



Scheherazade
Issue 5

Scheherazade

The Literary Magazine of Monterey Peninsula College

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To submit your own original creative work, send up to 5 poems and/or up to 20 total pages of prose (each prose submission sent separately) as an email attachment in .doc, .docx, or .rtf format to: scheherazade@mpc.edu

Please indicate the type of submission (Poetry, Short Fiction, etc.) in the subject heading of your email. Your full name must appear in the body of your email, along with a statement that you are a currently enrolled student at MPC. **Please do not include your name or page numbers in the submitted work.**

Work submitted should be in 11 Point Calibri or 12 Point Times New Roman font, with 1 inch margins at top, bottom, and sides of each page. There are no limitations on style or subject matter; bilingual submissions are welcome if the writer can provide equally accomplished iterations of the work in both languages.

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Pure Desire

Introduction

The young man's name is Louis. He has been standing on the pitcher's mound for more than twenty minutes. He is the first one to arrive for the baseball exhibition featuring Babe Ruth. Louis' eyes are narrowed; he is gathering himself for what lies ahead. Only 11am and it's a blue gray November morning in Los Angeles near LA High. Louis' black hair is combed straight back; it shines like patent leather. The crowds will start arriving soon for the 1 o'clock show.

Louis is staring out to the oil fields on the other side of the chain link fence that boundaries the ball field. He's remembering another field, similarly bare of trees and shrubbery, but without the nodding oil derricks; he can see the eight year-old version of himself playing his first game of baseball in Nogales, Arizona. Louis had arrived from El Fuerte a month before and he and his family were staying at an aunt and uncle's house. It had taken the boy that month to learn enough English so that the coach would let him do anything more than watch. He was thrilled and his heart was pounding hard, but not as hard as it's beating right now on the pitcher's mound. He knows his season record, he knows that he's struck out almost every batter on the teams that count, but he has to strike out Mr. Ruth. He remembers a prayer that his mother taught him, and as he turns to watch the line of black Fords approaching the field, he murmurs the words of supplication.

My dad, Louis Joseph Almada, managed to strike out the Babe that day, and his victory made the newspapers. The event is real, and so is the fact that none of his family members bothered to attend.

The younger version of Louis learning “baseball English” is another fact. The other details included above I invented by feel; my feel for Louis after knowing him for more than half of his ninety-eight years, and my husband Larry’s feel for him, which included a lot of questions put to Louis about his sports career and all things baseball.

I wish that I had asked more questions. Did Mr. Ruth ever say a single word to you? How many pitches did it take to strike him out? Did you come home and try to recreate the whole scene for your family, or keep it to yourself? Louis told dozens of stories over the years, but when I think of him, it was the being with him that I focused on then and remember now; in a certain way the stories got in the way of knowing the pure Louis, so maybe I didn’t pay enough attention to the stories.

September 16th of this year will mark ten years since Louis died, and all that time I have been rolling images of him and scenes from my life in which Louis is featured in my rock tumbler of a head, intent on smoothing out his craggy parts and the dips in our relationship, so that his life with me can flow like a river, at least on these pages. These days it feels like I can finally switch off the tumbler and share a few of the polished stones.

While I never got to see Louis play ball, I did get to keep him company when he went up to Seattle, at 90, to be honored as a Legend

of Seattle Baseball. I also was with him the day he died. For me that day was as perfect as I imagine the Babe Ruth strike out day was for Louis eighty years ago. I believe that both days were Pure Louis.

In an earlier draft of this story, I wrote that Louis never loved anyone the way he loved baseball, but at some point in working over all of our personal and relationship rocks, I have come to see that Louis loved me plenty, and that in many ways he showed me who I really am. And the perfect moments? It turned out that there were enough of them.

By the time I was born, Louis was 40 and working in the Los Angeles produce business as a broker. He was done with pro baseball. He'd had his shot at the Major Leagues with the New York Giants straight out of high school, but despite all of the accolades Louis received along the Spring Training trail as the first Latino to make it to the Majors, the "Caballero from California" was thrown out at heaven's gate. He had a nosebleed in Philadelphia when the Giants went on their exhibition tour during Spring Training, hemorrhaging in his hotel room, treated by a doctor who barely stopped the flood with a spear of ice up Louis' nose. Then he came down with a bad flu bug and the team left him behind somewhere in Virginia, and John McGraw, the legendary manager of the Giants back then, sent him down to the Minors, where he stayed. Louis didn't make it to the Giants' Opening Day game at the

Polo Grounds in the Bronx. No cap waving as he took his round of the bases as the rookie from California. It was a bad break, and Louis carried the pain of it with him for the rest of his life. Oh, he played on minor league teams, and the Yankees wanted to sign him at one point, but it was a bad time money-wise for baseball and Louis was not going back East for peanuts.

I imagine that Louis played ball the same way he later coached it at my grammar school, the same way he arrived for work downtown at the produce market before all of the other brokers showed up at 4 a.m., the same way he attacked the weeds in our flawless dichondra lawn; with a vengeance and zeal that you had to step aside for. But those high standards never compensated Louis for the loss of Major League baseball. They were not enough.

Louis was barely 19 on the day he struck out Babe Ruth. It must have been one of the perfect days of his life, and if I had been there to see him, it would have been one of mine. He was the California Athlete of the Year that same year: 1927. So said the Los Angeles Times in a big feature article they published in 2000 that listed all of the State Champions for as far back in the 20th century as the paper had records. There was Louis alongside Ted Williams, John Elway and Darryl Strawberry. I had never seen Louis play a game of baseball, but I

studied that list over and over, even when our relationship was running on automatic pilot. Larry keeps the Times article in his desk.

A few months after that barnstorming day, Louis was off on the trains to Sarasota, Florida to meet up with Mr. McGraw and the illustrious Giants of the time: Rogers Hornsby, Burleigh Grimes and Edd Rousch. Great names, and I know that Louis saw them as true giants, but I wonder how they treated him? No one in his family accompanied him eastward; there was no extra money.

As excited as he must have been, I'll bet that Louis could have used the moral support. He had never been outside of California after coming to the States from Mexico when he was eight years old, and the only real interest that his father ever showed in Louis' baseball talent was for the signing bonus Louis was promised if he made it to Opening Day. So it must have been one sad trip back to Los Angeles after McGraw cut him from the team. Louis told me a story years later about how happy he was to be coming back home, how he could smell the orange blossoms as his train got close to Union Station in Los Angeles. While I admired his lifelong ability to see the upside of failures along his way, I never believed that particular story. There must have been orange trees all over Florida.

The Peasants

I have a photograph of myself when I was about seven years old, sitting on the trunk of Louis' midnight blue Lincoln; I remember he took that picture. I am smiling at him with bobbed brown hair and bangs; I looked something like Scout in "To Kill a Mockingbird." My eyes are soft brown pansies and I am wearing a skirt with big red and green checks and a cute matching dark green blouse with puffed sleeves. My mother worked hard at dressing me for every occasion, but the giveaway is my skinned knees. That picture is a treasured keepsake of my childhood; it captures all of the Golden Years with Louis when I was his best pal.

My brother Chuck had left by then for UC Berkeley, and the dynamic at our house was my lovely, fragile flower of a mother, and Louis and me, the hardy peasants. It was my mother, Mia, wringing her hands over me and Louis delighted with my irrepressible energy. Irrepressible was Louis' nature too, and from that font sprang his loyalty to me. Mia would read to me every night; that was the best part of her for me, but I associate the Louis of my childhood with all things outside: animal, vegetable and our adventures in that big blue Lincoln.

I remember sitting in his lap as he drove the car, him letting me turn the steering wheel within his overlapping hands. I thought I was

flying. There were no seat belts to restrain me, or to separate me from him.

Louis loved to drive, and he usually sang when he drove. Hearing those songs over and over grooved them into my deepest memory, and there they sit. Along with being an outstanding high school athlete Louis sang in the Boys Chorus; his Chorus teacher had secured him a scholarship to a music conservatory somewhere, but Louis was not to be distracted from his baseball dreams. Nonetheless, he knew all those old love songs and sang them in tune and with a lot of heart: Irving Berlin, all the Gershwin tunes and his favorite, Frank Sinatra. My favorite of those was Sinatra's "High Hopes." Louis taught me all of the verses and it was one of the songs we would belt out whenever we were out and about.

He took me everywhere: to the bakery to buy those big, still warm lemon cookies that he would make even better with a thin layer of butter; to the feed store to buy horsemeat for our Springer Spaniel, Tessie, when she was pregnant with her first litter of puppies; to the nursery where I wandered off and jumped onto a glass-covered bin of composting leaves and cut a triangular wedge out of my right leg a few inches above the ankle.

Afterwards while I sat on the counter of my mother's bathroom, they were talking; her about how I never obeyed, him saying how

amazed he was that I hadn't cried about it, what with all that blood and the poached egg white of my flesh like a perfect piece of pie. They had also been discussing whether they should take me to the doctor to get stitches, since the cut went so deep, and I remember feeling proud when Louis said that I didn't need any.

Throughout his life, Louis admired my pain threshold. I broke my collarbone riding bikes with Cynthia Kondusky in 7th grade, and after I argued my way out of going to the doctor, Mia refused to get up in the middle of the night when I called out for some comfort. It was Louis who came in the middle of the second night and gave me some Tylenol. I went to the doctor the next day, but since there is no way to cast a collarbone, I was pretty much sitting still through long needles of pain for about a week and then I was fine. Louis told me many stories during that week about all of the concussions, welts and knots that he lived through while playing football and baseball. We were partners in pain. And it might sound strange, but years later when I birthed my two babies in under an hour each, Louis gave me those same admiring smiles and stories of pain endured.

I remembered he commented then that if I had been a pioneer crossing the Rockies in a prairie schooner, I would have been one of the ones who made it. At the time I winced; I guess that all daughters want their fathers to see them as warriors and goddesses all at once, but I

have come to view that pioneer women comparison as one of the nicest things that Louis ever said to me.

Back when I was little, Louis always took my part, which must have driven Mia wild, given all the times she wilted against the volume of his words when they argued. He would leave the house at night, pulling out of the driveway after I was asleep and they'd had their hot words, and that was how he settled the argument. Those outbursts didn't bother me much then, and the lesson I took from them was that I would grow up to be the dynamic one, the one who said the last bit, not the one left waiting for the car to pull back into the garage. Remember, I had no siblings around to confide in or set me straight about the boundaries, boundaries Louis didn't have for all of that baseball passion.

But it was those adventures with Louis that sustained me through the years when Mia was working so hard at trying to tone us down. It was Mia worried about the note that I brought home from the nuns saying that I wouldn't stop talking, and Louis and I busy getting filthy in the garden, washing cars in the driveway, or birthing Tessie's first litter of puppies outside in her doghouse in the middle of the night. Louis woke me up around midnight so that I could witness the whole thing. Tessie rolled over on one of her newborn pups that night and I still

know exactly where we buried it. Another perfect adventure with Louis.

We were handling 13 pieces of real life together....the peasants happy in our work.

And that was it: Louis' goal for me: "Are you happy, baby?" He asked me that question a million times, and I don't think I ever answered "No."

Broken Home

Those golden years lasted until the summer after I graduated from grammar school. Louis was offered a great job as the Sales Manager for a big tomato grower in Arizona; Tri-Car Sales. He was to work for the Cardenas family who owned hundreds of acres of prime farm land in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, but their Tri-Car Sales business operated out of Nogales, Arizona, a little town with lots of motels and produce packing sheds right on the U.S./Mexican border. Louis' plan was for the three of us to move to Nogales during the high tomato season, which went from November to May, and then come back to our house during the summer. There was no way that I wanted to leave home and my friends for anywhere with high school starting, let alone to a border town full of nothing but strangers.

Louis had always let me have my say, so that summer I argued through many rounds of discussions at the dinner table, believing in my twelve year-old mind that I could talk Louis out of taking that job and staying home. I didn't realize that up until that time Louis had been unhappy working for the Pacific Fruit and Vegetable Company, that he'd been chomping at the bit to have a big job where he was the boss and not the broker, a job as big as those thwarted baseball dreams that were stuck in his head. I also failed to realize that letting me "have my say" was as far into feminism, or maybe child indulgence, as Louis was prepared to travel at the time. So at the end of all those dinner time debates, Louis took the Sales Manager job with Tri-Car, my mother went along to take care of him, and I wound up as a boarder at the same Catholic high school where all my friends went as day students.

What a year that was. Ramona Convent High School was only ten miles from our house in San Marino, but it could have been a hundred. I did a lot of crying that freshman year; it seemed to me that all of the other boarders came from broken homes, and all I wanted to do was go home after school with my friends. Louis had failed me. The rock of memory I've saved from that time is me walking all around Ramona's campus with a carton of milk in my hand, alone and sniffing over being abandoned. That girl was such the only and lonely child, with no Louis

in sight. He was at Tri-Car making the biggest life he could for himself and his family. I know now that I would have done the same.

News of my unhappiness reached Louis and Mia in Nogales, and sophomore year my mother came home to shepherd me through the last three years of high school. Just the two of us with Louis home for holidays and summers. I pulled in the leave-me-be direction, and Mia pulled in the stay-at-home-with-me, I gave-up-my-life for you direction. It was not a great time for either of us, and it put a big strain on their marriage, but Louis was in his element down there at Tri-Car. Everyone in the office called him “El Tigre,” and there was a big tapestry hanging behind his desk of a golden Bengal tiger against a royal blue background. He was hitting nothing but home runs for the company and making a lot of money. The way I saw it, though, he’d left me in his dust and I never truly forgave him until the day he died.

Those high school years seeing Louis mostly as a visitor, were a major fork in the road that shaped me, and shaped how I viewed my dad. Louis suddenly saw me as a girl instead of a sidekick, and it seemed that overnight he decided that his spirited daughter had to be guarded every minute; from boys, from cars, from late night parties. If he was home when I went out on a date, he would wait by the front door and flick the porch light on and off if there was any lingering in the poor boy’s car. And it seemed to me that whenever he came home, he

would urge me to give Mia a break from our battle of wills, given that she was staying with me rather than being with him in Nogales. That was more proof to me that Louis had cut me from his team and I was on my own. Oh, we still maintained a warm relationship: after all we were a Hispanic family and all of us were huggers and kissers, and we meant it when we did it. And we could still be the hardy peasants, Louis and I, over dirt and dogs and singing our old songs, but I was gearing up to leave home for college, and for the first time Louis was relegated to the back seat of my life.

I left home for college at Santa Clara University; 400 miles was as far away from home as Louis would permit. During those years I made an alliance with Mia when it appeared that Louis was at least infatuated with another woman, Gladys Fulton, the only female broker making an actual living in the produce business at the time. And while no one spoke up to him about all that until years later, that was the point where I branded Louis a chauvinist. My dad knew that he had fallen down in status for me, from a hero to an ordinary guy without a college education to justify all of his absolutist opinions. I worked hard to leave Louis in my dust.

Five years passed. I married, had my baby boy, Brandon, and the following year I left that marriage with my one year-old son. Mia was appalled. No one in our family had gone through a divorce, no matter

what. Louis was less appalled, but he still warned me not to be headstrong about leaving the marriage, and I found his judgment of my judgment to be hypocritical, coming from a man who had probably cheated.

Life as a single mom got me started on the road to adulthood. Within three years I married again, and Larry, Brandon and I moved to Carmel. Our son Jacob was born and there were many visits with Mia and Louis over the next decade. My children loved Louis wholeheartedly and there was a second generation of fine adventures with Louis in the lead, but I maintained my reservations about him. I think that by then the reservations were a two-way street

Both my parents were born in Mexico and came to Los Angeles as children. My mother's father, Carlos Davila, was a doctor with a lot of strong opinions. The story went that he had not wanted his daughter to marry a "beisbolista." My mother was the one who told this story, but never to me until I was an adult. Hearing it repeated, no matter how big Louis' ego was, told me a mountain about their personal dynamic. The princess and the lowly peasant. And after Louis retired from Tri-Car at 70, there was another story, this one from Louis, how after turning 40, he would cry in the middle of the night, ashamed that he hadn't managed to achieve the success in business that he expected of himself, the heights that he'd imagined back at LA High School when his

future was so bright. Also around that time, Louis told me the story of how he'd been ejected from the back seat of a cab he'd shared with his Irish teammates during that Spring Training travel with the Giants all those years before; the "rookie Spic" from California. It was the first I heard about a single negative moment in his daydream days with the Giants. These underdog stories were all new for me. Louis was trying to reveal his inner struggles, lessons that I should have learned. But I was still stuck, speaking of rocks, between seeing Louis as my failed hero and as a flesh and blood guy who'd done the best he could with what he had.

A picture in my head from that time is a dream I had right before Jacob was born: I was in a movie theater when someone yelled "fire." I ran outside, and there was Louis parked in his car a short distance away on the street. As I started toward him he got out of the car as if to approach me, and in slow motion I watched him fall down like a pillar, no arms out to hold me or protect himself. I was shrinking Louis down to a manageable size in my sleep.

Louis and Mia moved to Carmel fourteen years after we did so that Larry and I could look after them. Louis was almost 90 then. Still strong of body and will but harmless now, I told myself. Within three months of their move, someone from Major League Baseball contacted Louis, explaining that the Seattle Mariners were planning the Opening

Day ceremony at their new \$500 million stadium and they were rounding up the “legends” of Seattle baseball.

Someone remembered Louis, Ladies Day Louie, from back when he'd played minor league ball there. Would he like to come and be part of the half time ceremony honoring the Legends of Seattle Baseball, Past, Present and Future? Yes, he would. Ladies Day Louie was a nickname some Seattle sportswriter gave to Louis. Apparently whenever it was Ladies Day in Louis' minor league days, he would always manage to hit a home run. The day that phone call came, it looked like Louis was back in business.

We all went up. There was the Commissioner of Major League Baseball, Bud Selig, standing outside the elevator that brought us to the players' level of the about-to-be-christened Mariners stadium. Larry was allowed into the ballplayers' dressing rooms to help my dad into the uniform the Mariners provided for all of the Legends. My mother and I sat close enough to the two of them in the dugout so that I could see that solemn look on his still handsome face throughout the entire game. But I saw him best on the JumboTron during the half-time ceremony, as big as any baseball player could hope to be, as big as Louis, the high school baseball star could have imagined. Two days later, while we climbed the stairs up to the plane that would bring us back home, Louis turned his head and said to me, “It was like a dream,

wasn't it?" Against the odds of age and his strike out with the Giants, it looked like Louis had gotten his enough.

The Winning Run

I should have been completely thrilled for him. Here we were, sharing the closest view I was ever going to get of Louis with a baseball, and I was telling myself that here was the tired old tiger settling for a sentimental consolation prize.

If you know your father when he is 90 years old and you are struggling with how to hold him in your heart, seeing him on that JumboTron, up there for one day with the greats of baseball, presents you with a conflict that is tough to handle. It would have been easier for me to stop judging him if hadn't looked so darn big on that screen. The camera had caught him in profile and Louis with his Benicio del Toro rugged brow, nose and jawline suddenly looked powerful to me again, and I stepped back.

I made myself focus on the slight stoop of his back as he walked to home plate, tipping his hat to the crowd. He wasn't as thickly muscled as he'd been for most of his life, but he looked proud and complete. A lot of the fans must have thought that he looked great for 90, or even for 80, but I remember wondering that day whether Ladies Day Louie was feeling any bitterness about being honored as a Legend from the

past when he'd been sent home by John McGraw before Opening Day at the Polo Grounds. His last big baseball day was a perfect day for him, but my divided heart kept me from fully sharing it.

I still hadn't forgiven him. For leaving me during high school, for not pushing me out into the world where he knew I wanted to be, for Gladys Fulton, for telling me that I should defer more often to my lawyer husband, who after all had given me a job after I passed the bar. We got back home from Seattle and Louis was irritable a lot of the time. I wanted the same resolute energy he'd had all the decades that I'd known him. He'd lived his whole life according to the gospel that his beloved high school coach Herb White had taught him: enthusiasm and hard work. Why did Louis give up on going to the gym, swimming laps? Having him now as my neighbor, seeing him almost every day, I developed new expectations of a man who was treading water when I was gathering steam.

Louis would flare up and set his jaw if his prescriptions weren't ready when he arrived on his walker at the drug store. He was fed up with the drops he had to put in his eyes every day to slow down the glaucoma, and though he gracefully gave up driving, which surprised me, he couldn't let go of giving my mother orders whenever she drove them anywhere. He sang less often. Larry said that Louis was angry under that noble, bighearted surface. I remained conflicted those last

four years of his life after Seattle. But then he allowed me to watch him die and our dynamic changed again, this time for good.

About six months before he died, Louis told my mother that he was “done,” that there was “no tread left on his tires.” Mia was upset about the comment, but the matter-of-fact way he said it was actually calming for me. I can remember standing in our driveway and imagining what I would say at his funeral. I was composing a eulogy that would be remembered by everyone there. I am embarrassed to remember my posing now, given the simple, inspiring death that Louis permitted me to witness.

Basically, Louis died in one day. Larry was in Wisconsin fishing with friends who had a house on Sister Bay. Louis was sleeping some during the days, a first, but no one expected him to die anytime soon. It was fine for Larry to leave. But two days before he died, Louis’ doctor sent over a Hospice nurse, just to evaluate him, and she said that according to his vital signs Louis was slowing down and could die within six months. No illness, just old age. I told the nurse about Louis’ amazing health history, so she told me that she’d be back Friday.

Friday came and the nurse was back, this time reporting that Louis’ vitals were even slower and that he could die within hours. I went outside to cry, but Mia couldn’t wrap her head around hours. I came back and sat down beside my dad on the other twin bed in his room.

Did he know? I think so, because the day before I'd heard him thank the caregiver who came to help him shower for all of her patience with his impatience.

And then he said it to me: "Bring me my glasses so that I can see where I'm going." Louis was gathering himself up for what lay ahead. It turned out that Louis was a believer. He was raised a Catholic and went to mass sometimes, but a believer in something else after this? That was a big surprise. And there was no way that Louis was saying this to reassure his daughter. Louis was a lone wolf kind of guy where his soul was concerned. He'd memorized the poem "Invictus" in high school and it became his lifelong credo.

Louis had eagle eye vision until glaucoma got in the way. In the last two years of his life he submitted to drops and finally surgery, but the results were not good enough, and losing interest in the nightly news on the blurry television had been a sign that Louis really was done. But here he was asking for help to see things clearly.

When he asked me to get him his glasses on Friday, September 16, 2005, I was thinking that those were some pretty good words to say, in a matter of fact way, for a guy who'd sworn by "Invictus." I had figured all along that when he went on about being the "captain of his soul" and "the master of his fate," that he would end his life as a talented dynamo with gratitude for the ride and that would be that. But when he asked

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for the glasses, all those years of conflicted feelings fell away; this was a new song out of his mouth that I had never heard before; an innocence he had never shared with me. Pure Louis.

I bowed my head to honor the hero as he passed by. It didn't matter where he was headed, it was good enough for me. There were no other requests. I sat next to him and watched closely. I was getting the lessons I'd wanted in high school. There were no parting words, just a last calm breath, and since I was sitting so close to him at that point, I heard it. It was our most intimate moment since I had been his baby, his delight and his shadow, and when I reached over to touch his hand before going to tell my mother, I bridged all the time between.

Tina Biegel

The Gift of Garland

1976-ish

When I was little, like many Monterey area locals, my family spent an average amount of morning to dusk Saturdays at Garland Ranch, a sprawling, hilly heaven of oaks and California poppies, jungle vines and buckeye trees, grassy fields and picnic tables, located in Carmel Valley, California. Flash memories of those days are slippery stones under my little bare feet, hunting for crawdads in a cold but refreshing Carmel River. There were really “dirty” dirt paths, the powdery kind of dirt, so fine that whatever clouds kicked up in walking would inevitably coat a wet kid from head to toe, like paint. These paths came with lots of stories about Native Americans, early pioneers, and mountain lions. There were incognito landmarks scattered among the acres, like a giant rock with bowl-shaped pits on the surface that were created for grinding acorn, along with some traditional, early-Californian structures built by more civilized settlers who came later. Once in a while, there was even an arrowhead to be found and kept like a treasure of history and mystery in a drawer with other conversation piece odds and ends. Standing quiet, the thick, warm wind muffled the wildflower scents and soft chimes of countless leaves into my own, cozy, private harmony. Similar to the feeling E.B. White describes in his essay, “Once More to the Lake”, “There were places in it which, to a

child at least, seemed infinitely remote and primeval." I felt total freedom at Garland Ranch, almost like an animal, but in a people kind of way.

I remember one, particular, spring afternoon that had been spent gathering an elite assortment of what I considered to be exceptionally perfect buckeye balls. I didn't want to leave them behind, so at dusk, when it was time to go, I filled my really brown, used-to-be white, knee socks with my buckeyes and proceeded to the car with very bumpy legs that I thought would go undetected. When we got home, my mother helped me to sprout one of my buckeyes and soon, I was the official custodian of a tiny tree that had every reason to love me. I didn't know it then, but this unsuspecting, little gift of Garland was to teach me a virtuous perfection of time and place throughout the seasons of my existence. It was to show me that everything I would ever be is drawn from everything I ever was, or hoped to become, in the very beginning.

My buckeye did quite well in its private, master pot for several years. It even survived a couple of moves around Carmel until we moved to Sonoma for six months in 1982 because my mother was married to a Hungarian artist named Zoltan for that long and Sonoma was where we moved together as a new family. I was in the Seventh Grade and our address was 844 Oak Lane. I loved that address. In Sonoma, my tree had to be planted in the ground because it was thriving so well in the heat and growing like never before. When we

returned to Carmel at the conclusion of the marriage, it was too big to dig up, so I was forced to part ways with my old friend, the buckeye tree. It was tough. I really loved that tree. E.B. White poignantly evokes “remembering back” to a special time and place, in his essay, “Once More to the Lake”, “It is so strange how much you can remember about places like that once you allow your mind to return into the grooves which lead back. You remember one thing, and that suddenly reminds you of another thing.” For me, that buckeye will always take me back to every stop along our mutual journey of taking root and growing up, as well as to all of the places that leads to, even if just through the seasons of my life that carry me, like a seed, back to the beginning again. It connects me to native soil and acorn bowl granite rocks. It connects me to chilly dusk and bumpy socks. It connects me to 844 Oak Lane. It returns my mind into the grooves of everywhere.

Over the many years, I often wondered how my buckeye was doing. Was he strong and healthy? Were his leaves not so green without me? The usual curiosities. I returned to Sonoma about eleven years ago and walked from the main square, through my old neighborhood, to our house at 844 Oak Lane. I had to rely on my instinct to get me there because I hadn’t remembered all of the turns. When I found the house, I saw a big, beautiful tree that towered over the part of the backyard where I planted mine back in 1982. Because of the time of year and my own lack of tree

identification skills, I couldn't really tell if the tree was a buckeye, so I was a bit disappointed, though left to wonder, which has a mystique of its own. Then there is faith. I finally left after deciding that I would choose to believe that the tree was my buckeye. I picked a beautiful, giant, yellow rose and put it on my bag, knowing I would keep it forever in memory of that visit.

2011

Driving out to the valley for what I hoped to be a bonding walk with my two teenage sons, I was telling my buckeye story along the way. I had never shared it with them and the timing was perfect, as we were heading out to Garland Ranch. There was a distinct patch of clouds in the blue sky over that part of the valley where we were heading, but it was vertical and kind of looked like how one would imagine a "smoke signal" to look because they were little, rising, puffy, white patches. I remarked in the car that Native Americans used to inhabit that area, to which they responded, "I know!" as teenagers often respond to anything a parent might say. Jokingly, I continued to say that somehow, the spirit of Garland Ranch was calling us there. Little did I know, that was somehow true.

Close to dusk, I pointed out to my son Collin that we were on "Buckeye Trail". When I was laughing at the coincidence, I looked down and in the moist soil at my feet, there were three, shiny (what I would

have considered “prime specimens”, as a child) buckeye balls. I picked them up and noticed that all three had already started sprouting and one of them even had a tiny tree bursting from its split root. I felt so excited because I knew what a gift I was holding. I felt that Garland Ranch had just given me my tree back, along with two more for my sons. I had just been telling them the story in the car. It was a very spiritual moment that felt even more meaningful to me because I was able to share it with the two people I love most in this world.

As we hiked that day, I must have jostled the three buckeyes too much in my hands because when we stopped again, I noticed that the root of a second ball had split and its new, tiny tree was peeking out. I felt a strong connection that this new generation of seedling was somehow still my tree, waking in my hand, replaced in my hand. The feeling didn't need to be negotiated in that region between wonder and faith, rather it felt like a kind of truth, the kind that is bound by natural law, only waiting to be discovered. Like White and his son, like White's dragonflies, “It was the arrival of this fly that convinced me beyond any doubt that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and there had been no years,” they were different, but unquestionably the same. My tree was never gone. It was always right here where I found it.

Our three buckeye trees grew in their pots and one day, we had to leave them behind. I never worry or wonder where they are or how

they are doing. I always know exactly where to find them again. I just let my mind, “return to the groove which leads back.” I return to that seed and it takes me there. It takes me to the beginning again.

Michelle Pisciotta

Don't Run!

For any number of reasons, my mother used to yell after me, "Don't Run!" How many times did I hear that during my early childhood? Probably hundreds, if not thousands of times.

Ever watch six-year old boys? They basically have two operating speeds: standing semi-still and running. As boys grow up, they slowly learn how to walk.

During the summer of 1972 I discovered it is sometimes very important to move slowly and carefully in certain careers. When an aircraft is used to carry passengers for compensation or hire, it is required every 100 hours to have a detailed inspection. One day in the big maintenance hangar at Fairbanks Air Service I was helping Brian, a licensed Airframe & Power plant (A&P) mechanic, with one of these inspections on our for-charter, single-engine, Cessna 206 Stationair bush plane.

For flight safety, redundancy, efficiency and maximum horsepower each cylinder of an aircraft's piston-engine has two spark plugs, each powered by a separate and independent ignition system. Like everything else on an aircraft the spark plugs are unique and expensive (typically \$28 each). All other piston engines (in buses, cars, trucks,

motorcycles, lawnmowers, etc.) have only one spark plug per cylinder (typically \$7 each).

As Brian removed the 12 spark plugs from the six-cylinder engine, I carefully took them to a small, enclosed, sandblasting machine, which gently blasted away any carbon or oil deposits. Brian taught me to be very careful handling aircraft spark plugs.

He said, "There are only two times that you ever drop an aircraft spark plug: first when you accidentally drop it on the floor and second when you drop it into the trash." After the sand blast cleaning, I used special tools to precisely re-adjust the electrode (spark) gap on each plug. Brian of course was required to double-check all my work.

While we were working and during the course of our conversations he casually said, "Don't run while working around airplanes." His off-hand warning didn't completely sink in to my brain. It should have.

Consider working around a 300 horsepower 6-cylinder piston engine that has a heavy 77-pound, aluminum, eighty-inch diameter, three-blade propeller bolted directly to its crankshaft. This propeller spinning at approximately 1000 revolutions per minute (rpm) is essentially invisible (especially at night). The tip of this propeller would be traveling at 238 mph.

Typical aircraft piston engines redline at approximately 2500 rpm.

There are no Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety guards around this huge spinning 'knife', no roped-off / taped-off safety barriers because this engine can and must move. It has too. It provides the forward thrust for an airplane to fly.

Combined with other extraneous airport / airplane noises, it is easy not to notice a spinning propeller.

An Alaskan urban legend circulating that summer at Fairbanks airport was told of a woman who was getting out of a twin-engine airplane during a short stop over flight. Multi-engine aircraft typically have engines mounted in nacelles on the leading edge of their wings. Almost every multi-engine airplane has the passenger door on forward left side of the fuselage. This passenger door is usually located directly behind the cockpit and forward of the engine. On this particular flight, the pilot had shut down the left engine and waited for the left propeller to come to a complete stop before he cleared the passengers to open the door and depart. Common practice during a quick stop over is to leave the right-side engine, on the side opposite the passenger door, running at idle speed. The woman was carrying her small pet dog as she stepped out of the airplane. Just as she reached the pavement, the small dog leapt out of her arms and went running under the airplane toward the right side. The woman gave chase, running to her right around the nose of the aircraft. Before the pilot could react, the woman

ran into the spinning right-side propeller. Most propellers clear the ground by at least 12 inches.

The little dog was untouched.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) uses the term “Propeller-to-Person” to describe this type of accident.

Before our 100-hour inspection could be signed off in the aircraft’s logbook, an engine run up was required. I helped Brian push the airplane tail-first (backwards) out of the hangar so our prop blast won’t ‘dust’ everyone in the hangar. Brian climbed into the left side pilot’s seat. I got in the right side copilot’s seat. We didn’t put on our seatbelts or headsets because we were just going to do an engine run up and weren’t going to turn on the radios.

Brian went through all the items on the Before Engine Start Checklist. He started the Starting Engine Checklist. He cracked (held open) his left side door open a few inches, held the airplane’s brakes by pressing his toes hard against the top of the two rudder pedals on the floor and yelled, “Clear” just before he switched on the battery. He yelled, “Clear Prop” just before he pushed the starter button. The big 300 horsepower engine started almost immediately, bursting into its familiar throaty roar. Brian settled in scanning all the engine instruments: engine oil pressure, engine oil temperature, cylinder head

temperature, ammeter, fuel flow, manifold pressure and rpm while we waited for the engine to warm up.

Outside we happened to notice one of the Fairbanks Air Service / Uicibelli Coal Mine owners walking over to our new twin-engine North American Rockwell Shrike Commander. Without performing any preflight checks or so much as an aircraft walk-around, he opened the pilot's door and climbed in. Incredulously we saw him start up both engines. As he taxied in front of us toward the runway, we saw all the bright red "Remove Before Flight" control-lock flags fluttering from the wing and tail control surfaces. He was headed for takeoff with all his controls locked!

Over the roar of our engine, Brian turned to me and yelled, "Go call the Tower and don't let him take off!"

Against our propeller blast I pushed open my side door, climbed out one foot at a time, crouching with both my feet on the gravel tarmac surface, just in front of the right main landing gear tire. Our maintenance hangar office (telephone) was to the front and left of where we were parked. I remember ducking my head slightly to get around and under the left wing strut and starting to sprint toward the office.

Flash forward 39 years: December 11, 2011 a beautiful 23-year old fashion blogger went for a night flight to see Christmas lights over McKinney, Texas. The pilot of the small two-place Husky airplane had offered others rides too, so he left the engine running. She exited the airplane walking forward. Per her book, *“Still LoLo”*, that’s when her life changed in an instant. It is estimated that just 1/16 of an inch of the still-spinning 2-blade propeller contacted her body: fracturing the left side of her skull, causing the permanent loss of her left eye and permanently severing her left hand just past her wrist.

Flash back to 1972 in Fairbanks: About 15 feet in front our spinning propeller both my feet skidded to a stop as if they had been suddenly paralyzed. A very strange, cold and unpleasant feeling flooded over me. In slow-motion I checked the left side of my body: my foot, my leg, my hand, my arm, my shoulder, my ear, my head...everything seemed to be okay. I looked back over my shoulder at the airplane into Brian’s frozen, ash white face. The whites of his eyes were as big as saucers. It was a look of TOTAL SHOCK.

A wave of nausea swept over me, but I didn’t throw up.

I realized I had just sprinted very close to or ‘through’ the arc of a spinning three-blade propeller. It must have been VERY CLOSE per the expression on Brian’s face.

I have no recollection whatsoever of how we contacted the Tower and prevented the fatal takeoff. I don't even remember Brian ever talking to me about how close I must have come to being sliced to pieces.

I do remember learning a huge lesson that day.

Don't Run... around airplanes!

J.T. Rethke

Excerpted from *South to Alaska: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?*

EQUINOCTIAL

Equinoctial I: half moon

half moon waxing or is she waning did I lose my sight
heaving moon half dark half heavy moon light
pulling at this floundering soul one long or lonely night

and somewhere peers an owl west or east at the speckled sky
sitting naked up-on the roof lanky cat and I
as from the north blows in a wind

measured and chill along a sound
magnetic light dappled tripping over hollow ground
boundaries shifting contrast trails across this fractious skin

is consciousness outside of mind, or contained within
passing through me gutters spirit and I am unwound
lichen trails leafy masked naked feathered madness growls

wild eyes steady piercing mid lofty gnarled tree limb
primal shrouded fleeting as the furtive wind

and in its wake a querulous question in the half life of time
listening through the voices for the silent one within
the true guiding voice mid the hollow din

of fathers fears success and peers and pride all wounded shadows past
of love and laughter lost what lasts seems falling with the leaves

dark my night but lighter still, naked in the trees

Equinoctial II: dark moon

and the owl who knows knows I know but where these feathers fall
in darkest hours I can not say though hear the shadow's call

there is a howl a howl a hollow howl surrendering to the fall
I howl a howl a doleful yowl before the coming dawn

there is no blame but scoured silent air no light now yet silvered, quiet
despair
and from this fathomless pit, shattered shackles, the ascent out of it

for what shame in madness yet unapologetic truth
what love ever lost yet freeing in the breeze

nought but fear lows, fading in the trees
and who can know divinity's call

but for courage to be still and listen deep
for truth buried in the heart of darkness' keep

for love for life for ever birthing
there is no other yet self embrace

give me breath and a voice (to call) to shout up to heavens high
what is the calling but to write I write, I write

reaching, riding fading echoes of mid night

and turning sideways into light, belabored ghosts vanish on a wing
and burdens past begin to lighten, and my heart begins to sing!

Niklas Spitz

My Cabin Memories

shadows warm, and colors grey,
the hooting owl in moonlight stays.
the moon in turning windows plays,
upon my lashes, dancing rays.

my lover sleeps in soundless dreams,
and hides his thoughts from me, it seems.
his head in soft and deep repose,
as moonlit air drifts past his nose.

so still the air upon the sound,
of moonlight cast upon the ground,
as gently now with eyes turned down,
i watch the silent world turn round.

Paula Haro

Liquid Excess

Early morning
My eyes disperse the excess
Again and again
Ripping down my pretty face
Pent up deep somewhere
From a place I know not where?
I blink excessively
Trying to decide how
I got this numb
Carrying pounds and pounds of
Emotional garbage
I carry it close like a dear child
I guard it, I lie, I protect it
With my whole self
Unjustified
I'm sick, I'm numb
It's not even mine
And you want me to pretend?
Bury your secrets

When you know
I cannot do it anymore.

Stacey Tibayan

Ars Poetica

I bought an old Honda Passport, and taped over the "P"
Thus prepared to port a poet, from A to B

For example, I go to class aspiring to write
With Plato the pedant, and Aristotle for delight

Whence forth Horace, Longines and Dryden transcendent
Might canter, swift, upon horseback, to be in attendance

Lest professor Kary wield her disciplinarian's stick
We best all be timely, and better write quick

Thus in good company aspiring poets must be
to mark the foundations of history

Interpreting progressions on the theme of life
Literary evolution and sublunary strife

From iambic pentameter to spoken word, in time
Bringing forth expression - linear to sublime

Thus subverting space-time and reality
in porting poets' asses, from A to B (to MPC)

Niklas Spitz

Planned Parenthood Stairwell

Blue

Cheap nylon

Old grey midsection

Trod by four feet on two legs

A solid reek of cold, dead Camels

The pangs of grief mixed in with Marlboro

The dying smoke of not-fathers and almost-mothers

Russell Swartz

When Mom Came to Visit

It was you...
in conversation

Speaking words as if
nothing was different

Telling me about
Salinas

Telling me about
a picture

One I'd never seen
on this earth plane.

It was you...
pointing out relatives

I don't know
because I was born in Hollywood

Not in Salinas or
Monterey.

It was you...
that came here yes HERE

to this big house
that I live in

As if everything was the same
and you thought I wouldn't mind.

We conversed
until I woke myself up

with my own voice

Speaking words aloud as if

nothing was different
and talking to you

as if you were still here

alive.

Stacey Tibayan

Born Free?

The eternal cry for life.

Does a baby cry for life, or because of it?

Wet, cold, held upside down, spanked and gasping for air.

The pure innocence is broken,

The cord is cut and tied.

A knot that represents the twisted knot of mankind,

The knot that keeps all of mankind from slipping.

A baby is born.

Does it cry for life or because of it?

It brings beautiful innocence into life.

Only a baby can start; new, fresh, and pure.

It is a stranger from another world which,

Must be taught how to live in our world.

Taught how to live, or how to survive?

If it could remain untouched, what

Would it become, do or be?

Would it become what we are?

What are we?

If left alone, would it become an animal?

Would it kill for reasons unknown?

Would it destroy without thought?

Would it not be, better to live as an animal?

Than to become, the beasts that we are?

Loving hands mold this innocence until,

The innocence is gone.

Does this innocence die, or remain as
A reminder of our lost innocence?
A beautiful example of what should be.

Gaze upon this baby and feel the newness.
Life, fresh, sweet and pure.
What beautiful thoughts go through,
The clearness of a baby's mind?
Is this mind new and pure, or are
Some of the cubicles only dust-covered?

A child is born.
With innocence unmatched.
Shout, laugh, and cry!
Cry not for it, but for yourself.
Cry *for* life, not because of life.

J.T. Rethke

Ship in the Night

(Ghazal form)

I called to my lover pining, under the moon
yet alone I remain waiting, under the moon

Searching heavens deep, she is sailing
mid silent stars, scintillating, the moon

Bold round gate, to silver garden framing
ferny path to heaven, calling, the moon

Sublunary torment - fruit of desiring
sweet, gravitas - gratifying, the moon

Tides, blood; lovers, laughter; and longing
subservient - eager - beckoning, the moon

Gravity - defying, space-time transcending, tail
silhouette trailing, lithe cat mastering, the moon

Niklas, sails the night, billowing ship of dreams
traversing, sky California-king, to capture

The moon.

Niklas Spitz

A Few Basic Taxes

A few basic taxes will be shown,
We'll tax you for every house you own,
That's right,
even if your mortgage is all paid off.
Shush! You're not supposed to scoff!
I said these taxes you will pay,
You will pay them every day,
If abroad you buy a costly souvenir,
we'll put a tax on it if you bring it here.
You must pay us for your large inheritance too,
even though it was left not to us, but to you,
If you must stay in a hotel a night,
tax you for that? Yes we might.
We can tax you for each night in a hotel you sleep,
as well as at a restaurant if you need to eat,
We also badly want a one percent fraction,
out of each of your bank transactions.
Quit protesting in all these phone calls and faxes.
Calm down! We're not asking for *too* many taxes.

Rachel Weber

Dancing Face to Face

He takes a step forward

she doesn't step back.

He gestures right,

she turns left to see.

He inhales her perfume,

she exhales the sweet

scent of desire.

Patricia Merrifield

Κύματα

Nearing:

Perfection of plastered acrylic,

An ebb, flow, laps

Hissing, drawing buzzards for meaningful flight

Drawing in red smears and pink cries, let go, push,

pull, slaughter,

Save none, my fellows, relish in the

Screams and bellows, pecked wrists

Leave none for hellos, veins prodded

Raw, sinewy chords severed, scream--full,

Never nourished, squawk-squawking dissonance,

Scream-screaming needing, begging,

Ending, tormenting lamenting, shedding

Sinful beginnings as plucked feathers

Slowly gather lost feet in sluggish drag.

Towards shore, towards another,

To be known against the downcast

As a battered shame:

To speak with harmonies removed;

Speaking wrists as mud clots

drag helplessly, repent--

--redundant. At this point words

As blurred as static

Leaking from the vinyl

Wax and polish what is said

Before skipping back to

All that:

Limited. Linear.

Flat, lacking expanse,

Contents as void as the dreams no longer articulated

Between pale fingertips

Where sand seeped

where once fear could--

Drown in apathy

Freely

Arriving and Being:

From a cradle floating riverbed,

Holding golden hue, sprinkling

Hums of Anne's lullaby, lacing

Then stepping to rapt admiration

Like the rhythmic breath of the Moon

The gentle beat of the Sun, outshone,
and shunned jovially, avoiding burning,

Milky skin and gleaming oceanic gaze.

From the grass fields above the traveled path of
stream,

A corpse comes to its feet, screams silence

And gleams at sight of ethereal being,

Reach, if only further my dreams,

Fall, the past repeats.

A cooing peace for the aura at ease--

Ruben Cota

Broken Stars

“So near you are, sky of summer stars,
So near, a long-arm man can pick off stars,
Pick off what he wants in the sky bowl,
So near you are, summer stars”

Summer Stars

Carl Sandburg

#

Lisa looked at her father, six years of wonder in her big eyes,
and said, “Dad, what is that?”

He watched the bright line crash through the Kansas sky, above
the three hundred acres of nearly ripened corn, above the dirt road that
lead to the endless highway, above the blue house with fading white
trim and doors that were never locked. The falling star fizzled and he
took a sip of his beer.

“You remember the time that branch broke off the apple tree
and hit you?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Well, stars can break too, and they fall just like anything else.”

“Did that just break?”

“Yeah. It’s called a shooting star.”

“Where do broken stars go?”

He rocked back and forth in the creaking chair, and the wood boards of the porch creaked with him.

“I guess they become lights somewhere.”

She jumped off his lap and sat on the porch railing, staring at the sky.

“Where do the stars come from?”

“When a person dies, they become a star. That’s what happened to grandpa.”

“Where’s grandpa’s star?”

He got up and stood next to her.

“Right there.”

He pointed.

“Is grandpa’s star gonna break?”

“No. Only bad people’s stars break.”

“Good.”

They stood there and watched the stars while the corn swayed. He pointed out constellations and drank his beer.

After half an hour, the beer was a bottle and an aftertaste. He set it down on top of the railing and ruffled her hair.

“I think it’s time for bed, little lady.”

“Tell me one more thing, dad.”

“What?”

“Will I get a star when I die?”

He nodded.

“Right next to grandpa.”

She yawned. He smiled.

“C’mon. Let’s go say goodnight to mom.”

#

Lisa looked at her mother, eighteen years of nescience in her big eyes, and said, “Are you two going to miss me?”

Her mother carefully set the teacup and saucer next to her chair, then turned to her daughter. “Why on Earth would we not?”

“Because I’m not doing anything useful for you guys.”

“Honey, you’re not supposed to be right now. Be useful when we’re old.”

“But I’m just going to be spending your money when I leave.”

Her mother shrugged.

“That’s college for you.”

“But you could be using that money.”

“For what? Honey, we started your college fund when we started trying to have a kid. Now it’s your money.”

“But--”

Her mother stuck a finger up.

“No buts.”

She returned the teacup to her lap and sipped it. “What brought this up?” she asked.

Lisa peeled a small strip of the flaking paint.

“I just--I just don't think dad's okay with me leaving.”

Another sip of tea.

“And why do you think that?”

Another strip of paint.

“He just keeps hinting that next year's harvest is going to be difficult.”

“No more than most years.”

“He's just, he's saying that you two are growing old and are gonna need help just around the house and stuff.”

Her mother shook her head.

“We're not going to die in four years. You have time to get your degree.”

Lisa bit her lower lip.

“I--”

She shook her head.

“What if--”

Her mother waited for Lisa to put her thoughts together. Finally, she said, “What if I don't come back?”

Her mother shrugged.

“If you don't come back, you don't come back.”

“I mean, I want to come back, but if I can get good recommendations I might end up working for the Lick Observatory.”

“Then you’re making something of yourself.”

“I just don’t want your guys to feel neglected, I guess. I dunno, am I making sense?”

Her mother drained the teacup and pointed to the corn. “Do you honestly want to take care of this until you die?”

Lisa fidgeted with her hands. “Maybe.”

Her mother stood and hugged her daughter.

“Be honest with me.”

Her bottom lip shuddered. “I just--” And the tears started. “I just wanna study the stars and be loved by you guys and learn about the universe and I don’t want you to be mad at me and I don’t want dad to think I’m never coming back but I might never come back and I’m not sure he’s okay with me never coming back and I don’t know, I just don’t fucking know.”

Lisa sobbed against her mother’s shoulder. Her mother stroked her hair.

When the shaking had stopped and the tears were dry, her mother looked into her eyes.

“Honey, we want you to be happy. Are you really going to be happy growing corn?”

Lisa shook her head.

“Of course you aren’t. Listen, we want you to be here, because we love you. But we also know that you need to grow. You need to work

at the Lick Observatory and study the stars and tell us about them. You need to chase your dreams right now. The farm will always be here if you want to come back.”

“Dad said he thinks I’ll only come back for your funerals,” Lisa sniffled.

“Then we can die happy knowing our little girl is making something of herself.”

Her mother picked the empty teacup up. “C’mon. Let’s go to bed. We’ll get you packed tomorrow.”

#

Lisa looked at her father, twenty-six years of worry in her big eyes, and said, “You doing okay, dad?”

“Fine,” he said, reaching into the cooler next to him and pulling out another Coors.

She pointed to the frost on the railing, the brown dead stalks past the porch standing against the blue of the night. She motioned to the thick brown sweater her mother had sent her as a Christmas gift.

“You wouldn’t be drinking outside in this weather if you were fine, dad.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

“I’m fine.”

She rubbed her temples.

“Okay. Be fine. I’ll stay here and be fine with you.”

She pulled out an unopened pack of Camel Wides and tapped it against her palm.

“Since when do you smoke?”

She peeled the plastic off, tore out the foils, and pulled a cigarette out. “First finals.”

She lit it and took a drag. He shook his head.

“It’ll kill you.”

“So do car accidents.”

“Been enough dying around here.”

She closed her eyes.

“Yeah. You’re right.”

She smeared the ember against the boards and flicked the cigarette onto the hard dirt past the porch.

There was silence.

Finally, she asked, “Are you sure you’re fine, dad?”

“Sweetheart, let’s talk about it tomorrow,” he said, closing his eyes. “Right now, just give me a cigarette.”

“I thought you quit.”

“It’s been twenty-six years. Besides, I ain’t as worried about dying any more.”

She handed him the pack and lighter with a hint of a frown. He lit two and gave one to her.

In a small voice, she asked, “Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“Which one is mom?”

“Let’s go look.”

He stood up and offered his hand to her. She took it and they walked down the rickety steps to see the stars.

He pointed with the cigarette to a star.

“There’s grandpa.”

He moved the cigarette by an inch.

“And right next to him is your mom.”

She squeezed his hand, and underneath the blue Kansas sky, there were two people and three hundred acres of brown dead stalks and a dirt road that led to the highway and a house with peeling blue paint and white trim and a headstone behind the house that read, “Laura Thomas 1964-2012.”

The only lights in that night were two cigarettes and countless stars.

Russell Swartz

El Reloj

Era hora de tener un nuevo comienzo. Estaba agobiada, abrumada por la infelicidad. Me subí al avión con las esperanzas de dejar atrás Argentina y con ella, los desdichados recuerdos.

Hasta ese momento no había hecho más que obedecerlo, someterme a él. A decir verdad, no había sido más que arcilla a la cual él podía moldear a su voluntad. “Acordate de hacer lo que te pedí Silvi”, “Acordate de hacerlo a tiempo”, solía decirme con su dulce voz. No, no, no era dulce. No debía ser dulce. Era despreciable. Sabía que nada bueno sucedería cuando se dirigía hacia mí de ese modo. No importaba qué tanta dedicación y esmero pusiera en cumplir con lo que me solicitaba; siempre había un hueco, un error, un detalle al que yo no había prestado suficiente atención. Y por esa razón debía pagar las consecuencias.

Mis ojos miraban el cielo azul que se extendía infinitamente en todas las direcciones y debajo, se volvía uno solo con el mar. Mis ojos miraban el cielo pero veían otra cosa. Llevé delicadamente mi mano derecha hacia mi mejilla. Mi cabeza que reposaba sobre el asiento cómodamente permaneció así, preparada para lo que estaba por venir: dolor. Mis dedos danzaban suavemente por toda mi cara: frente, mentón, pómulos, sienes... Dolía. A pesar de estar reviviendo la tortura

que causó esas deformaciones, magulladuras y contusiones, mi cara permaneció inmutable.

“Veo que no te esforzaste demasiado. ¿Será acaso que no me amás lo suficiente?” me había dicho Luis con esa voz que pretendía ternura. Me miraba decepcionado. Movi6 ligeramente su cabeza de lado a lado expresando su desaprobaci6n, hizo un chasquido con la lengua y llev6 sus manos a mi cara. Al principio me acariciaba delicadamente.

“Perdoname. Sabés que no quiero pero no hay otra opci6n”. El fuego que se encendía en sus ojos era imposible de ocultar, ni siquiera detrás de esa falsa y casi perfecta apariencia de compasi6n y piedad.

De repente, lo sentía. Eran como piedras lanzadas con fuerza brutal sobre mi cara. Sólo que no eran piedras. Eran las manos que instantes atrás me acariciaban.

Mis dedos inquietos se detuvieron sobre una herida situada en el margen izquierdo de mi cara. “Perdoname mi amor. Es lo mejor para vos” había dicho y termin6 la frase besándome la frente.

Mi cara seguía aún inalterada, sin expresi6n, con los ojos perdidos que miraban el firmamento pero no lo veían. Ya estaba cansada, harta. Basta. No más Buenos Aires. No más Argentina. No más Luis. Luis qued6 atrás. Las heridas, bofetadas y puñetazos quedaron atrás. Aquellas cargas que me oprimían, que llevaba en mi espalda y me encorvaban, que se expandían en mi mente y me asfixiaban, quedaron atrás.

Sorpresivamente, rendida y cansada de sufrir, gotas de agua brotaron de mis ojos. Primero eran unas pocas. Fluían lentamente hacia mi nariz, mi boca y mi barbilla. Dibujaban rastros como ríos y caían, una tras otra, desde mi mandíbula. Luego el caudal aumentó. Las lágrimas brotaban desenfrenadas, furiosas. Y sin darme cuenta, el recuerdo de Luis dio a mi semblante forma de enojo, de bronca. El ceño fruncido, los ojos entornados y la boca encogida. Me quedé así un rato, aunque no soy capaz de decir cuánto tiempo ya que no tenía mi reloj, y aunque lo hubiese tenido hubiera sido en vano.

Tan rápido como comenzaron, las lágrimas cesaron; los músculos de mi rostro se relajaron y mis párpados se cerraron. Luis había quedado atrás junto con el dolor. De ahora en más sería yo misma, sería libre; sin opresiones ni hostigamientos. Me prometí a mí misma que no volvería a ser así de tonta. Esto no volvería a pasar, estaba segura de ello. Y así, decidida y aliviada como me sentía, me dormí.

Al despertarme estaba confundida. Solo pude distinguir la figura de la azafata, esbelta y delicada como una muñeca de porcelana, sacudiéndome suavemente con la intención de despertarme. Me sonrió tímidamente y comenzó a hablarme casi susurrando, como si me estuviese confesando algún secreto que ningún otro pasajero debiera escuchar. La verdad es que no entendía chino, pero sabía lo que me estaba diciendo: debíamos prepararnos para el aterrizaje. No era la primera vez que viajaba en avión, sabía qué hacer. La miré, sonreí y

asentí. Entonces me dispuse a enderezar el asiento, guardar la mesa plegable y ajustarme el cinturón.

Miré mi muñeca buscando el reloj. Necesitaba saber la hora. No obstante, intenté contenerme, centrar mi atención en otra cosa. El tiempo ya no debía ofuscarme.

Di un profundo suspiro. Mientras el avión descendía, me di cuenta de que sentía un terrible dolor de cabeza. Podría haberme mentido mí misma y atribuirle su causa a la “mezcla de emociones ocasionada por el nuevo comienzo”. Pero no. No era eso. Estaba totalmente segura de que había sido aquel sueño que tuve durante todo el vuelo y que dejó en mí una gran preocupación.

Era evidente que el recuerdo de Luis me perseguía. No podría superarlo tan rápido. Quizás nunca lo superaría. Quizás, las marcas que había dejado, tanto físicas como emocionales, no se borrarían jamás. Su mirada, su sonrisa, su voz, su recuerdo y el miedo se habían grabado en mí. El miedo a Luis y a cualquier cosa relacionada con él se había asentado en algún recóndito lugar en mi mente. No toleraría un golpe por la espalda. No importaba qué tanto quisiera olvidarlo o cuántas veces creyera superarlo, siempre volvería a caer. Aún me preocupaba Luis. Me preocupaba el tiempo.

Las imágenes del sueño comenzaron a desfilar frente a mí. Era una noche sin estrellas. En los suburbios de una ciudad desconocida, llegaba en un taxi a un edificio que me resultaba familiar como si alguna vez,

hace mucho tiempo, ya hubiese estado ahí; como si hubiera pasado tanto tiempo desde esa vez que no tenía ningún recuerdo salvo la sensación de haber estado allí antes. El silencio era pacífico y a mismo tiempo, aterrador. Estaba sola y sin embargo, me sentía observada.

Al atravesar la imponente puerta de madera, me encontré en un largo pasillo sin fin. Las tiras del piso flotante se extendían infinitamente. El corredor era ancho y con la distancia, las paredes se conjugaban. Los relojes, inquietos, inundaban los muros. Y los había de todas las formas y tamaños: redondos, cuadrados, grandes, chicos, antiguos, modernos. Sencillos, glamorosos, extravagantes, atemorizantes. Más que nada nerviosos. Las manecillas rotaban frenéticamente, imparables, y ningún reloj señalaba el mismo horario. Me desesperaba. Asustada, nerviosa, comencé a correr en la única dirección posible: hacia adelante, por el pasillo recto. No había puertas ni desvíos. Sólo relojes. Entonces, lo peor sucedía: la voz de Luis. “Silvi, querida, por fin te encuentro” se escuchaba fuerte. Su voz omnipresente provenía de todas partes y de ningún lugar en particular. La desesperación comenzaba a apoderarse de mí. “¿Adónde te habías ido sin mí?”, “¿Hiciste lo que te pedí?”, “Queda poco tiempo”. Y esas últimas palabras no se iban, retumbaban, se repetían. Queda poco tiempo...

Aterrada ya, mis intentos por escapar fracasaban, trataba de correr más rápido pero mis movimientos se entorpecían con el apuro.

Tic toc. Corría, corría, mis pies se enredaban y caía. “Queda poco tiempo”. Mis brazos, con el afligido propósito de huir, se estiraban como si pudieran sujetarse de algún lugar, levantarme e impulsarme hacia adelante. Tic Toc. Me levantaba, corría, avanzaba por el pasillo y las paredes se fusionaban sobre mi cabeza. “Queda poco tiempo”. Tic toc. Ya ni siquiera pensaba, solo quería avanzar para escapar. Cuando mis piernas estaban a punto de arrojarme al suelo, cuando el pasillo era tan estrecho que al pasar por él los relojes rozaban mi ropa, cuando al mirar atrás ya no se veía la entrada sino el pasillo infinito, llegué al fin del camino. Allí comenzaba una escalera caracol.

Quise empezar a subir pero algo me detuvo. Una mano que me sostenía y me impedía avanzar. Era un botones. Lo miré pero él, en vez de devolverme la mirada, observó su muñeca. Observó su reloj pulsera. Era mi reloj pulsera. “Queda poco tiempo” me dijo y me dio un empujón hacia arriba.

Las palabras hacían eco nuevamente. Volvía a correr, cuesta arriba esta vez. Los relojes aún invadían las paredes. El tic toc era cada vez más furioso, más agresivo, más irritante. Me esforzaba por subir, por no parar. Era un martirio. Pero debía escapar. Escapar de la voz de Luis, escapar de esas palabras.

Me arrastré por los interminables escalones, sobre la alfombra de terciopelo. Justo cuando el terror empezaba a rozar el límite de la

locura, llegué al descanso. Una puerta blanca con un cerrojo dorado determinaba el fin del camino infernal. Alguien golpeo la puerta desde el otro lado. Decidida, coloqué mi mano sobre el picaporte y apresuradamente abrí.

De repente, negro. Todo negro.

El sacudón del aterrizaje me trajo de vuelta a la realidad.

“Bienvenidos a Beijing” anunciaba una aguda y simpática voz femenina en el aeropuerto, luego de haberlo hecho en varios otros idiomas.

Recogí mi equipaje y tomé un taxi que me llevó hasta el hotel.

El chofer me saludó al entrar al vehículo. *Ni jao* articuló. Fueron las primeras palabras chinas que aprendí. Estaba segura del nuevo comienzo, de la decisión que había tomado. El temor desapareció y logré una sonrisa. *Ni jao* respondí.

Debió haber pensado que entendía su idioma ya que continuó hablándome en chino con su voz serena. De más está decir que no lo comprendía. Abrí los ojos y elevé las cejas. Era un frustrado intento por entender algo que sabía que no entendería. Al ver que no obtenía respuesta alguna, el conductor echó un vistazo por el espejo retrovisor. Sus ojos rasgados eran intrigantes; eran como lustrosas perlas negras.

“No hablo chino” balbuceé con la esperanza de que supiera lo que le estaba diciendo. Es probable que no reconociera el idioma pero sí que interpretara mi mensaje. El espejo volvió a mostrarme sus ojos oscuros.

Sonrió. Así lo demostraron los pequeños pliegues que se formaron en el fin de sus párpados.

“Bienvenida a China” dijo a duras penas con su inconfundible acento. Digería las palabras, los sonidos se estancaban en su boca y le costaba dejarlos salir. Luego, su mirada se centró nuevamente en el tráfico. Sistemáticamente miré mi muñeca. Recordé que no debía hacerlo y, como el chofer, me centré en el tráfico yo también. Fue un viaje silencioso hasta el hotel.

El alojamiento me dejó fascinada. Era tradicional, tan... tan perfecto. El estilo de la construcción inspirado en la arquitectura imperial, el tejado a dos aguas curvado ligeramente hacia arriba, la perfecta combinación de los colores rojo y verde; la madera, ese material tan dócil que perfectamente tallado daba lugar a todos los muebles del lugar y hacía de cada uno, una obra de arte; adentro, los caracteres indescifrables en tinta negra colgando de las paredes; y justo pasando el vestíbulo, la joya del hotel: el jardín que vestía de verde a todas las superficies, salpicado con flores rojas, rosas y violetas; y un estanque cuya agua fluía y caía incesantemente, meditabunda, por una pequeña cascada. Y la música... el erhu sonaba como si alguien lo estuviera tocando no muy lejos y sus cuerdas me seducían, me hechizaban, y cada nota me sumergía un poco más en su cultura ancestral. Cada objeto, cada planta, cada flor, y cada sonido tenían su lugar, todo se encontraba en magnífica armonía.

En los cinco días de hospedaje en Beijing, me dediqué a recorrer la ciudad y sus alrededores, donde los avances de la frenética civilización moderna convivían con los vestigios de la milenaria civilización tradicional.

Comencé mi itinerario en la Ciudad Prohibida localizada en el centro de Beijing, y que en otros tiempos supo ser el Palacio Imperial Chino. Afortunadamente, mientras la recorría encontré un grupo de turistas españoles. Me quedé detrás suyo para así poder escuchar al guía, aunque debido al murmullo constante me fue difícil escuchar todos sus comentarios. Sin embargo, tuve la suerte de poder captar la explicación más importante. El guía explicó que la mejor traducción para el nombre nativo del palacio es en realidad “La Ciudad Púrpura Prohibida”. La palabra china para *púrpura* también hace referencia a la Estrella del Norte y según los antiguos astrónomos chinos, esta estrella estaba en el centro del cielo y era la residencia del Emperador Celestial. El Palacio o Ciudad Prohibida constituía así su contraparte terrenal, siendo la residencia del Emperador terrestre. Y es por esa razón es que se la conoce como la Ciudad Púrpura.

Luego, pude visitar la plaza Tiananmen, las tumbas de Ming, el Templo del Cielo y el Palacio de Verano, aunque no tuve tanta suerte como en la Ciudad Prohibida. Sin embargo, la inmensidad y majestuosidad de cada uno de esos lugares solo podían recordarme mi pequeñez, mi despreciable importancia en el mundo.

Terminada la estadía, desde el hotel llamé a un taxi. Mi próximo destino me esperaba. Mi nueva vida me aguardaba.

Me subí al coche. Algo me resultaba vagamente familiar. Entonces, noté en el espejo la misma mirada de unos días atrás. Lo reconocí y me reconoció. Me sonrió y le devolví la sonrisa.

Consciente de mis limitaciones para comunicarme, le entregué al chofer un papel con la dirección del próximo alojamiento. Un prolongado y callado trayecto se avecinaba.

El tiempo avanzaba, el silencio se mantenía y no llegábamos. Sentía una desesperada necesidad de buscar la hora en mi antebrazo, pero debía controlarme. Casi inconscientemente, cada tanto, volteaba mi cabeza buscando ese reloj que no tenía. Instantáneamente la desviaba hacia la ventanilla para así, desviar mis pensamientos. Tratando de evitar repetir este lamentable espectáculo, sujeté con fuerza mi muñeca izquierda con la otra mano. De ese modo, sin soltarla y con la vista clavada en el paisaje, permanecí el resto del viaje.

Cayó la noche. Las horas habían pasado y todavía no llegábamos. Sentía las miradas furtivas que el hombre al volante realizaba cada tanto.

La luna, redonda perfecta, estaba cubierta por una ligera cortina difusa. Con mi muñeca aún sujeta, me quedé absorta en su belleza. Su pureza intocable me atrapó. ¿Podría ser yo ahora como la luna? ¿Podría ser radiante y hermosa, sin otra preocupación más que brillar? ¿Podría?

¿Me escribiría alguien alguna vez una canción? ¿Podría ocurrir sin Luis?

¿Sin mi reloj?

Abstraída, perdí *-finalmente-* la noción del tiempo. En lo que parecieron unos pocos minutos, llegamos a destino. En las afueras de un pueblo ubicado en medio de la nada, se hallaba mi nueva residencia. Se encontraba a orillas de un lago, rodeada por un bosque de bambú.

La casa contrastaba con cualquier otra edificación que pudiera haberme cruzado en mi estadía en China. Era una gran casa de madera, sin ningún tipo de influencia del estilo oriental o imperial. Construida completamente en madera oscura, con un techo a dos aguas de tejas casi negras y con habitaciones que se extendían como protuberancias de la construcción central, me recordaba a aquella cabaña en la que solía pasar las vacaciones de mi infancia con mi familia en la Patagonia. Quizás era la coincidencia de que ambas casas se encontraran frente a un lago rodeado por la tranquilidad de un bosque. Y que esa misma tranquilidad no fuera tan tranquila, sino que albergara un mundo de criaturas que se esconden y observan durante la noche, atentos a cada uno de los movimientos de los que se atreven a invadir su hogar. Estaba sola y sin embargo, no lo estaba; estaba siendo contemplada, acaso acechada, por los animales. Y también estaba la luna que bañaba el paisaje con su luz de plata.

Ya me alejaba del vehículo cuando algo me impidió seguir avanzando.

-Silvi – pronunció. Mi mente se puso en blanco. Quedé anonadada. ¿Cómo era posible que supiera mi nombre? Fruncí el ceño y mi mandíbula cayó; no podía creerlo. Desconcierto, eso sentía. “¿Qué...?” fue lo único que atiné a decir. No entendía.

El conductor extendió su mano con el puño cerrado. Al abrirlo, allí estaba, precioso. De la cadena plateada colgaba el dije circular que era realmente un reloj. Sin dejar de mirar al chofer con incredulidad y fascinación, extendí la mano yo también y allí lo dejó. Cerré el puño y luego, lo guardé en un bolsillo. ¿Qué otra cosa podría haber hecho?

Ninguno dijo nada más. Me alejé del auto y este en silencio se fue.

Caminé hasta la puerta de entrada. Golpeé una vez. Nada. Otra vez. Nada. Intenté abrir, pero estaba trabado. No tenía adónde ir, sólo podía esperar.

Mientras tanto, saqué el reloj de mi bolsillo, ese precioso regalo. Seguía sin encontrar explicaciones a lo ocurrido. Presté atención hasta al más mínimo detalle; no había lugar a dudas, era mi reloj. Se me ocurrió toda clase de preguntas, pensé en muchas cosas, pero no logré ninguna explicación razonable.

Pasé mi dedo índice sobre la cubierta, lustrosa. Reflejaba la oscuridad de la noche y la luz de las estrellas. Interrumpiendo el paisaje estaba yo. Las marcas en mi cara aún se notaban. Menos visibles que antes, pero aún ahí estaban.

De repente, se escucharon unos pasos.

Horrorizada por haber visto mis heridas otra vez, inquieta por lo recientemente ocurrido, puse el reloj nuevamente en mi bolsillo. Instantes después, se abrió la gran puerta de madera. Era el botones del alojamiento. Sin dirigirme una palabra o siquiera una mirada, tomó mi equipaje y lo llevó a mi habitación. Debió haber sabido quién era yo. O me debió haber estado esperando. ¿Había llegado tarde?

Lo seguí hasta el cuarto. Dejé mi única valija frente a la cama y se marchó cerrando la puerta tras de sí. Todo lo que necesitaría a partir de ese momento estaba en esa habitación, en mi cartera y en mi valija. Empezaba a sentirme a gusto, cuando repentinamente el teléfono sonó. No esperaba ninguna llamada, por lo que debía ser el recepcionista o una llamada equivocada

-Silvi, querida, finalmente te encuentro- colgué inmediatamente. No creí que el recepcionista pudiera hablar un español tan fluido. O, que si lo hiciera, se dirigiera tan confiadamente hacia mí. Respiré profundo y traté de convencerme de que no había sido *él*.

El teléfono sonó una vez más. No había sido *él* y no sería *él*, así que podría atender tranquilamente.

- Silvi, mi amor, ¿adónde te habías ido sin mí?- Imposible. Estaba paralizada. Podría haber sido una broma de mal gusto. O alguien queriendo asustarme. Aunque siendo sincera ¿quién podría hacer semejante cosa? ¿A qué otra persona conocía que no fuera *él*?

El teléfono sonó por tercera vez. En un intento fallido por creer que no había sido Luis, atendí temblorosa.

- ¿Hiciste lo que...?

Colgué. Las paredes comenzaron a constreñirse, el aire me faltaba.

No podía permitirme escuchar esa frase completa. Era él, lo sabía.

No podía engañarme a mí misma. Instintivamente llevé mis manos a mi rostro, protegiéndome. Se desplazaban entre sienes, pómulos y orejas, tratando de cubrirme completamente. No podía decidir qué era peor: el dolor que sentía cada vez que terminaban de ser pronunciadas esas palabras o seguir escuchando esa dulce y espantosa voz.

Tiré de la puerta y me lancé a correr por el pasillo buscando algún tipo de protección, alguna seguridad. Necesitaba escapar de esa voz, de esas palabras.

Mientras corría, escuchaba mi respiración profunda, desesperada. Mi corazón latía enfurecido, atormentado, exasperado. Las pulsaciones resonaban en mi cuerpo que tiritaba al ritmo de la sístole y la diástole. Mis piernas, desacostumbradas a cargar el peso de mi cuerpo a tan alta velocidad, parecían inútiles, inservibles, torpes. Se doblaban y tropezaban. Quería correr rápido, escapar, huir, desaparecer, fugarme. ¿Acaso no encontraría mi paz jamás?

No había habitaciones ni puertas ni salidas.

Tic toc. Sonaba el reloj en mi bolsillo. Tic toc. El sonido se hacía más

potente, se fusionaba con el recuerdo de las palabras de Luis. *Silvi, Te encontré, ¿Adónde...? ¿Hiciste...?* Resonaban, retumbaban, me taladraban la cabeza. No lo soportaba más. Me estaba asfixiando. Había un vacío en mi pecho. Me consumía, me desmoronaba.

Tic toc. Ya no era solo mi reloj. Tic toc. Mi reloj sonaba al compás de todos aquellos sobre las paredes del pasillo. Tic.toc. *¿Adónde podía ir?* No había lugar en la tierra o en mi conciencia donde hubiera paz. No tenía refugio. No podía más que avanzar, abalanzarme, precipitarme, a pesar de los movimientos torpes. Tic toc.

El trayecto era interminable. Creí que caería rendida, que me desmoronaría en el suelo, cansada de huir de la voz, de Luis, de las palabras, de mí misma. Cuando no daba más, cuando estaba a punto de entregarme, me encontré en el fin del pasillo y en el comienzo de una escalera caracol.

Me tomé unos segundos para reponerme. Abracé mis costillas y con un gran suspiro llené mis pulmones. Quería llorar.

Tic toc. Tenía que seguir. A punto de subir el primer escalón, algo me detuvo. Una mano me sostenía. Era el botón que me recibió. Miró su reloj pulsera. Era el reloj pulsera que años atrás me había obsequiado Luis para que realizara sus pedidos a tiempo. Era mi reloj. Fue ese objeto la causa de mis tormentos. ¡Cómo lo aborrecía! -Queda poco tiempo - anunció. Señaló el piso superior con una mano y con la

otra me dio un ligero empujón en la espalda, impulsándome hacia arriba. Tanta confusión. Demasiada.

Ya no pensaba, no conjeturaba ni suponía. Ni siquiera me esforzaba en hacerlo. Sólo me esforzaba por huir de Luis, de sus palabras, de mí. Agitada, mis manos aferradas al pasamano para no caer, me esforzaba por cargar el peso de mi cuerpo por cada escalón. Incontables eran los escalones pero la desesperación era más fuerte que el agotamiento.

El dolor incrementaba, no solo en mi cuerpo sino también en mi alma. Jamás sería feliz, jamás estaría tranquila. Mis ilusiones de una nueva vida, de un nuevo comienzo, se rompían en mil pedazos delante de mis ojos y sus astillas se clavaban en mi corazón.

Llegué al descanso. Me tropecé con una gran puerta blanca con un reluciente cerrojo dorado. Alguien llamó a la puerta del otro lado. Fuese quien fuese, las cosas no podrían empeorar. Decidida, puse mi mano sobre el picaporte y sin dudar abrí.

-Al fin llegaste. Por primera vez llegás a tiempo. Silvi. mi amor, no sabés cuanto te extrañé – murmuró esas últimas palabras.

Era él.

Intentó acariciar mi rostro pero no lo permití. En cambio, lo miré con desprecio. No logré descifrar qué estaba ocurriendo pero ya no necesitaba hacerlo. Tanta confusión y tanto tormento se desvanecían, se esfumaban, perdían la importancia que supieron tener.

Sujeté su muñeca para evitar que me tocara y con la otra mano puse en la suya el reloj que llevaba en mi bolsillo.

Atravesé la puerta y caminé por la habitación, de espaldas a Luis, en dirección a la ventana. Me hablaba pero su voz remota se convertía en susurros.

Durante mi estadía en Beijing había escuchado que regalar un reloj en China significa regalar la muerte. Quizás fuera verdad.

Me asomé por la ventana. Era una noche preciosa.

Y de repente, negro. Todo negro.

María Agustina Orabona

The Timepiece

(El Reloj, translated from the Spanish by the author)

It was time for a new beginning. I was already overwhelmed with unhappiness. I got on the plane hoping to leave Argentina behind, along with the bad memories.

Until then, all I had ever done was obey, submit myself to him. In fact, all I had ever been was clay that could be molded into whatever shape he wanted me to be. “Remember to do what I asked you to do”, “Remember to do it on time”, he used to say to me with his sweet voice. No, no, no, it was not sweet. It was not supposed to be sweet. It was despicable. I knew nothing good would happen when he talked to me that way. It didn’t matter how hard I tried to meet his expectations; there was always a hole, a mistake, a detail of which I haven’t cared enough. And that’s why I had to take the consequences.

My eyes were now staring into the blue sky, which stretched infinitely in every direction; it became one with the ocean below. I was looking at the sky, but I was seeing something else. I gently set my right hand on my cheek. I kept my head resting comfortably on the plane seat, ready for what was about to come: pain. My fingers were slowly dancing across my face: forehead, chin, cheekbones, temples... It hurt. My face remained immutable, although I was reliving the torture that had caused the bruises, the contusions and the wounds.

“It seems that you didn’t try that hard. Don’t you love me enough?”

Luis had said, pretending to be a disappointed kind loving man. He slightly shook his head while clicking his tongue in disapproval, and put his hands on my face. At first, he stroked it softly. “I’m sorry. You know I don’t want to, but there is no other choice”. The fire that started burning in his eyes was hard to hide, not even behind that almost perfect mask of compassion and pity.

Suddenly I felt it. It was like rocks being brutally thrown at my face. But it was not rocks. It was the hands that moments before had been stroking my face.

My restless fingers stopped over a wound on the left side of my head. “I’m sorry honey. It’s the best for you.” he had said, and ended talking with a kiss on my forehead.

My face was still emotionless, with my eyes fixed on the sky, looking at it but not seeing it. I was done, it was enough. Enough! I’d already had enough Buenos Aires, enough Argentina, and enough Luis. I wouldn’t have any more of them, not a single bit. All of them would stay behind. The fists, the injuries, the punches and the slaps were behind. Those loads oppressed me; I had carried them in my back and they bended it, they had expanded inside my mind and asphyxiated me. And now, luckily, they were behind.

Surprisingly, I found myself crying; a few tears streaming down

my face. I could feel them slowly flowing towards my nose, my mouth and my chin, like quiet and strong rivers. One after the other, they fell off my jaw. The volume of tears increased, as they fiercely sprung from my eyes. I frowned and I shrank my mouth. The memories of Luis had inadvertently made my face contort in rage. I couldn't tell how long I remained that way since I was not wearing a watch, and even if I had been wearing my watch, it would have been in vain.

The crying ceased as easy as it had started. My facial muscles relaxed and I shut my eyes closed. Luis was behind along with the pain. From now on, I was going to be myself, I was going to be free. I wouldn't be that silly again, I had promised to myself. This was never going to happen again. I was sure about it. Decided and relieved as I felt, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was confused. I could notice only the shape of an air hostess delicate as a porcelain doll. She was gently shaking my shoulder trying to wake me up. When she noticed I was awake, she gave me a shy smile and started talking to me as confessing something that no one else was supposed to hear. The truth is that I didn't understand Chinese, but I could tell what she was saying: we ought to prepare for landing. It was not my first time travelling on a plane; I knew what I had to do. I looked at her, smiled and nodded. I straightened the seat, folded the folding-table and fastened my seatbelt.

I glanced at my wrist, looking for the clock. I needed to know the time. However, I tried to focus on something else; time was not going to chase me any longer.

I took a deep breath. While the plane was descending, I realized that I had a strong headache. I could lie to myself saying that “the headache was because of the mix of emotions produced by the fresh start”. But I wasn’t going to lie. It was not that. I was totally sure that it must have been that dream I had during the whole flight.

It was obvious to me that the memory of Luis was still chasing me. I was not going to be able to get over him that easy. Maybe I would never get over him. Maybe, the emotional and physical wounds he had left would never be erased. His gaze, his smile, his voice, his memory and the fear I had for him, had been engraved somewhere in my mind. The fear I had for him was settled, and I was just hoping it wouldn’t get stronger. I knew I was too weak, even though I was trying so hard to forget him, and if he would ever appeared again I was going to fall. I was way too worried about Luis and about time as well.

Images from the dream paraded before my eyes. I was riding a taxi in the middle of a night with no stars, in the outskirts of an unknown city. All of a sudden, the taxi stopped at a building that seemed quite familiar to me, as if I had been there so long ago that I couldn’t bring up any memory but the feeling of having been there before. The silence

was peaceful and terrifying at the same time. Although I was alone, I felt there was someone staring.

I went through the imposing wooden door to find an endless hallway. The floor wooden tiles extended infinitely. The hallway was wide, but in the distance the walls joined together. Restless clocks filled every single spot on the walls. And there were clocks of every shape and size: rounded, squared, big, small, antique, and trendy; simple, fancy and frightening ones. But they were mainly nervous. Their hands rotated anxiously, unstoppable. There were not two clocks that showed the same time. It disturbed me. Frightened as I was, I started running in only one direction: straight forward through the corridor. It was the only available way. There were no doors, no detours, there was no way out. There were only clocks. And then, the worst happened. Luis' voice sounded loud: "Silvi, honey, I've finally found you". His omnipresent voice seemed to come from everywhere and from nowhere in particular. I was taken over by despair. "Where had you gone without me?"; "Did you do what I asked you to do?"; "You're running out of time". Those words echoed, they wouldn't leave, they kept repeating themselves. Time is running out...

I ran faster, the fastest I could, but my movements got clumsy with the hurry.

Tick-tock. I was running, running fast, but my feet tangled and I

fell. "Time is running out". I was extending my arms, as if I could hold from somewhere and pull myself forward. Tick-tock. I was standing up. I was running as the walls started fusing over my head. "You are short of time". Tick-tock. I was not thinking anymore, I only wanted to get out. When my legs were about to fail and leave me on the ground, when the aisle had become so narrow that the clocks rubbed my clothes as I passed by, when looking back I couldn't see the door anymore but only the endless aisle, I reached the end of the corridor. I was at the bottom of a spiral staircase.

I was about to start to go up, but something in front of me wouldn't let me. A hand was in front of me like a barrier. It was a bellboy's hand. I looked at him but he didn't look me back. Instead, he looked at his wrist. He looked at his wristwatch. It was my wristwatch. "You're running out of time" the bellboy said and pushed me from the back.

The words started echoing anew. I was running again, uphill this time. Clocks still filled the walls. The tick-tock was getting furious and aggressive, more irritating. I was striving to go up, striving not to stop. I was in misery, but I had to escape. I had to escape from Luis and from those horrible words.

I dragged myself upstairs across the velvet carpet. Terror was reaching the limits of madness. Fortunately, I arrived at the landing. At

the top of the second set of stairs, at the end of this hell, there was a white door with a golden doorknob. Someone knocked on the other side. I was decided to give an end to that nightmare, so I put my hand on the knob and rapidly open the door.

Suddenly, everything went black; completely black.

The landing shook me and I went back to the real world.

“Welcome to Beijing!” announced a high-pitched female voice through the speakerphones in the airport, after having made it in other languages. I picked up my luggage and then got in a taxi. “Ni hao” the driver greeted me. Those words were the first Chinese words I had learnt. I felt so happy about the decision I had made. Fear started blurring and I could handle a smile. “Ni hao” I replied.

He might have thought that I understood his language since he kept talking to me in Chinese. Needless to say, I couldn’t understand a word. I widely opened my eyes and lifted my eyebrows. It was a failing attempt to understand something I knew I was not able to understand. When he realized he wasn’t getting any response, he glanced at me through the rearview mirror. His slanted eyes were intriguing, as though they were shiny black pearls.

“I don’t speak Chinese” I managed to state, hoping he would understand. The mirror showed me his dark eyes again. I could notice he smiled because of the tiny folds that appeared around his eyes.

“Welcome to China” he could hardly say with his distinct accent. It seemed as though he had to digest the words before letting them out. He focused on the traffic again. Systematically I looked at my wrist. I remembered I shouldn’t do that, and like the driver, I focused on the traffic as well. It was a silent trip to the hotel.

The hotel was stunning. It was traditional, so... so perfect. Its wonder was a result of its traditional-imperial-style-inspired architecture, the upturned roof, and the perfect combination of red and green on the outside and the inside of the building; every piece of the furniture was a single piece of art made of carved wood. Inside, there were indecipherable characters on black ink hanging from the walls, and just across the lobby one could find the treasure of the hotel: right in the center of the building, surrounded by its walls, there was the garden that painted every surface green, and was dotted with red, pink and violet flowers; and there was a pond with water falling unceasingly and meditative from a cascade. There was also the music... the erhu sounded as though someone was playing it not far away and its strings seduced me; they were enchanting. Every note immersed me a little bit more in their ancestral culture. Every object, every plant, every flower and sound had their own place. Everything was in perfect harmony.

I stayed five days In Beijing, during which I devoted myself to explore the city and its surroundings, where the development of the

frantic modern civilization blended with the traces of the ancient traditional civilization.

I started my tour in The Forbidden City, located in the center of Beijing, which long ago used to be the Chinese Imperial Palace. Fortunately, while walking around, I found a group of Spanish tourists. I stayed behind them so that I could eavesdrop on their tour guide. Because of the continuous murmur, I could not understand everything he said. However I was lucky enough to listen to the most important part. He said that the best translation for the Chinese name of the palace was actually “The Purple Forbidden City”. The Chinese word for *purple* also refers to the North Star. Ancient Chinese Astronomers believed that this star was in the center of the sky and that it was the heavenly abode of the Celestial Emperor. The Forbidden Palace was its earthly counterpart and was home to the Chinese emperor. That’s why it was called the Purple City.

Later, I visited the Tiananmen Square, the Ming Tombs, the Temple of Heaven and the Summer Palace, though I wasn’t as lucky as I had been in the Forbidden City. Nevertheless, every place was majestic and they could only remind me of my negligible existence.

Finally, my stay in Beijing came to an end and I called a taxi from the hotel. The next destination was awaiting me, along with my new life.

I got in the taxi. Something was vaguely familiar. Then, I noticed in the rearview mirror the same gaze I'd seen some days ago. He smiled and I smiled back.

Aware of my limitations to communicate, I gave the driver a paper with the address of the next hotel written on it. A long and silent trip was about to start.

Time went by, the silence remained and there were no signs of the hotel. I was feeling anxious about time. I wanted look at my wrist and found out what time it was, but I controlled myself. I had to. I turned my look into the window, so I could turn my thoughts away from the time. Yet, I turned my head to my wrist every once in a while, almost unaware of it. I held my left wrist tightly with my other hand in an attempt to avoid this pitiful scene. I remained still in that position during the rest of the trip.

Night fell, the hours passed and we hadn't arrived yet. Every so often, I felt the driver's gazes.

I focused on the moon. I was engrossed in its beauty. It was rounded and shiny white, covered by a diffuse curtain. Still holding my wrist, I wondered. Could I be like the moon? Could I be bright and beautiful? Could I only care about shining? Would someone ever write a song for me? Could I do that without Luis, without my clock?

I was lost in my thoughts and so, I *finally*- lost control over time. In what it seemed to be a couple of minutes we arrived to the lodge. My

new residence was in the outskirts of a town, in the middle of nowhere, only surrounded by bamboo woods. I could also see a lake next to my new home.

The building was quite different in comparison to any other building I had seen before in China. It was more like a cottage, made completely of dark wooden tiles, with no resemblance at all to the oriental or imperial style. It had a gable roof made of black tiles and there were a lot of rooms, dozens I would say, that looked as though they were extensions of the main building.

The place reminded me of the cottage in the Patagonia in which as a child I used to spend holidays with my family. Maybe it was due to the similarities such as the lake and the woods, and their calmness surrounding the house. A calmness that wasn't so calm because it was full of creatures hiding and observing during the night, aware of the movements of those who intrude their home. I was alone and still, I wasn't. I was being observed, maybe even lurked, by the animals. There was also the moon that spilled its silver light all over the landscape.

I was walking away from the taxi, but I stopped.

-Silvi- the driver said. My mind was blank. I was shocked. How was that even possible? I frowned and I dropped my jaw, I just couldn't believe it. "What...?" was the only thing I could stammer. I was evidently missing something.

He stretched his arm, with his fist closed. It was odd. When he opened his hand, there it was, precious as it had always been: the silver chain and the rounded pendant, which was in fact a clock. I couldn't stop staring at the driver. I was incredulous and fascinated. I extended my arm and he put the pocket watch in my hand. I closed my hand and then put it in one of my pockets. What else could I have done?

None of us said anything. I walked away from the car and it left in silence.

I walked to the entrance door. I knocked once, but there was no answer. I knocked again. No answer. I tried to open but it was locked. There was nowhere I could go, so I decided to wait. Meanwhile, I took the clock out of my pocket, that precious gift. I was not able to find an explanation to what had just happened. I look carefully at every detail of the clock. There was no doubt that it was my clock. I got too many kinds of questions; I thought of many things, but I couldn't get a reasonable answer.

I rubbed my finger on the lustrous cover of the watch. It reflected the darkness of the night and the light of the stars. In the middle of that landscape, there was me. I could still notice the scratches and wounds in my face. They were less appreciable than some days before, but they were still there.

Suddenly, I heard some footsteps.

Horrified to see my wounds again and uneasy for what had happened minutes before, I put the watch back in my pocket. Just a few moments later, the great wooden door opened to show me the bellboy standing on the other side. He didn't say a word; neither had he looked at me. He just grabbed my luggage and took it inside, into my room. He should have known who I was. Or he might have been waiting for me. Was I late?

I followed him into the bedroom. He left my only suitcase in front of my bed and then left, closing the door behind him. Everything I was going to need from then on was in that bedroom, in my wallet and in my suitcase. I started to feel comfortable when all of a sudden, the room telephone rang. I wasn't expecting any call, so it might have been a call from the front desk agent or a misdialed call.

-Silvi, honey, I've finally found you - I hung up immediately. I didn't believe that the front desk agent could speak such a fluent Spanish. Or, if he did, I doubted that he could refer to me so confidently. I took a deep breath and convinced myself that it hadn't been *him*.

The telephone rang once again. It hadn't been him the last time and it was not going to be him now, so I could perfectly answer the phone.

-Silvi, my sweetheart where have you gone without me? -
Impossible. I was paralyzed. It could have been a bad joke, or someone

trying to scare me. But to be honest, who could have done that? Which other person did I know besides him?

The telephone rang a third time. I was still trying to believe that it hadn't been Luis. I picked up the phone, shaking.

-Did you do...?

I hung up. The room seemed to shrink. I could not breathe.

I couldn't allow myself to listen to the whole sentence. It was him, I knew it. I couldn't deceive myself. Instinctively, I put my hands on my face, as if I were protecting myself. As I couldn't cover my whole face, I moved them through my ears, cheekbones and temples. It was hard to decide what was worst: the pain felt every time those words were said or being unable to escape from that sweet and horrifying voice.

I slammed the door open and started running through the hallway, looking for any protection or any safety. That voice and those words needed to be away.

As I ran, I could hear my own breath. My heart beat fast, tormented, enraged, and exasperated; its pulse resounded in my body that was shaking to the rhythm of the systole and the diastole. My legs were not used to carry the weight of my body at such a high speed; they seemed useless, idle, and clumsy. They bended and topple me. I wanted to run, escape, or disappear. Was I never going to find my peace?

Even though I kept running, I couldn't find any way out. There were no rooms, no doors, no detours.

Tick-tock. The watch in my pocket sounded. Tick-tock. The sound became louder and blended with the thought of Luis' words. *Silvi, I've found you, where..., did you...* they echoed, they rumbled, as they drilled into my head. I couldn't stand it, it was asphyxiating. There was a void in my chest that was consuming me, breaking me, pulling me apart.

Tick-tock. It was not just my watch. Tick-tock. My watch was sounding to the beat of all those clocks on the walls. Tick-tock. Where could I go? There was no haven, no place on earth or in my mind where I could be at peace. Tick-tock. I could only go forward, lunge furiously, despite how clumsy my movements got. Tick-tock.

The way was endless. I was falling in to pieces, fed up with this nonsense, with Luis' voice, his words, with myself and with running. Notwithstanding I was exhausted and willing to give up, I went on a little bit more. I found myself at the end of the hallway and at the beginning of a spiral staircase. I tried to pull myself together, as I slid my arms across my chest and filled my lungs with air. I wanted to cry.

Tick-tock. I had to go on. I was about to take the first step upstairs when I was stopped by a hand. It was the bellboy that had taken my luggage when I had arrived. He looked at his wristwatch. It was the wristwatch that some years ago Luis had given to me, so I could accomplish all of his requests on time. It was my wristwatch, the one which had been the cause of all of my sufferings. How I loathed it!

-Time is running out- he announced. He pointed to the upper floor with one of his hands and he slightly pushed me with the other from my back. There was so much chaos.

I was neither thinking nor guessing nor supposing anything. I wasn't even trying to. I just wanted to get away from Luis, his words, and myself. My hands were holding to the railing, preventing me from falling. I was frantically going upstairs, though I struggled to carry my own weight through every step. The number of stairs was countless, yet desperation was stronger than exhaustion.

Pain was increasing, not only in my body but also in my soul. I would never be happy, I would never find peace. My dreams of a new life, a new start, were just that; only dreams. Those delusions were falling apart in front of my eyes and their slivers were nailing into my heart.

Finally, I reached the top of the stairs and I bumped into a white door with a shiny golden doorknob. Someone knocked from the other side. Whoever it was, it couldn't get worse. I put my hand on the doorknob and opened the door.

-You have finally come. For the first time you are on time. Silvi, honey, you don't know how much I've missed you- he whispered those last words.

It was him.

He tried to stroke my face, but I didn't give him the chance. Instead, I gave Luis a hateful glance. I didn't understand what was going on. But I didn't need to understand anymore. So much chaos and suffering were blurring, they were losing their importance they once had had.

I held his wrist to avoid his touch and put the pocket watch in his hand.

I went through the door and walked towards the window, passing by Luis. He was talking to me but his remote voice was turning into whispers.

During my days in Beijing, I've heard that giving a timepiece away in China means giving death away. It could have been true.

I leaned out the window. It was a beautiful night.

And all of a sudden, everything went black; completely black.

María Agustina Orabona

My Soldier

Ethan left.

His things were packed in a big ugly bag that matched his clothes and smelled lightly of dirt. Dad stood straight, hugged his son and tried to be proud. Mom cried. I did too. He hugged me tight, “Be good for me, okay, Lucy?” I just kissed his cheek and buried my face in his chest.

We had to say goodbye the night before he left. He decided he would go to the airport with his friends. If we had come along, it would have been that much harder for him to leave. Mom held me close as he went out the door. I wanted to go with him, but we all knew I couldn’t. I watched from the window as he drove away.

I slept in Mom and Dad’s room that night. Crowded in the bed, Dad kept saying the same thing over and over. “Someone has to protect the country.”

The words didn’t comfort Mom, and I didn’t really understand them.

Days passed slowly.

Mom cut her hair short. After work she would obsess over cleaning the house. She would chase me out of rooms with the vacuum, muttering to herself about what a mess I made. She was constantly in and out of the house trying to keep busy.

Dad would quietly come and go from work. In the evenings before dinner, he'd work on an old beat up car that took up half of our small two car garage. It was his and Ethan's big project, but Dad was fixing it up to be nice and useable for when he came home.

I spent most of my time moping around the house. I didn't want to touch any of my toys, they reminded me too much of the games Ethan and I would play. I missed taking afternoon walks to the park and playing catch. I missed wrestling in the living room. I missed watching T.V. with Ethan. I missed how he would pat my head and whisper, "Don't tell anyone that I still like these kid cartoons."

One day when I didn't eat dinner, I heard Dad say to Mom, "What's wrong with her?"

"She's depressed." Mom quietly replied, resignation in her voice. She understood how I felt. She was going through it too.

That night she let me sleep in Ethan's room. It had escaped her cleaning tirade, Ethan's scent stuck to the walls the way sadness hung in the rest of the house. I climbed into his sheets. When I closed my eyes, it felt like he was right there with me.

The days that passed turned into months.

I kept to myself and clung to Mom and Dad when they came home. They fell into their routines and took little notice of me. They threw themselves into their work and were often out of the house. They kept themselves so busy that they didn't make much time for each

other. They no longer asked about each other's day. They just talked about their own, so proud of how much they were able to get done. They tried their best to be happy, but clouds of worry still hung over their heads. Both of them were afraid to say anything about Ethan. The only time they'd talk about him was during his rare phone calls. Every time the home phone rang, they'd both jump and share nervous looks. Mom never answered, but Dad's sigh of relief always told her everything was fine. Our talks would be short and his end would have horrible connection, but I got excited each time I heard his voice.

The first thing Ethan would tell us was that he was safe. He'd talk about what the weather was like out there. He was a cook, and he'd say his job wasn't all that exciting. He always wanted to know about us. He wondered if Dad recorded the World Series. He asked Mom how work was going. He asked about me, if they were giving me enough attention and if I was eating just fine. He knew I had trouble eating when I was upset.

We would send him a box of his favorite snacks every month. Sometimes we added in a little extra things. A box of detergent that he asked for. A new set of socks.

A few times I tried to coax Dad into taking me to the park and playing catch the way Ethan and I used to, but he'd always tell me to leave him alone. The old car became his life. We knew he worked on it in the hope Ethan would come home alive and well. He was always so

worried and tense. He started to get short tempered with me and Mom, then lock himself in the garage with that car.

Around Ethan's fourth month away Mom couldn't pretend everything was fine anymore. She broke down while we were putting together Ethan's box. Kneeling on the ground before it, she clutched a framed picture of me, Dad, and the old car and tears started streaming down her cheeks. I sat down beside her and she held me close, sobbing with her chin on my head.

That night both of us slept in Ethan's bed together. The next morning we found Dad in a sleeping bag on the floor.

After that, she joined a support group for mothers with military children. She hosted some events and it felt nice to have people coming through the house again. She hummed as she worked around the house and wasn't as jittery anymore. But the phone still made her jump.

As Mom's solemn mood started to lift, so did Dad's obsession with Ethan's car. He would still work on it in the evenings, but he'd leave the garage door open and watch me run around in the front yard. He started to take breaks and play a bit of catch with me before Mom called us in to eat.

Things started to go back to normal, but I still slept in Ethan's room. It took ten months for Mom to invade it with her cleaning. Several times I tried to fight her off, throwing fits as she started to dust.

She sprayed cleaner on the windows and I was afraid she was going to wash away Ethan's scent. She said the room was musty. With Dad's help she was able to chase me out. He finally took me to the park.

By the time we got back, Mom was taking Ethan's sheets out of the washing machine and into the dryer. That night Mom and Dad made me sleep in my own bed. I whined about it all night, but they ignored me and went to bed as if they hadn't just washed away the closest connection I had to Ethan.

Mom and Dad were up extremely early the next morning. They woke me up and dragged me out to Ethan's now fixed up car. I was forced into the back seat and fell asleep almost instantly. The drive was long and I was very impatient after I woke up, but Mom and Dad were used to my tantrums and drowned me out with music.

We eventually came to a stop at a noisy place. It was filled with cars and people. Right when we parked, Mom took me to the bathroom and lectured me about being on my best behavior. We walked through a giant room with giant windows. People were everywhere, sitting, standing, moving and waiting. Anticipation filled the air. Mom and Dad were talking excitedly to each other, but their words were lost on me as I took in all the strange sights and sounds.

Through all the new sounds, one familiar voice broke through the crowds. "Mom! Dad!"

People parted as Ethan came towards us, flanked by other men in matching clothes and big ugly bags slung over their shoulders. His face was cracked in a huge grin.

Joy jolted through me. I lurched forward, yanking my way out of Dad's grip. Barking wildly, I bounded towards Ethan. I jumped up and showered his face with kisses.

"There's my girl!" He shouted, laughing and petting my head, "Have you been good for Mom and Dad, Lucy?"

I barked and Dad pulled me off of Ethan. I strained against Dad, sniffing Ethan's pants and boots, drinking in his new scent. It didn't smell like Ethan, but there was no mistake that it was him.

"Your dog really missed you, huh." One of Ethan's friends laughed.

"She wasn't the only one." Mom said, pulling Ethan into a tight hug, tears shimmering in her eyes.

Ethan held her in one arm, patting my head with the other, "I missed you guys too."

Allison Williamson

Lines

There were lines on his face and lines on his hands.

He was in the chow line on the USS Nimitz, and then he was in a line putting together Fords. He was in the line for an unemployment check, and then he was in the line for soup. He was in a line picking pockets, and then he was in line being picked out. He was in line for prison food, and then he was in line for AA. He was in line for methadone, and then he was in line for an autopsy. There were no lines for his funeral.

Russell Swartz

Chester

I chained my bike to a tree and locked it. The tree was deep in the bushes well out of view so I wouldn't have to worry about hippies stealing it. The trail was short and I made it to the river bank in no time. The river was mostly dry by July leaving pools dotting the riverbed for fifteen miles until it reached the sea. Standing above a pool situated on a sharp bend of the river I paused scan the water's edge. I saw my quarry on the shallow, sandy side of the pool. It was Chester.

Chester was a bullfrog. He was huge. He'd shown up here three summers ago, and all the boys who'd hunted frogs here had taken their best shots trying to capture him. Today I was going to catch him if it took all day. I had a jar in my backpack along with a change of clothes. I was planning to get wet.

Chester's eyes were visible just above the surface of the still water. He was facing away from me, but I knew his eyes could detect motion of any kind. I assumed he'd already seen me.

"Good" I thought. I didn't want this to be easy. Any idiot can shoot a lion or a bear. Catching frogs took skill, and it took reflexes possessed only by twelve year-old boys. I slipped out of my good shoes and into my beat up, black, high-top basketball sneakers. I tucked my brown corduroy pants into them so leaches couldn't swim up my pant legs. I

didn't mind leeches on my arms so much, but other parts of my body were off-limits. I put on my brother's swimming goggles, lay down on my stomach, and crawled into the water like a snake.

I stopped to watch what Chester would do when the ripples reached him. If he went deep I would wait for him on the surface until he came up for air. He remained still as the last ripple raised and lowered him onto the sandy bottom.

He was going to play this cool. Of course he would, he was the boss frog here.

I'd watched him eat a baby Water Moccasin one time. He just gulped it down like a worm. Another time I arrived late in the afternoon to see him chasing down baby bullfrogs that had stayed too long in the pool. He ate seven of them while I was there. I rescued three of them, but the fourth one was taken right in front of me by Chester. In my rush to catch the little guy, he came from between my legs, and snatched the smaller frog with his tongue. Then he was gone like a bolt of green lightning back into the deeper water.

I swam carefully across the deep side of the pool. I got the idea from watching Martin Sheen do this at the end of a Vietnam War movie. It was working. Chester continued to watch the opposite direction as I closed in on him. I kept my mouth closed to keep the water out but a little made its way in.

It tasted putrid.

I stopped when I was ten feet away. I could touch the bottom with my hands so from here I would pull myself as close as I could.

He didn't move. I smiled.

He had to be toying with me. I knew that at the last second he would leap away, and this would take all day. I hoped it would. I pulled myself alligator-style to within an easy arm's length away. He remained motionless. I studied him. For three years so many had tried to bring him in. Here I was about to become a local legend in the junior high frog hunting community.

Something was wrong.

There should have been small ripples around his nose created by the involuntary motion of his pulsing throat.

Could be holding his breath? Is he that good? I asked myself. I rose slightly from the water and saw it. Something was hanging from the left side of his body. I reached carefully, and with a sudden thrust my hand was around his cold, slippery body. I stood as I pulled him from the water.

He was dead. A BB had torn through his abdomen. Part of his intestine was hanging out of the exit hole.

I was numb. I scanned the far bank of the river even though I knew the killer was long gone. I looked at Chester. He was proud even in death. I took him with me as I walked around the edge of the pool back to where my pack was. Somewhere along the way I began to cry. I

hadn't cried since I was nine, and I felt like a giant baby. I kept my sobs as quiet as possible. This stung me as bad as anything I'd experienced in my short life.

I laid him carefully on the bank before I changed out of my clothes. By the time I zipped up my pants my tears had dried. I sat facing Chester and put my good shoes back on. I understood what happened, I had seen it before. Boys grow out of defining themselves by creating things, and instead they turn to destroying things. Destruction equals power to them.

I pulled the laces out of one of my black high-tops. I tore my wet Star Wars t-shirt into a long strip, and I wrapped Chester in it. I placed him carefully into my shoe on his belly, and I put the shoe's tongue over him. I coiled the lace around the shoe and tied it tight. I found a spot overlooking the pond just above the high water mark. Using the jar I'd brought I dug a hole deep enough to cover the shoe-casket along with a layer of round river rocks I put over it. I covered the grave marking it with more stones, and I used the lid of the jar as a head-stone.

I stood there for the longest time. Tears returned to my eyes. I would turn thirteen next month. The age where childhood faded as boys sought to define themselves as men. I promised him, and I promised myself I would never become a destroyer. I looked back down upon the pool in the bend of the river. I knew this was the last

time I would come here as a boy. In that moment I knew I was crying because my childhood had ended.

I had just buried it with Chester.

Marc Ferris

Casualties of War

My family's farm spanned 200 acres on the southern plains. Winter wheat, summer soybeans and fall sorghum dictated the cycle of crops. We were nine but mom was expecting any day now, to make us a round ten. The Great European War was over; wheat prices were slowly falling; but land for plowing was cheap and plentiful. Life was full of chores: farming, domestic animals and house chores. But this life was rich and school was optional. In the twenties I was the youngest boy—the golden boy, my mom's favorite. I was at that curious age, intrigued by frogs and bird's nests and fat worms, bubbling up from the ground after a rain. Still too young to be tasked with the heavy labor that my four older brothers and dad struggled with daily, I stayed near the house and heard mama humming to my two younger sisters, giggling about silly things—clotheslines, left over pie crust dough, and fretful creatures—spiders, lizards and snakes—that were all friends to me.

Our house sprouted here. Grandpa came over in a prairie schooner and first lived in a sod house. It was dug into the side of the hill, with grass sod for the roof and bare ground for the floor, and a piece of flapping canvas over a window frame on the one side built of wood; it was a start. But women, they didn't like living in a hole in the side of a hill. So, my gramps and his daddy built this here house years

ago: two stories, a covered porch, wooden floors, framed glass windows and a brick fireplace to pipe off the smoke and provide some heat in the harsh winters. Yearly, God's troubles came our way: freezing sleet, tornadoes, extended droughts and locust swarms, even biblical deluges. But the house withstood. It creaked and breathed heartland dust, which slipped around glass frames, under doors and down chimney flues. The soil didn't take 'no' for an answer—it needed to imprint all living souls on the plains.

In August, baby Daniel was born. Momma knew he'd come late, a Virgo she said. Daniel didn't want to come out. He and momma wrestled for twenty-six hours. With that, I knew something was up. Before, all us siblings popped out before the midwife arrived. Anyway, Daniel emerged, got slapped into earthly consciousness and howled his first scream at the injustice of life. He had a mat of red hair (we were all bald at our debuts), and the usual ten fingers and toes and a male appendage. Mama decided to keep him anyway. I remember momma calling me over the next day to catch a peek of the new baby.

"Anthony, you need to make me a promise," my mom said to me when she peeled back the blanket off Danny's face.

I was mesmerized. This was no girly doll—Daniel sighed softly when he breathed, rubbed his small button nose with tiny fingers, and then opened his lids and shiny spots would look out toward me.

"Yes, mommy," I whispered, still gazing at Daniel's face.

“You need to promise me that you’ll watch over your baby brother and keep him safe. He is special. Can you promise me that, Anthony?”

“Oh yes, mommy.”

Boy, was I naive and young. I didn’t know what I was getting into; nor did I realize at that time I would no longer be the golden boy in my mom’s eyes.

Daniel grew up differently. He had many parents—different faces would change his diaper and dress him, different hands held and fed him the bottles of milk (*Mama was too dried up after the birth*), different voices and shoulders rocked him to sleep. He discovered he only had two true parents when he started school and the same two showed up for parent/teacher talks.

By Danny’s 6th birthday, we were all attending school—a one-room wooden structure, with a leaky Franklin in the back corner, a long blackboard on the front wall and an old, solid teacher’s desk, perpetually cluttered with papers and crayons and broken pencils, off center, in front of the room. All the kids sat in thirty to forty wooden desks facing the front. The desks had straight-back seats connected to metal boxes with wooden tops, hinged to open and disclose a bottomless bin that held pencils, papers and nefarious other things. Usually the papers needing parental signatures were buried deepest in the bottom of the desk. Each wood top had the mandatory etching

imbedded in its surface. Dried hieroglyphic wads of gum edged the bottom of the desk as well. Seating dictated a student's fate: closer to the the oak desk—trouble maker, front row—brown nose, back of the room—late to arrive. My desk was near the teacher's; Daniel was near the front and more in the middle. Danny was teacher's pet—he read better and earlier than I did and seemed a savant in math, memorizing his multiplication tables two grades before I did. The teacher, Ms. Wright, would ponder my brother's future, away from farming.

Cut from the same cloth as my older brothers, I was outgoing and comfortable with people and girls in particular. Danny was reserved and shy and a 'late-bloomer.' At recess, he would hang out with younger boys, hunt for frogs, play tag or just walk in pairs the rim of the school yard. Mary, Danny's age, sat behind him in class. Starting her puberty surge earlier than the other girls, Mary was no 'later bloomer.' I found her very appealing. But I saw that she mooned over Danny. I also recalled the kid sitting in front of Danny in school, Billy something, his family lived three farms over from us. I caught him bullying my kid brother one day and I set Billy straight. He left Danny alone after that.

Being a good big brother, I would show Danny the ropes. When the time came, I would inadvertently leave a girlie magazine slightly exposed under my mattress. The front cover had the address of the local smoke/magazine shop in town. Danny got the hint and sneaked

into the back racks there, hidden from prying eyes of moms and ministers alike, and got his gander as well. Then, he'd come home and we'd have these discussions about anatomy, pubic hair and fuzzy feelings.

One morning, after arising early, I spied him changing his bed sheets. Though startled, he was able to confide in me.

"I wet my bed last night."

"Danny, you quit that five years ago. Tell me what happened."

"I had been in the Smoke shop yesterday and last night..."

"Stop, Daniel, you're alright. You didn't wet your bed. Welcome to puberty!"

Of course, I had to spill the beans about 'the birds and the bees,' but concluded that from here on out, he would have to wait till high school and then, on his own, learn by trial and error.

High school for our farming community was a twenty minute bus ride away. Used to hoofing to school alone and at one's own pace, the unsettling experience of waiting in a gaggle of kids at the bus stop and then finding a safe seat in the pecking order was nerve-wracking. We'd go from top 'senior' at the old school house to a lamb in a sea of faces, having to roam room to room for different subjects and deal with strange locker partners, all unnerving. Friends would be few and far between—impractical with the distance between communities feeding the high school. And though I tolerated the old, grungy metal bus and

worn flat cushions, Daniel grew to love them. I think it was because Mary, sitting beside Daniel for the commute, charmed him. She'd wear those pleated skirts, white blouses and an occasional sweater across her shoulders and when exiting the bus, turn to Daniel, wish him a good day and scoot. One day, after school, I noticed Daniel sporting a boner and kidded him mercilessly about it the rest of the day.

By the time of Daniel's senior year, I had graduated four years earlier and was working on some of the surrounding farms. About two weeks before prom night, Daniel came to me, upset because he didn't know who to ask to the dance.

"Doofus, Mary has been bonkers over you since grade school," I cried.

"Oh yeah, I guess I could ask her."

"If she hasn't been asked already. But only one way to find out," I replied.

Danny told me he approached Mary about one week later, in his awkward meek way, saying, "There's this dance I've been meaning to ask you about."

He said that Mary said she was thinking of going with Ben Abbot, but now that Daniel had asked her, that she would love to go with Daniel. Mary told him to pick her up at 5:00PM, since curfew was 10:00 and her dad would kill him and ground her for the rest of her life if they were late. Then, she asked if he was driving.

I had helped Danny get through his parallel parking challenge in my new truck just two weeks earlier. Danny had bent a No-Parking sign post while attempting that maneuver on his first exam. Luckily, my lessons sunk in. He learned to drive my truck with a clutch and got his driving permit.

The eve of the prom, Daniel came to me. He had been fantasizing about the slow dances with Mary, thinking of ways to nonchalantly drop his hand down her back onto her bottom while guiding her around the dance floor. My retort at the time was to act natural.

I waited up prom night to get the report from my baby brother of how it went. Danny remembered suffering the parents' Browning Box Camera/bright flash incriminating pictures of the young couple before escaping the house. Danny remembered how breathtaking Mary looked: silky brown hair worn down below her shoulders, creamy white skin exposed at the neck supporting a faux pearl necklace Mary's mom had given her for the occasion. She sported new nylons on her slim, graceful legs, a slim black belt cinched her polka dot-on-white dress at her thin waist; her bosoms, fully developed from elementary school days, filled out the top of the dress. Daniel sported the current farmer look: 6 foot even, tall and lanky, brown curly hair (*he lost his carrot top before grade school, turning the family brunette finally*), and though grown up, still sporting his baby face with a boyish grin on clear skin, looking thirteen rather than the sixteen years listed on his driver's

permit. His ensemble for the night included black slacks, white dress shirt and a black tie (*a loaner from me for the night*). Dreamily, Daniel recalled the slow dances with Mary including two or three with his hand anchored low on her back, pressed bosom to bosom, that seemed to drift into hours. But, he got her home by curfew and then home here. "I'm heading to bed for some sweet dreams," he said.

The next morning, instead of seeing a dreamy-eyed baby brother, Danny appeared agitated, with blood-shot eyes. He mumbled about a nightmare but he wouldn't spill. Two days later, I barged into his bedroom and demanded to know what was going on with all his sulking.

"I had a wet dream prom night, alright.!"

"Whew," I said. "I thought it was something terrible."

"No!" Danny wailed. "It was a nightmare! I was at a dance, I think I was with Mary. But I spied a guy there, visiting from Dallas, to chaperone his country cousin. He had a silky voice, clean white teeth, black wavy hair. Boy, was he built. I looked down and I was rock hard. Then there was this lightning flash and I crashed into a deep slumber just before dawn."

"Oh! " I puffed.

"Anthony, I awoke with wet underwear the next morning. Am I going to hell?"

“Calm down, Danny. It was just a dream. It didn’t mean anything. You aren’t damned and you aren’t going to hell.”

By 1940, all our brothers were in the service and I headed off to Marine boot camp; Danny was heading off to college. Ms. Wright, the spinster schoolmarm, came through and arranged for the darling boy to attend a Divinity school in Dallas. I hadn’t shipped out yet and my mom was distressed when she and Ms. Wright met.

“I’ve given four sons to Uncle Sam,” mom said. “And I don’t want to lose my baby boy to them as well.”

Ms. Wright agreed, lamenting, “Your son is too special and shouldn’t become fodder for the upcoming war.”

Quietly eavesdropping in the next room, I thought at the time, *‘Am I chopped liver?’*

Ms. Wright continued, “I have arranged for Daniel to attend a six-year Divinity College near Dallas. He’ll graduate with a Master’s degree and hopefully any war, if FDR can’t keep us out of the fighting, will be over and won before then.”

My mom, still fretting, asked, “What about the costs? We’re poor farmers.”

“The church will pay tuition, room and board for the school terms. Danny can work in the defense plants during the summer and week-ends and stay at the YMCA downtown when school is out,” Ms. Wright replied, calming my mother’s fears.

Later, mama confided in me her dream for our Danny: after graduation, Danny could return home and take over for the aging vicar, settle down with Mary and make beautiful grand babies for her.

'Yep, chopped liver,' I thought to myself.

I went off to boot camp and later the beaches of the south Pacific, after Pearl was attacked. Danny, in his letters to me, spoke of school, the YMCA and the defense plant work. His buddies found a local watering hole, Delaney's, for week-ends. In some of the letters, Danny confided that the prom night demons still bedeviled him. He tried to study, work until exhaustion, and then collapse asleep at the end of the day. He even limited his beers, less temptation overcame him. Not even his nightly prayers to God to exorcise the demons seemed to be working.

During the war, I dodged bullets and Japs, island-hopping the eastern Pacific as an aircraft mechanic. But, I was still alive. My older brothers had died earlier—one in the RAF before America got into the fight, one on the USS Nevada, trying to stream out of Pearl in '41, and the third on D-Day on Gold Beach in '44. They all returned home to be buried in the family dirt, out back on a low knoll, where earlier an older brother who died in a farming accident in '38 and our two younger sisters who succumbed to Dirt Pneumonia during the Dust Bowl also rested eternally.

The last letter I got from Danny was in the late Spring of '45 before our push onto Okinawa. He had just gotten an Uncle Sam letter informing him of his draft upon graduation. He would have to report to Fort Benning, for boot and 6 months OCS before being shipped out to southern Germany, assigned as a chaplain with an airborne division. Danny said he and a couple grads were going to go to Delaney's for a blow-out celebration and to hell with his limits (stating he felt he had finally repressed his demons, dismissed them as adolescent angst and were mostly forgotten). He'd raise one for me. A later letter from my mom, postmarked late April, stated that Danny had gone missing. I could still make out the tear stains on my mom's letter pages.

September, 1945. The war won, I was discharged and sent home. Coming in under the Golden Gate, I cried at the sight and the thought that I 'd made it home safe. But new marching orders from my mom awaited me when I arrived home to Kansas: "Go find your baby brother and bring him home."

A Marine buddy's uncle, a detective with the Dallas Police Force, uncovered a police report about a bar scrap around that night in Dallas, involving a 24 year old Caucasian male at the DeSoto bar, but the John Doe's whereabouts had been unknown after the arrest. Together, the detective and I started to piece together what happened the night Danny disappeared. The Divinity school recalled the students heading

off to Delaney's. The bartender recalled Danny was way beyond his usual limit, feeling no pain. He remembered they were going bar-hopping, to check out DeSoto's, a dive in the seedier part of town, two blocks up from the train station. They had mentioned they wanted to see what all the hushed ado was about. Uncovering that fact, the detective nodded knowingly, and we headed first to DeSoto's and then back to his squad room. There, he told me to go back to my hotel and he'd have the whole 'skinny' in the A.M.

The next day, bleary-eyed and sad-looking, the detective knocked on my door, entered the room and asked that I sit down. He started his report: He knew DeSoto's was a 'Dorothy Boy' hangout, and that the very night Danny went there, Dallas' finest had busted the place, roused all the degenerates and shut down the bar for a few weeks. A buddy of a buddy remembered the bust. A kid was discovered in the john, with his pants down to his knees, being serviced by a Dorothy boy, who was humming 'God Bless America.' Using their batons, Dallas' finest proceeded to beat the living crap out of the SOBs and then dragged their puny asses out into the back alley. Later still the two arresting officers returned to the back alley, to 'convert' the kid back to the righteous way. After a break, returning to their dastardly work, they found Danny dead. They conveniently lost his wallet and waived the autopsy on the John Doe and then the cops buried their

immoral act in a potter's field west of the city. The detective gave me directions to the field.

I followed the directions and arrived at the new City Dump. I rechecked my directions. Then I hailed one of the dump workers and asked where the old potter's grave was. He responded that I was standing on it.

I looked around, stunned. Suddenly, though a gristly, battle-toughened Marine sergeant, I couldn't stop bawling. My legs gave way and I fell to the ground. I just sat there, sobbing for all my dead siblings, with the sobering thought that I alone survived.

After what seemed like hours, I felt intense rage rise, shaking me to the bone. I stood and screamed: "*Dammit, Danny, your future was planned!* You survived the Depression, the Dust Bowl, even skirting the war. Your brothers died to keep you safe! Hell, I've fought all my life to keep you safe! You were mom's dreams! We didn't deserve this, baby brother!

My voice echoed in the dump's canyons and then also died off. Suddenly spent, sullen, I turned my back to the scene, burdened with the realization of the next task at hand. I needed to return home to tell my mother I was her golden boy once again, and that Danny wouldn't be coming home, not even to the knoll.

Michael Beck

Billy the Sheep

PROLOGUE

My fraternal twin brother Martin thinks I'm a sheep. Like, an actual sheep.

CHAPTER 1

Liebe ist für alle da

But before I get into all the sheep shit, both figuratively and literally, I need to explain a few things first. I mean the last thing I want to do is write a whole damn book, but I have to. I'm an English major and this stupid fucking book, memoir rather, is for my senior thesis to get my Bachelor's Degree. I honestly had no idea what to write an *entire book* about, so I figured I'd just wing it. Better that than write a boring paper on *Pride and Prejudice*. At least no matter how shitty this book will be, it will always be better than *Pride and Prejudice*, so I got that going for me. Just kidding. I know you love *Pride and Prejudice*, Professor Williams, that's why I'm giving you shit for it. Anyway, I'm writing this book about this ridiculous, upsetting, and stupid topic otherwise known as my freshman year in college. As my thesis. And I'm paying money to do this???

Okay, time to come clean. I guess I need to be honest with you if I'm going to be telling you about all this stuff. It wouldn't make any sense to write a whole book and to make everything up for it. Who in

their right mind would do that? But yeah, to be honest, I don't have to pay for my college tuition; my parents pay for it. So basically my parents are paying thousands and thousands of dollars to some bureaucratic institution of snobby intellectuals, just so that I can write this book, and for my efforts I'll get a grade in the form of a fucking letter and an eventual piece of paper with my name and the school's name on it, and get to shake the president of the university's hand. And that's it. Doesn't that all just sound insanely ridiculous when you break it down and think about it?

Oh also, before I go into other things, I should explain the title of this chapter. *Liebe ist für alle da*. Before you go to Google Translate to see if you can figure out what it means, I'll just tell you. It's German for "love is there for everyone." And it's the title of a song I'm currently listening to. It's a song by the German metal band Rammstein. Wolfgang introduced me to them, and they are super badass.

Anyway, "love is there for everyone." The song, from my understanding of the lyrics I read on Google, is about how messed up love is and how love isn't actually there for everyone, even though people would like to think it is. There's more to the song, but I won't go into detail right now because Rammstein is kind of messed up. Plus I probably have no idea what I'm talking about. So I think I should probably ask Wolfgang about his interpretation of the song. He is German after all. But more on that later.

CHAPTER 2

ADHD

Also, if you haven't noticed, I kind of have ADHD. I don't know if I *actually* have ADHD, but I feel like I do. And I'm sure you will probably think I do too. I mean I'm writing a book and I basically haven't even said anything of value yet. And the so-called "writing gurus" with their *How to Sell Out and Write a "Bestseller" by Being Generic and Following My Bad Advice* books and more nonsense talk about how you have to grab the reader in the first few pages. But I always go off on all these tangents that are seemingly unrelated... and potentially stupid. And it's really hard to sit here and do this. I keep minimizing Microsoft Word to go on YouTube and watch videos of cats or I leave completely and drive to Chipotle to get some Pibb Xtra soda, my all-time favorite drink (and no, it's *not* like Dr. Pepper or Cherry Coke, it's so much better). All in all, it's probably really annoying to read this, but oh well.

Anyway, let me explain a few things (finally), so you have some sense of what's going on. Oh and also, when I say "you" I'm basically referring to you, Professor Williams. I'm only writing this stupid book for my major and you're the only one who will read it since you're my advisor and will be the one who grades it. Who else would want to read this book anyway? And I'm sure you'll hate it. But please just give me at

least a C-, the lowest possible passing grade. How hard is it to just write one little letter? You just click on my name in your little Excel grading sheet and type a 'C'. I just typed it and it was easy as fuck. But the least you could do is pass me. I mean I'm the one who has to write this whole damn book. And I mean I'm *paying* you aren't I?

Okay fine. My *parents* are paying the school, which then pays you.

Oh, I forgot to ask. Is it inappropriate to swear in this book? I mean I think I've already dropped the F-bomb a few times. If it's not appropriate then I'm sorry... However... I think it should be allowed. History professors in college teach us about innocent children in Vietnam who were burned by napalm by American pilots. But a swear word and a pair of boobs are totally off limits in our society??? You can show people killing each other in PG-13 movies like *Taken 7: Taken One Last Time* starring Liam Neeson, but if you show one nipple: "OMG THIS SCARS MY CHILD, WE NEED TO BAN THIS."

Don't even get me started on those psycho religious parents who think *Harry Potter* is a book for sinning devil-worshippers.

CHAPTER 3

The Actual Start of the Fucking Book

My name is Jerry. Jerry Shepherd. It's an all-around stupid name. I don't know why my parents named me Jerry. It's like an old

man's name from the 1930s, and I'm only 22 years old. That might surprise you. I'm sure I sound like some annoying little angsty teenager who took a quick break from one of the *Call of Duty* videogames to write this. Maybe since I sound like an annoying little kid this should be a Young Adult book? Sound good, Professor Williams? But wait, if it's a YA book, then I probably can't say drop all these F-bombs in it... Also I don't know what type of genre this should be. It's a memoir obviously, but I don't know if it's a tragedy, a comedy, or just a piece of crap. Maybe I'll know when it's finished. So far I think it's going to be a combination of a tragedy, a comedy (I'm not funny, but Fred sure is), a coming-of-age story, and a love story, with maybe a few action scenes thrown in.

P.S. Don't worry about who Fred is yet. I'll tell you later.

Anyway, I figure I'll start this book at the beginning. Well not the *very* beginning. The book is already boring enough; I don't need to also talk about my entire childhood. Besides, all that shit pales in comparison to what happened to me in college. And that's what this book is about. And just as a heads up, this book revolves around me, my brother, and my friends. So there are like no super cool explosions, no exciting adventures, no guns, no boobs (well not too many), and we're not going to save the world. So that might disappoint some people. I mean I didn't think that would disappoint you Professor Williams. You always talk about Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre*, and *A Passage to India*, so

you're obviously okay reading boring books without explosions anyway. Just kidding.

CHAPTER 4

Are these chapters too short?

I'm already on Chapter 4 and I'm only a few pages in. Fuck it. Kids these days with their short attention spans probably need hella short chapters anyway.

Before I say anything else, I just want to put this out there. This book might offend you, Professor Williams. But in all the creative writing classes I've taken from you, they can be summed up with two rules. You've drilled these into us since day one. And I happen to agree with you 100%. I'm sure you're surprised that I actually agree with you on something.

Professor Williams' Two-ish Most Important Creative Writing

Rules:

1. Write from your heart
2. Never write for anyone else
 - a. Never write what you think other people will like, just for the money or to get published.

And here are my responses to your rules:

1. I'm definitely writing from my heart. This whole book

2. is about things that happened to me, Martin, and my friends. And it all deeply affected me and us, and I'm quite passionate about it.

3. Why would I write for someone else? I actually hope that the people I talk about in this book don't read it. A lot of people would be super pissed off at me. Especially Vicky.

a. *Clearly* I'm not writing to get published. I think that's obvious.

So there you go. I'm following your rules; you can't get mad at me.

Anyway, back to the book. I was born on October 24th, 1992 (so at the time of my writing this in 2015, I'm 22 years old). Also, it might be a surprise to you, but I'm a twin. (I don't think you know my twin personally though, Professor Williams.)

My fraternal twin brother Martin was born just a few minutes before me. This would be a defining characteristic of our relationship, and of our entire lives. Martin always finished first, always had a one-up on me, and always got what he wanted before I did (if I got what I wanted or needed at all).

The only time our relationship was actually *decent* was when we were toddlers. I mean we weren't developed enough to understand what was going on. Once Martin's brain developed, he realized that he would no longer be a brother to me.

Our parents raised us the best they could. I mean Dave and Becca (that's my dad and my mom) fucked up royally. Like that one time my dumb dad Dave dropped Martin on his head on the hardwood dining room floor, but whatever. And as you'll come to understand later, they treated us both quite differently. If they had treated us like equals, and if we actually liked each other, then maybe all this would never have happened and there'd be no book. I'd probably be writing my English thesis on *Pride and Prejudice* right now.

As Martin and I grew up, we continued to play together less and less. Like I said, when we were babies and toddlers, we'd play on the floor together, stare at the same floating mobile together in our cribs, etc. You get the idea.

But everything started to change when we were about five years old. Well, when Martin turned five years old three minutes before me. It all started with one little push. When Martin pushed me down, hard, to the hardwood floor (the same one that Dave dropped Martin's head on a few years back) was the day that changed the course of our lives. I ran away crying and Martin didn't get in trouble. And boom, a perpetual relationship dynamic was born.

This trend continued as we grew up. Martin would harass me, bully me, be a total dick, and all the while my parents turned the other way. I don't know why. I guess they just like Martin more. But I don't know. My therapist doesn't know why either.

Just kidding.

I'm sure my therapist has some idea.

Anyway, I retreated into my bedroom night after night, and kept my emotions to myself. In other words, I hid them, avoided meeting other people, and grew even farther apart from Martin and my parents. My parents thought I was just weird, and even had me meet with a child psychologist. They thought I had Asperger's (not even kidding - and *NO* the doctor did *NOT* think that I had Asperger's, by the way). Shows how much faith my parents had in me, they were quick to just categorize me as having Asperger's. Martin had always been sociable, charismatic, outgoing, charming, motivated, attractive, etc. I didn't satisfy any of those above requirements to being accepted into society, or even accepted into my own family. So instead I get labeled as having Asperger's. And because people treated me this way, it's probably the reason why I grew up to become an asshole, or at the very least, annoying.

CHAPTER 5

A Defense Mechanism due to Insecurities known as "Trying to be Cool"

Hahaha. I'm sitting here laughing. I'm totally picturing you Professor Williams, sitting at your oak desk in your office reading this book. I can perfectly imagine the reactions on your face as you read all

this shit. I bet when you got our class's thesis submissions, you'd never have expected to be reading an English thesis quite like this, right? Even if you give me a bad grade, I'm looking forward to your thoughts. It makes writing this actually *somewhat* enjoyable.

Anyway, back to the story. Let me summarize my middle and high school years for you Professor Williams. I guess they're kind of relevant, but not important enough for me to spend much time on. So they'll get like five paragraphs. But hopefully it gives you a bit of context.

The bullying that I received from Martin, and all the other kids in school, had a significant impact on me. I also realize that it makes me somewhat contradictory. I was a shut-in who spent most of my time playing videogames and I had no friends. However, it also drove me to try extra hard when I *was* in public (i.e. school) to fit in. Some nerds and social outcasts avoid other kids at school like the plague. They go to class, never raise their hand, never socialize, go to the library at breaks and lunch, etc. I, however, was a unique case (or at least I'd like to think I was). The rejection and bullying I received from everyone made me want to be accepted even more. In other words, I desperately tried to be cool. My therapist tells me it was a defense mechanism due to my insecurities.

I thought that if I could be cool, then I'd fit in, and people would like me, and then I would eventually achieve self-actualization and all

that other Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs bullshit. But as anyone who spent time in middle and high school knows, you can't just *become cool*. You can't just wake up one morning and think "I'm going to fit in and be accepted by my peers today!" Being cool requires good genetics (i.e. being born attractive), being manipulative, being confident in oneself, being rich, being charismatic, or just plain being lucky (arguably the most important one being confident). And if it's not yet clear, I was none of those things. And had zero confidence.

As aforementioned, Martin was born lucky. It's rotten shit luck that my fraternal twin brother was born tall and handsome, and I was born with a flabby body and awkward-looking face, and an even more awkward personality. Have you ever seen a pair of twins who vary greatly in attractiveness? It's fucked up, man. And I know I'm not the only one out there. There was another set of twins that Martin and I went to elementary school with. Natalie Steinberg was super hot, was a cheerleader, and was absurdly popular. Meredith Steinberg, on the other hand, was... none of those things. I always felt kind of bad for her... But obviously not as bad as I felt for myself.

So long story short, I desperately tried to be cool. But I'm writing this with 20/20 hindsight. At the time, I thought that if you acted differently you could fit in and be cool. But I already had a reputation of acting like an awkward idiot, so I figured, hey, I'll just change how I dress.

As I soon found out, dressing like a football jock, does *not* make you a football jock. And did I stop there? Of course not. I tried to dress like a bookworm, emo, goth, prep, redneck, hippie, yuppie, etc. etc. Lastly, I tried dressing like a nerd, and even though I kind of *was* a nerd too, I still couldn't fit in with even the nerds! Who knows why, you never know with those nerdy kids, they're weird.

Eventually I just gave up. And there I was, sitting awkwardly at a lunch table saying "Yo" to all the cool kids and getting no response. And all the while Martin continued to be one of the most popular kids in school. Let me give you an example. One time in middle school, I went into the bathroom at break. I pushed open the door to one of the stalls, and there was Martin, getting a handjob from Nicole Steeler, the most popular girl in school. And this was in 7th grade!! Martin was everything I wished I could be. And I had to fucking be around him and listen to how amazing his life was both at school *and* at home.

CHAPTER 6

Yet Another Example of My Absurd Stupidity

So I need to address the elephant in the room. It's possible you noticed it, or maybe since my book sucks you weren't paying close attention. But that's okay.

So the elephant in the room is: if I hate my brother so much, why the fuck would I choose to go to the same college as him? Well,

even if the title of this chapter leads you to believe that it was all my stupidity, part of it was my parents wanting us to go to the same school. But another part of it was my choice too. I honestly don't exactly know why I applied to the same school as him. My parents' pressure aside, maybe it was me trying to make a point, or prove myself? Maybe I had some optimism, deep down inside myself, that my brother and I would finally get along? I honestly don't know, Professor Williams. I just don't know.

Regardless, the decision was made in the spring of 2011, and there I was, getting ready to go off to college with my brother. And it made me sick to my stomach.

Colton Miller

Mary Sparrow's Flight

The following morning, after Isabella left for the hospital, Mary ventured out into the Malasana neighborhood, where she saw old men playing chess at a small table beside the courtyard garden.

She purchased a café con leche and watched them in the sunshine. They wore black wool berets and took long drags on their cigarettes as they considered their next moves.

When she realized she'd been staring at them for about 20 minutes she felt as if she'd wandered onto another planet. She pulled a map of Madrid's Metro from her purse and found the route to the Prado, Madrid's famed national art museum beside the enormous royal gardens.

Shortly afterward she arrived at the massive stone building and headed directly downstairs to the permanent exhibit of Francisco Goya's works.

The carnal, ugly images of demons, debauched clergy and souls burning in hell felt oddly comforting. Here were images of destruction found on the walls of Goya's private home after his death, perhaps never intended for the public.

These nightmarish images felt familiar, direct from the terrors of childhood: Father Time Cronos eating the doll-like figure of his son, blood flowing from the decapitated torso. A goat drooled over a circle of women (were they nuns?) who sat around him in the forest, A scholar flopped unconscious over his desk, bats wheeling over his drugged body.

Feeling light-headed, she left the lower gallery and went up wide, cool marble stairs to the upper floors where she found the famous *Maja Desnuda*, the portrait of (perhaps) Goya's benefactor's naked mistress. Relaxed on a couch, the *Maja* looks directly out at the world with a gaze that is far from demure. In the early 19th century, this painting shocked the world as she flashes just the tiniest bit of dark curls below her milky white tummy.

At just this moment, Mary heard a familiar cough behind her.

"Ah, Mary Sparrow," said Senor Felipe Huesos, clearing his throat at the end of that familiar cough and smiling a sparkling smile at her.

There was a large woman in a red dress on his arm. Despite her nod to the fashions of the city she looked like she would be just as comfortable pulling up potatoes in a field as strolling through the Prado on a weekday. She looked like she'd be at ease anywhere.

“Allow me to present to you Dona Pepita Risuena. She dances with me at Las Meninas and is a guest instructor at Amor de Dios.”

“Encantada,” said Mary, standing up a bit straighter in Pepita’s shadow.

“Charmed, as well, Senorita Sparrow,” replied Pepita, giving her a kiss on both cheeks.

“I see you have been downstairs admiring Goya’s terrible Caprichos,” Felipe clucked. “Now let’s proceed to Velasquez’ ‘Las Meninas’, which is the namesake of our club and an uplifting masterpiece.”

And so they entered the cavernous gallery that featured the 17th century painter of the Spanish Golden Age, Diego Velasquez. A self-portrait of sorts, as Velasquez is shown in front of his easel painting the royal couple, who are reflected in a mirror on the back wall of the room. The dynamic charge of the 10’ X 10’ painting is the presence of the small royal princess at the center, flanked by her two young ladies in waiting, the meninas of the title. Two dwarves and a dog play with her. A man stands framed in the doorway to the salon, observing the scene.

“How real they are!” said Felipe.

Mary agreed, adding, “It’s like a portal into another time.”

To which Pepita laughed, saying, “But it is, *mi amor!*”

Pepita had taken petite Mary by the arm and was alternately pinching her cheeks and chatting with her in rapid-fire Spanish. As Mary tried to keep up with the flow of conversation she found herself enjoying Pepita’s radiant self-confidence.

“And now, my charming friends,” said Felipe, “Let us go to the Plaza Mayor and then, later, to Las Meninas!”

Intrigued to see her new friends on the stage, Mary accepted Felipe’s invitation, boarding a taxi with them to go into the heart of the city.

Long late-afternoon shadows filled the enormous 17th century plaza. Ground floor cafes featured outdoor seating and above them, on all four sides, were floors of apartments with balconies looking down onto the center of the space.

The white steel folding chairs of the cafes looked like origami birds clustered in the corners of the plaza. Only a few tourists, unaware of the civilized Spanish custom of the siesta, sat at the small white tables.

“Here is where the Inquisition conducted public executions. You know, burning infidels and witches,” said Felipe, ever the cheery guide, even when the subject was torture.

“That was a long time ago,” Pepita added, frowning at Felipe.

“Let’s have a café, then show Mary the pre-show rehearsal at the tablao”

“*Fabuloso,*” agreed Pepita.

So they sat at the nearest café table they could find and Mary admired the beautiful facades of the apartments, each with a view of the executioner’s block.

Later as they emerged from the plaza and headed towards the low, dark tavern of Las Meninas, Mary felt herself entering a timeless world. They walked down a street with potted red geraniums in window boxes to a door with a golden cube of light shining through it. A long-limbed black haired woman threw open the door and swooped down on Felipe.

“*Vaya, Tio,*” she growled. “It’s about time you came back!”

Pepita gave her a nod and sailed past her holding onto Mary.

“*Tranquila, Carla,*” said Felipe. “We are here now.”

Mary looked back at her wondering what had caused such upset as Carla pouted and flounced as only a 6’ tall flamenco dancer in full costume can do. After a brief trembling rage at the door of Las Meninas,

she strolled back inside the bar, and whispered curses to a wild-haired man wearing a dark purple keffiyeh.

Later, as the stage darkened, a solitary man came on. In his seventies, devoid of any fancy dancer plumage, he took off his black gypsy porkpie hat and tilted back his head to sing, like a big, gawky bird. What came out of his mouth was the pulsing chant of Andalucia, the song of mourning, the song of love.

“This is the ‘cante jondo’, “ commented Felipe. “The deep song.”

And in the ululating baritone voice that was almost, but not quite, sobbing, Mary felt some of her own grief slip away; the grief she had carried with her for thousands of miles and a few decades, too.

Grief, like silver beads flowing off of a broken string, pooled one by one around her. This grief, that loss, that loss, that grief. This apology. The door slammed in your face. That person that laughed at you. How Life laughed at you. How the list goes on.

Linda Sonrisa

Supporting this magazine

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Thank you for reading *Scheherazade*,

Henry Marchand

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