gotta stick together. Just you and me, that’s all we need.”

That’s all we need. Just you and me. Grace squeezed her mother’s hand.

They were at the top of the hill now, and Grace peeked out her keyhole through the drizzle at the slide and the swing set, then at the picnic tables and the scattered

trees, and finally at their little blue car parked alongside the curb. Her mother stood a few feet away, face turned skyward, eyes squinting against the driving BBs of water, hair streaming long and wet down her back. It was raining so hard Grace found it hard to believe the earth would ever dry. She imagined it would always be like this: rivers streaming down the gutters, pools collecting in the sidewalk cracks, muddy ground and murky puddles. Everywhere water. Everything wet.

Grace's clothes had grown heavy and cumbersome. She wanted to take off her sweatshirt but couldn't get the double-knotted bow undone. Water ran off the tip of her nose, and she stuck out her tongue and caught a drop. She was surprised at how warm it tasted.

Grace's mother held the kite with hopeful, outstretched hands. She peered up into the leaden sky, as if challenging it or maybe begging. The kite was small and diamond-shaped and painted red. It had a hard time getting airborne.

"Mommy, let's go," Grace said, holding the end of the kite string and shivering slightly, but her mother didn't hear. She raised the kite above her head, quietly beseeching the wind to take the tiny red diamond in its arms and raise it high. Grace knew you shouldn't fly kites in the rain. Her mother knew this too, and yet there she stood, trying anyway.

The chemotherapy started the very next week.

The second time, Grace went with her mother into The Little White Room with the hospital smell and space-age machinery. It reminded Grace of the aliens she had seen once, when her babysitter let her stay up late and watch a Big Kids movie. Grace was scared of The Little White Room, but she went in anyway. She sat beside the bed and watched the medicine drip...drip...drip out of the IV bag, down a clear tube, and into her mother's arm, slowly trickling inside her, becoming a part of her, like blood or bone.

As the treatments continued, Grace sometimes brought along pictures she drew in art class. This always made her mother smile, except for the picture of the red kite and the rain. That one made her mother cry.

One day when Grace came to The Little White Room, she brought a bottle of her mother's nail polish, and they painted each other's toenails. Grace was very careful, but she still got polish on the skin around her mother's nails. She wasn't very good at coloring inside the lines, but her mother said that was okay. Red was her mother's favorite color. You couldn't be dying if you had bright red toenails.

Grace believed her. She coated her mother's toenails with thick layers of red, as if somehow chip-free nails could create miracles.

After her mother died, Grace kept the \$3.49 bottle of Carmine Red polish in her bureau drawer, buried underneath her underwear, where nobody would find it. She kept some of her mother's other things—a lock of auburn hair, a lavender silk scarf, a book of Walt Whitman poems—in the drawer of her bedside table. But the nail polish was Grace's secret. Sometimes she would slip it out and painstakingly paint a single fingernail red with the same tiny brush that had traced her mother's nails nearly a

decade ago. She would carefully paint only one coat, using as little polish as possible, because this was a special red, her mother's red, and she couldn't go out and buy more when she ran out. She doubted they even made Carmine Red anymore.

Grace would sit there on her bedroom floor, sneaking glances at the splash of vibrant color alive against the white of her skin, stroking the single red nail with her thumb, strangely comforted yet upset with herself at the same time.

\* \* \*

Now, Grace watches the pool of red soak through the layers of paper towels. The tiny bottle, nearly empty, sits upright on the bedside table. She should feel renewed loss—hollow, aching—but she feels only the same starved normality of her everyday self. The carpet is stained red, and the tips of her fingers are stained red, and as the tears slide down her face, she imagines they are red, and as the rain falls outside it is red, too, soaking into the earth and washing the streets with a faint carmine sheen, and somewhere, somewhere, Grace imagines there is a tiny red kite, struggling against the wind and the rain to fly.

## **AN ORDINARY DAY**

The girl on the bench has a Popsicle.  
It drips like her salty tears on rainy days.  
Flowing into the green, murky ocean that holds the secrets of sunken ships.  
The cherry dye stains her cheeks a sticky red.  
The same color as her mother's blush that she loves to borrow.  
She's so pretty, with those dimples.  
Those cherry-stained dimples.  
Otherwise, she's pretty simple.  
Just a simple beauty.  
With a simple red Popsicle.  
On an ordinary day.  
At the beach.  
With me.

—JoyEllen Freeman



*House of Creation IV*  
—Shareen Knight

## WAITING UNDER A RUG

by

TK Turner

Studying me from across the room, she stiffly straightened her back and pursed her lips. From the moment our eyes met, I knew what would happen next, but Trey didn't. Still smiling valiantly, he gave his mother a nudge and extended his arm toward me. "And this," he beamed, his green eyes twinkling in the light, "this is my girlfriend, TK!"

Still reaching for a handshake, I parted my lips into the biggest smile I could muster without hurting my face. "It's so nice to meet you, Carol!" I chirped in the sweetest voice imaginable. "Thank you for inviting me!"

A sudden look of disgust washed over her as she glared at my hand. She tossed a furtive glance to her son, and the valiant smile evaporated from his face. By the way his eyes fearfully looked up at me, I could easily guess what his mother's look had meant.

Throughout the eight-hour drive to Memphis from Dallas, I had mentally prepared the lines I'd say. I had literally spent *hours* memorizing every aspect of my boyfriend's family to make a good first impression. Every outfit in my suitcase had been carefully scrutinized before packing. But as my hand still waited for her handshake, it suddenly occurred to me that none of that mattered anymore, and I smiled despite myself. The irony wasn't lost on me.

Regardless of what I wore or said to this woman, she couldn't get past my being black. More specifically, she couldn't get past her white son dating a *black girl*.

Carol mustered a wobbly smile and halfheartedly shook my hand. Without speaking, she retreated to the couch and looked away to the wall. Nobody spoke for several long seconds as the three of us fidgeted uncomfortably in her oversized living room.

"I'll go put my stuff upstairs and go to bed," I announced into the silence. Without waiting for a response, I shouldered my bag of belongings and started up the staircase to my room. I was irritated but not surprised. More than anything, I was angry that this late in the 2000s I still had to deal with *this*.

As I neared the top of the stairs, I could hear her hissing to her son; "Just what were you *thinking*, honey?! Why didn't you *tell* me before you came?!" Rolling my eyes, I continued up the steps.

The house had three attics, at least seven bedrooms, and the biggest outdoor pool I've ever seen. As an anesthesiologist, she could afford to buy a house with all the pomp and splendor. She decorated all the rooms with ancient Chinese pottery and oversized Victorian beds. Millionaire or not, the house was just too big for one person. The lavish decorations only annoyed me further as I scrutinized the first room along the hall.

Since her other sons hadn't yet arrived, I used Eric's room—my boyfriend's middle youngest brother. After showering, I crawled into his huge king-size bed, pulled the satin covers over my head, and dozed off. I knew Trey and his mother would be down there for a while; and after spending eight hours cramped inside a little car, I was too tired to wait up.

Several hours later I felt a hand shaking me awake. I awoke, blinking, as my boyfriend pulled me into his arms. My glance toward the digital clock on Eric's nightstand told me that it was a little after 3 a.m.

"She's...disappointed in me," he lamented, burying his face into my hair. "She told me that she went wrong raising me...and kept asking me if I knew what I was doing, or if I was acting out!"

In the dark I could see how upset he looked. I had never seen him so angry, and one of the things I loved most about him was his laid-back personality—it took a lot to make Trey upset.

"Let me guess, it's all because I'm black, right?" The question lingered in the air for a moment, and, after I had said it, I couldn't help but laugh.

"I'm...so *embarrassed!*" he confessed miserably.

"I'm not upset about it," I lied through a smile.

"*You may not be upset but I am!*" he spoke fiercely.

I reached across the covers and squeezed his hands into mine. I searched his eyes in the dark, trying my best to calm and reassure him. "Regardless of what your mother thinks of me, I'm still going to be here. You love your mother and I understand that," I smiled. "So let's enjoy the weekend," I said, but in the back of my mind I hardly expected that we would. We kissed goodnight and spent the rest of the evening tossing and turning in our separate rooms.

The next day wasn't much different from the first. His mother was never outwardly rude, but she made it clear she didn't want me there. She introduced me as her son's "friend" instead of his "girlfriend" and continuously put meat on my plate, even though I told her numerous times I was a vegetarian. On occasions I tried talking to her, she would either ignore what I said or deliberately contradict my statement as if baiting me into an argument. She made sure I remained alone by keeping her son busy with errands and not inviting me on their outings together.

I was irritated with the situation but compliant, nonetheless. I didn't want to be the "oversensitive, angry black woman." However, things came to a head after my boyfriend's youngest brother simply walked out and left the house shortly after being introduced to me. In a fit, Trey had followed him outside. The two brothers had a shouting match by the pool, while I helplessly watched from the kitchen window.

Carol witnessed the entire event across the room. She apologized for her son's behavior through a laugh and told me not to think anything of it. Her eyes seemed to laugh at me. I felt sick to my stomach for the rest of the day.

My boyfriend and I had often talked about the strains of interracial dating. We had watched the so-called “staples” with movies like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* and *Something New*; and aside from the occasional hostile glance at the grocery store, we naively concluded there was nothing left to talk about. This was the 21st century! Our nation had its first black president, slavery was abolished, and the civil rights movement had ended a generation ago. What left was there to say?

I knew there was plenty. However, no sensible black person (or any other racial ethnicity) still wanted to appear as the “oversensitive minority,” not this late into the new millennium. Not with a black president sitting in the White House.

As the weekend progressed, it became obvious that our interracial relationship was eating my boyfriend up inside. He had stopped holding my hand in public; and whenever his mother introduced me as his “friend,” he no longer sought to correct her. He shrank from me and refused to meet my eye. For the first time in his life, he felt the full brunt of modern-day racism. The rose-colored goggles shattered, and he was guilty—not just as my boyfriend, but as a white man.

I was more than happy to leave when the time came, but as we started the drive back to Texas, I found myself getting angrier and angrier about the whole experience. In our effort to “deal” with the situation, we opted not to discuss it. Like the majority of the country, whenever it concerned race, we had just wanted to kick the issue under a rug and pretend it wasn’t there. I did it out of fear of being seen as “oversensitive.” He did it out of idealism. Either way, nothing was resolved.

“Do you still want to be with me?” I demanded all at once in the car.

“Of course I do,” he glanced away from the steering wheel.

Without stopping a beat, I continued on, “I can’t change who I am—so if your family doesn’t come around, could you really handle being with me? This can’t happen again if we’re going to be together.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” he took one hand off the steering wheel to rest it upon my lap. “This caught me off guard too. My mother and everyone else...just need time.”

*Time*, I pondered, but I smiled at him anyway. At least things between us hadn’t changed.

Since our return, Carol still hasn’t acknowledged me as her son’s girlfriend and has even gone so far as to demand my voice be taken off his home answering machine. She refuses to have me back in her house out of fear someone she might know will...“see” me. Trey hasn’t visited his mother since then—his choice, not mine—and has decided he will not visit her again unless the *both of us* are invited.

I knew ahead of time that Carol’s reaction to my relationship was not unique. When it comes right down to it, interracial relationships are still left waiting for someone to kick them out from underneath a rug. One would assume that as “contemporary” Americans, more would be willing to pull it off and clean the mess under there—but then, as my boyfriend said...I guess these things just need “time.”

## **DEMETER MOMENT**

In a blank white cube of a room  
at a plastic table  
facing each other  
halfway through your tale  
of vague, tangled happenstance  
weary plodding  
resistant strangers' crisp indifference  
ending here  
a locked ward  
sheltering your girl  
whose life, already tragic,  
has turned down another dark path  
hoping we can decipher  
turn aside  
the corruption somewhere  
in her brain—  
at this moment, we look deeply  
in each other's eyes  
sensing hope and hopelessness  
linked by Demeter's aching cry  
for her vanished child.

—Catherine McGuire



*Ideas Come Through*  
—Maheshwar N. Sinha

## CORBREAD

by

Melanie S. Hatter

I sit in my mother's cluttered kitchen, on the only seat not covered with newspapers and magazines, watching her pour two sticks of melted butter into what would be, after an hour in the oven, a baking pan of cornbread. The air is thick and warm, stifling really, but the window is broken and doesn't open anymore. I want to get in my car and go home.

"Ma, it's just the three of us. You don't need to make so much."

"Child, this is gonna be good. You and Bryan's favorite since you was itty-bitty things." She pauses and brings her eyebrows together. "Where is Bryan, anyways?"

"In the back, watching basketball, I think."

Ma holds the pan in the air with one hand while she opens the oven door with the other. The mixture sloshes in the pan, and I lunge forward to catch it, but Ma dodges my hand.

"Ma, please let me help you."

"I got it. I'm fine. The chicken's done and I just need to put on the potatoes and heat up the greens, and we'll be all set."

To my amazement, the pan slides onto the rack without a spill. My held breath exhales slowly, and I take a step back watching her closely. She's added a few pounds since I saw her last—eight, nine months ago. The Capri pants stretch snuggly across her hips and the sleeves of the pale blue blouse are tight across her forearms. Her mood is upbeat.

"I'm so glad y'all are here," Ma says, wiping but not really cleaning the countertop by the stove. "I don't get to cook for folks these days. This is gonna be great. My babies here for dinner."

Her babies. I narrow my eyes at the woman. Ma spent many a day and night not caring much about *her babies*. We weren't even teenagers when she began leaving us alone at night to go out with one man after another.

Ma looks around the room as if satisfied that it's perfectly clean. "Okay, well that's done," she says. "I'm just gonna step out for a minute. Okay, baby?"

In other words, she's going out for a smoke. It seems odd to me that she continues to go outside to smoke even though Ed isn't here anymore. Must be habit. No smoking in the house was his rule. In the twelve years he was in our lives, I never saw Ed

smoke, but in his youth, he said he had smoked two to three packs a day. A heart attack in his early forties spurred him to quit. Not long after that, he met my mother and within months, it seemed, they were married. He was a gentle man, intelligent, a thinker, not like the others. I was glad to see she finally found someone decent. He loved to talk. He and Ma both could spend the day talking about everything from the latest news to when best to plant bulbs. With a smile and a wink, he could inspire the best in people. He read history books and always had something to share about what he'd read. I admired him for that. Now, every time I hear a song by Earth, Wind & Fire, I can't help but think of Aristotle. "He came up with that, you know," Ed said, one morning at breakfast when "Boogie Wonderland" was playing on the radio.

I screwed up my face at him and swallowed a mouthful of cocoa puffs. "What?"

"Aristotle. He was a Greek philosopher who said that everything in the universe is made up of four basic elements: earth, water, air, and fire. That's where the group got its name from."

"Aristotle?"

"Yep." He went back to reading the newspaper and said nothing more, leaving me wondering about this guy Aristotle's influence on my favorite R&B group.

As I watch Ma gather her cigarettes, I'm relieved to get a moment alone, but wonder if I should follow her outside—isn't that what a good child would do? I don't feel up to being the good daughter, but I try, and ask, "You want company?"

"It don't matter."

The sharp odor of alcohol catches in my throat as Ma moves past me to the back door; it's in the air like the cloud that follows Pigpen in the *Peanuts* cartoon. Everyone says alcoholism is a sickness, but I'm past the point of feeling sorry for her, tired of making excuses. Ed died two years ago. The woman should be moving forward with her life, not going backward. She isn't even sixty yet.

"I'll be there in a minute." I walk through to the den where Bryan is lounging on the sofa, the remote in his hand, speaking into his cell phone headset. He's telling his two-year-old daughter that he loves her, then asking for her mama. He tilts his head at me and puts his finger up, indicating he'll be done in a moment. I lean on the doorframe. The curtains are still closed, and the air mattress where Bryan had slept is propped against the wall, the sleeping bag piled in the corner. I stop myself from opening the windows and feel glad I drove down this morning, having declined Bryan's suggestion that I come Friday and stay through Monday. I'm not about to miss Monday's meeting with Bernstein—this is a client who could be the key to my next promotion.

"All right, honey," Bryan says, staring at the TV where Florida is beating UCLA in some basketball tournament I have no interest in. "I'll call you tomorrow before I leave... I love you too." He looks at me. "What's up?"

"She seems to be handling things fine. Didn't want my help with dinner. Things are under control."

Bryan blinks in slow motion, turns back to the television, and sucks the inside of his lips. He says, “You think that, huh?”

“Well, I don’t see you rushing to help her.”

“She needs someone here all the time.”

“So then we pool our funds and get a nurse.”

“I ain’t making that kinda money, Miss Corporate Advertising, and with Tammie pregnant, we can’t keep paying out for her. I already paid her phone bill. You know it got cut off, right?” I nod, but he keeps on. “Yeah, ’cause I don’t remember seeing no check or nothing coming from you.”

“Fuck you, Bryan. It’s not like I don’t send her money. You live thirty minutes away. It’s a four-hour drive for me, for chrissake.” Deep breath. I’m not here to fight, but he acts like I do nothing to help and seems to forget that Ma’s electric bill comes to my house—I pay the balance every month.

“I said I’d sit with her outside.” As I turn to leave, Ma is standing in the dim hallway staring at the floor.

“What’s the matter, Ma?”

“I dropped my cigarette.”

I flip the light switch and see a cigarette with the end snubbed off, lying in the middle of the floor. I retrieve it from the musty carpet and hand it to Ma, who apologizes.

“Well, if I had just put the light on. I’m just silly these days. Can’t seem to think straight sometimes.”

Ma reaches her hand toward me and rests her palm on my shoulder, leaning into me, and I feel her other hand, a fist holding her cigarette and lighter, pressing into my back, her warm cheek gently touching mine. I stand stiffly, uncertain how to respond, my hands dangling in the air behind her. A hug? This from a woman who never hugs, who never displayed any affection toward her children. Her affection extended to no more than a quick pat on the top of our heads. She preferred to deliver in generous amounts long finger strokes and kisses to any man who stopped by while we were relegated to the back rooms. That’s what I learned about affection.

Bryan comes into the hallway and gives me a knowing glance. “I told you so,” his eyes say. I roll my eyes, then watch Ma struggle to get the cigarette back in its pack. Her hands shake.

Ma wears the same stunned expression she wore at the funeral. We had sat under a canopy on a sunny day beside a memorial for unknown soldiers; Ed’s ashes in a plain cream-colored urn atop a fold-out table. There had been no church service—Ed hadn’t been religious and explicitly requested no pomp and circumstance. Only a

handful of family and close friends attended. He had suffered at home for months. Ma, a registered nurse, had cared for him herself, had watched the cancer eat him away in the back bedroom in a special hospital bed they'd rented. His death was no surprise, but still, for months afterward Ma appeared shocked until she finally got stuck in denial, taking refuge in a wine bottle. She never acknowledged, or perhaps she never realized, that the loss was ours too. That Ed had become a father to us in his own way, someone to help guide us through our late teen angst. Without his steady hand, Bryan would have found his way into juvenile hall or worse. And me, maybe I wouldn't have found the confidence to push for more than being an excellent typist.

"Let's get the kitchen cleaned up for dinner," I suggest, trying to sound happy to be here. Stepping back into the kitchen, I say, "Ma, you should get someone in here to clean up for you."

I grab at the newspapers and start making a neat pile of them. Some are on the floor, and as I bend down, a cockroach scuttles into the corner. I jump back in fright and stand staring at the corner, watching for movement, the moment taking me back to when we were youngsters living with Ma in that small tenement apartment after Daddy disappeared. I had awakened thirsty and padded out of the room we shared to the kitchenette. With a strong tug, the refrigerator door opened and its light flooded the room. Roaches crawled across the counters and walls. In retrospect, there had only been three or four, but what I saw then was a swarm. After discovering the bugs, my body had itched for weeks and walking barefoot anymore was out of the question. I ran screaming into my mother's empty bedroom. Bryan—not my mother—had consoled and cuddled me back to sleep. He taught me to love, to touch, to hold on until your battering heart slows down and you can breathe enough to talk again. She taught me to keep my distance, to fuck strangers at arm's length and make sure they leave before breakfast because I wasn't about to cook for them.

"Ma, really, you need someone in here to help you."

"I can manage, okay." She drains the potatoes and vigorously mashes them, adding generous amounts of butter and milk through the steam rising in her face. The mere thought of the calories make my arteries thicken.

I call to my brother to help and hand him the newspapers to dispose of out back. Frowning, I clear away the miscellaneous papers to find a thick layer of grease and grime. With some effort and much Lysol, the table and chairs gleam; the silverware and plates complete the picture. There's a vague familiarity as I help Ma dish out the food, a distant memory of us three sitting together at the dinner table, and for a moment we stare at each other in bewilderment before digging in to eat.

"Wouldn't you like Janel to come live with you for a while?" Bryan asks.

I scowl at him. He has responsibilities, sure—a good job as a clerk in the courthouse, a wife and daughter—but he chose that life when he opted to marry Tammie when she got pregnant. Just because I'm single with no children doesn't mean I should give up my career in DC and move to the-middle-of-nowhere Virginia to be caretaker for our mother. It's not like she's shown any interest in my life since I graduated college. She can't even tell anyone what I do for a living.

"I don't need no one to live with me," Ma says. "I'm fine. Ed will be back soon."

The words slam into my face, and my jaw stops moving, my mouth full of buttery mashed potatoes. For months, Ma's phone calls had come late at night, sometimes in the wee hours of the morning, slurred and jumbled words expressing her anguish through the drink. "Eddie was my soul mate. My true love," she'd slur over and over again through the wine, and she asked why God had taken him away. Then the calls changed. Still late at night, but she wasn't crying anymore. She was telling me that her Eddie would be back soon from his tour on the ship. Ed had retired from the Navy years before he died, but Ma was back there in her mind, waiting for him to get leave. Convincing her otherwise was futile and while it pained me, eventually I played along. Months passed, her late-night phone calls stopped and I marched forth with my life.

"Where's he at, Ma?" Bryan asks.

Ma chuckles. "Where's he at?" she says. "He's working at the Pentagon now, like I told you. I feel better knowing he's on land."

Ed had never worked at the Pentagon as far as I knew. Bryan looks at me. "You oughta come stay for a while," he says, his voice quiet.

The mush in my mouth jams the back of my throat. I've just bought my first home, a row house in Northwest, and am in the middle of redecorating. Plans are set to build a patio in the back and create an exotic garden for me to sit in when the weather is pretty. Three weeks ago, I finally made love to a man I wanted to roll over and see in the morning. He made *me* breakfast in my kitchen, scrambled eggs, fried ham, and toast. I made the coffee and reveled in his cooking.

Strands of frizzy hair spring out from Ma's bobby pins and her damp forehead glistens, and I wonder: could that be me one day? Even if all my plans come to fruition, if I marry the man of my dreams and have children, one day, could I outlive my husband and be sitting at dinner believing he's still alive? Who would guide me if my mind gets lost in a haze of alcohol? She smiles at me—a smile I haven't seen in years, and for a moment, I'm eight again, and we're sitting cross-legged on the living room floor stringing beads together to make the longest necklace ever, while the air is thick with the smell of cornbread baking in the oven. Food. High-calorie, made-from-scratch, artery-clogging comfort food. That was it all along. Love served up in every home-cooked meal, and us devouring every morsel, filling our bodies with her affection.

"Eat up," she says. I take another piece of cornbread and break it open, feeling the warmth rise from its soft middle.

## **ASPERGER'S TOLERANCES**

Mary dislikes the sound  
of a clinking wine glass  
and car and other engines.

I do not like screeching crows  
or screeching brakes.

We don't like sirens, mufflers, leaf blowers,  
and mowers, but she is very bothered and  
I yell about it, confusing people.

Mary rocks and sways.  
I do not.

I have an excellent memory sometimes.  
She sings and plays harmonica  
She has a great vocabulary and is well-read.

We have had many jobs,  
not really trying to job hop.

People call this ashpergers,  
asbergers, aspergers, or  
aspie people on a wrong planet.

—Nicole Taylor



*Electric Jelly*  
—Chantel Schott

## WALLS

by

Anjoli Roy

There are rats in the walls. Everybody knows that, but nobody wants to think about it. Still, there they are, nesting nimbly in the cotton candy insulation, smudging their musty hair along concrete walls and wooden support beams. I have nursed a fear of rats for as back as I can remember, and as irrational as it may seem, in my travels across the U.S. from California, where I knew rats to lumber around in garages and alleyways, to New York, where they got on and off the subways alongside human passengers, all the way back across the country to Hawai‘i, I have hoped with all earnestness that I might find a place, at last, without these hideous, disease-ridden creatures. Still, I know that if I listen closely enough, I will hear their nails clicking and their high-pitched squeals squeaking across the still night air. But New York’s nights are never still, which means that to hear the rats, to note when they are scratching their wet teeth through the dry wall or gnawing on the plastic bags beneath your kitchen sink, you must have an ear alert to them.

Dave always spends the weekends outside the city. He says it’s his time to decompress, to chill out with his family, and to just get away. The problem is that when he’s gone, our small studio apartment is, for the most part, unoccupied.

It was three o’clock in the morning, his time, when Dave logged online. Nine p.m. my time, I was precariously balanced on the back two legs of my desk chair, shamelessly watching a bootleg version of a reality TV show on my computer instead of doing my reading for the graduate program I was enrolled in. I had left Dave a few months prior to pursue a higher degree at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. It was on a lark that I traveled so far for just an M.A. in English, but I felt confident that we would survive the two years and five thousand miles apart. We’d even be stronger for it. In the back of my mind, I conceded that after braving this great distance, we might average the space between us and move to some place between New York and Hawai‘i—some place that was warm, that wasn’t as gritty as New York. Some place without rats.

Checking my clock and calculating the time difference, I was surprised to see Dave online. I accepted his request to audio chat, and a slew of indeterminable (not curse, Dave doesn’t curse) words came through my computer from his end.

“Um, what?”

“Two in the apartment when I got back from work—their bodies as big as Coke cans!”

“Two *what*?”

“*Rats*, Roy Li!” he pleaded, using his nickname for me to garner extra sympathy.

The *Rattus norvegicus* is the only species of rat that lives in New York City, my quick Internet search would later tell me. Also known as the Norway rat, this brown creature is said to be, inexplicably, from northern China. After making its way through northern Europe, the rodents arrived, it is claimed, on Turtle Island in the 1700s. In fact, thanks to global warming's more tepid winters and humans' ever wasteful food habits, the brown rat is now common to all continents in the world, with the sole exception of Antarctica. In the midst of my online research, I would be most loath to discover that, stowaways on European ships sailing the Pacific, these same rats had landed in Hawai'i in the nineteenth century.

Though there were rats here before them, the brown rat is the largest on the Hawaiian Islands today.

In New York, winter is the best time to exterminate since rats are already combating the cold and relative lack of food. However, as a recent *Times* article has said: "Every garbage can without a lid, every window screen that had been nudged aside just enough to let a rat slip by" encourage the existence of this ever-present population.

"Did you call the exterminator?" I shouted, losing my balance on my chair. I slammed my hand back onto my desk to keep from falling over.

This was a silly question, actually. I knew Dave didn't pack away possessions the way I did, despite my continual travels, and he certainly didn't have a phone. He hadn't had a phone for the past year. Or, scratch that, he hadn't hooked up a phone since then (he'd spent months purchasing one, then never bothered to activate it). It was his way of punishing me for moving all the way to Hawai'i to go to graduate school, I told myself. I didn't want to believe that, actually, unlike me, he wasn't addicted to technology—didn't need a BlackBerry for e-mail, BBM, text messages, Facebook, the bus schedule, general Internet searches, and, oh yeah, for telephone calls too.

My mind immediately flit to the teeth and nails, I was convinced, that I'd occasionally heard in the very apartment I was sitting in, halfway around the world from Dave. On those nights, I'd lamely hunker down into my sheets, hoping that nothing would eat its way through the cinder block walls.

Dave recounted the scene he stumbled into after his weekend with his family in Long Island. He saw one rat scurry back into the wall behind the refrigerator. The other was in the toilet. Captive, the toilet rat suffered a painful drowning in the concentrated peppermint Castile soap that I stored by our shower. In addition to the toilet water, the rat also drowned in, okay, urine too. (Those were the only two fluids he had within reach, he told me. It was the heat of passion.) After the drowning, Dave lifted the rat's limp body—"at least thirty pounds" (his words)—with the plunger and dumped it down the garbage shoot just a few steps outside the front door of our studio. Then, he went to work scrubbing the apartment, dumping any food in sight (he hadn't grocery shopped since I'd left months earlier), finally shifting the stove and fridge away from the wall enough to reveal the fist-sized hole the rats had eaten through the wall. He stuffed it with a dirty towel.

In the morning, the towel had been eaten straight through and a new hole gaped

in the wall, though the rats (thoughtful guests) had disappeared by morning. Dave patched things over again, this time, covering the holes with duct tape and “something else,” he said.

“What else?”

“Well, you know how I told you the holes are, like, perfect circles?”

“Yeah...”

“I plugged up the holes with your makeup thingies and then used the duct tape.”

Packing up for Hawai‘i, I’d left behind my plastic cylinders of pricey mineral foundation and blush, among other things, thinking, *Who needs to look cute in a long distance relationship?*

“Dave! That stuff’s expensive!”

Home again that evening, he found yet another rat, this time “chilling out” (again, his words) in the planter on our windowsill, sunning itself. Its legs were kicked out to the side; its face, resting against the warm glass, looked out dreamily at the setting sun.

“I swear to God!” I yelled into my computer screen. “We aren’t living any place with rats or—or—or snow! So get your isht together. When my program is up in May, we’re moving!”

“Didn’t you already move?”

I sensed him smirking behind the screen. I flicked off my computer though, without a webcam, he couldn’t see my angry finger. “Funny, guy. I’m serious.”

“And are you saying there aren’t rats in Hawai‘i or something?”

“Not that I’ve seen!” I snapped. I instinctively drew in my limbs, eyed the walls for gnaw marks, the surfaces around me for droppings. “So what’d you do to the sunning rat?”

“I opened the window and pushed it outside.”

Never mind that we live three stories off the first floor. Never mind that there are always pedestrians dapppling our street, playing music a touch too loudly, yelling at each other, smoking weed and laughing. I imagined the rat making a big splat on the sidewalk below. Would the grandma I saw in my mind pull her light, fall scarf a little tighter around her neck and scuttle away? Or would she even notice?

“The exterminator came,” he said. “He gave me glue traps.”

Perhaps, like Dave, I imagined the hulking beasts laughing with the sticky mats clung to their muscled, furry bodies as they scurried back into the walls and beyond.

Dave created his own tactic instead of the glue traps. He cut up circles from the wire-mesh strainer I used for draining pasta, then duct taped those circles to the wall.

The next morning, there was no rat in sight, and his patches were intact. At work that day, Dave beamed through the phone. “And get this, Roy Li! I was walking out of the apartment, and I heard our neighbor through the wall saying, ‘They’re f’ing huge! I think they must be coming through the gas line!’ I guess they’ve moved on.” He laughed.

On my way out that same morning, I stepped into the bright Pauoa sun and was thankful that I had encountered no such rats in my house on this island, so far away from Dave’s. On its way down the valley, a cool breeze sped down one of the many green folds of the Ko’olau mountains and hit my upturned face with a playful smack. I smiled, appreciative for my good fortune, and clanked shut the chain-link fence behind me.

Turning to start the walk to the bus, I spotted something out of the corner of my eye. I breathed in, considered not bothering to acknowledge what I now knew to be at my feet.

I exhaled and looked down.

There, just ever so slightly too close to my left foot was a large, furry mass. I shrieked—muttered an ineffectual “Yuck!”—but didn’t move the large, motionless body to the slim trash can in our garage, yet. I knew it would still be there when I got home—my roommates left the apartment through the garage when they dipped into their cars—but I vowed that, even after its limp, light brown body stiffened and rotted away, even after I would shovel it into a plastic bag that I’d then carry with the tips of my fingers to the trash cans at the end of our street, I would pretend like it hadn’t been there. I definitely wouldn’t tell Dave about it.

*After all, it was either not tell him or settle on moving us to Antarctica,* I mused.