

Desert Voices

The Literary Magazine of Palo Verde College

Spring 2009

Volume 7

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Desert Voices is a literary magazine produced by the Language Arts and Communications Division of Palo Verde College.

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About Our Publication

Desert Voices publishes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry that best reflects life in the American Southwest. Palo Verde College and its Language Arts and Communication Studies Division produce the literary magazine for the Palo Verde Valley, which is located along the Colorado River on the California-Arizona border. We dedicate our publication to providing an opportunity for published and unpublished writers to share their voices and style. Our publication has one issue each year in the spring. Distribution is limited to our local and regional communities. Writers whose works appear in *Desert Voices* will receive two complimentary issues.

For information about submission to *Desert Voices*, please see Submissions at the end of this publication.

Essence of Spring

Poetry

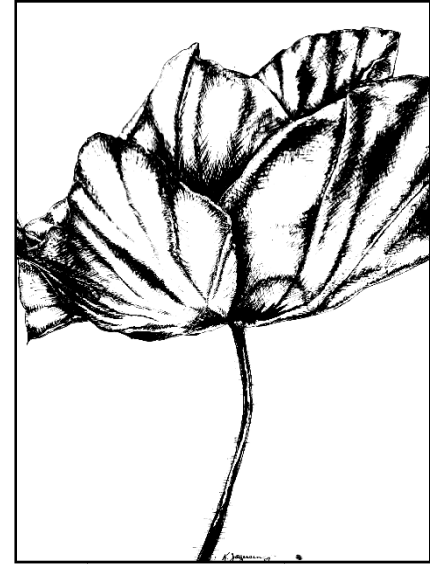
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Poetry

John Lovik

La Censura

Fue buena suerte
que nací en los EE. UU.
Cuando quise hablar
pero busqué la censura
(la cabrón)
necesité solamente hablar
palabras sin inglés.

Censorship

*It was good luck
that I was born in the United States.
When I wanted to speak
but found censorship
(the bastard)
I needed only to speak
words without English.*

Kiran Prasad

Final Resting Place

Ancient remains of trees lie before me
Scattered and torn
Like carcasses at the end of a battle.
On the earth that once nourished them,
Then buried them under layers of silica and volcanic ash.
Many lie there still—
Three hundred feet deep.
Erosion has exposed the prehistoric logs.
Some peep partially out of the ground
Like tombstones
Marbled and cold to the touch.
Stained with the mineral-rich colors of
Mustard, mint, rust, black and crystal-white.
Their bark rough and ossified.
Now a path leads to their final resting place.
The sanctity
Eroded by tourism.

John Sibley Williams

Preparing for Fire

The juniper attacked us from behind
as a lover might, silk-handed,
and off-guard we swaggered drunkenly
back to campfire, as if facing the smell
would dull its charms
and return our distracted conversation
to things mighty, abstract, and unseen
waiting for us over the next sandstone wall.

Each twig we cast sparked infinitesimal fireworks
like dying candle spit
like fireflies adding themselves to the sun,
and the light did not war against the darkness
but lifted us with it
to where, though unseen,
it could still be felt.

Dreams of junipers began to trickle over
the faint of heart, those simple enough
to gaze upon a fire and be warm,
leaving me alone
just outside its perfect halo
boasting brashly to a gathering of stones,
geckos, and broken ceramic pots
that though smaller than a juniper spark
I'd not be taken quietly,
fondling my words like a sword, distracted-
savage Ares speculating aloud to statues of himself
where the blood goes in peacetime.

John Sibley Williams

In the Western Night

Blue sparks raining from the sky
as if from two great metals clashing,
and a scream swallowing itself.
A half-dead mare, the half that bears its soul.
If argued correctly, the other half, they claim,
cannot also suffer.
Flies gather round its groin.
Metals clash, blue sparks,
and the shoe slips on, unnoticed.

And in my heart German shepherds
tempering the prairie wind
by gnashing their teeth
and pouncing upon the slightest sound.
And every sound a distinct fear,
every barn door rusting out, creaking,

and yet there is comfort
in condensing all life into a moment
and waiting for the next,
which this time will be it- it
and yet nothing like it-
like being the author and the poem
and fearing which will longer endure.

In the western night without illusion
the landscape crawled under my shirt
to die.
I still hear the rusting of hinges
and pounce upon every sound,
and still her eyes aglow beside me
spark blue and fall to the sheets,
heavy metals.
We're awaiting another scream
that can swallow itself.

The shoe slips on unnoticed.

Samantha Readman

Know Thyself

Standing at the gate
Too frightened to open it
My mind scared of me

Standing at a wall
A brick wall around heart
Feeling shut away

Beautiful sunset
Nothing on moonless night
Nonexistent me

Lost in feelings
Huge desert sun burning through me
Consuming my heart

Down the path I go
Must I travel past gate?
Turn away too scared

Secure wall and gate
Not ready to show anyone
Not even myself

Same path, different time
Frightened scurry far away
Hide everything

Stephen Maurer

Dog-Days of Diversity in Albuquerque

1

On one side of town
the Catholic sheriff, his saintly wife, 6 kids
have a yapping wiener dog
(born 6-6-06, the canine antichrist).
Buddy charges everyone, snapping and barking,
cowers when petted,
clamped his tiny jaws around the newsboy's Achilles
and had a seizure.
He emerges early morn with the firstborn,
clearing devils from lingering darkness.

A big, snarling three-legged cur, José,
known trouble-maker of unknown pedigree,
battle-scared veteran of coyote wars,
targeted leader of garbage can thieves,
suspected of devouring little dogs,
is a fierce protector of Jesús.
Jesús broods and plots revenge in his cell,
busted and hung-over,
after last night's knife fight,
the skinhead blamed still roaming free.

Intoxicated by power in darkness,
Buddy gets out, prowls and purges lurking shadows,
except a three-legged, salivating specter.
Incensed, Buddy charges.

José slinks inside, drowsy and overfed,
a momentary indigestion expelled as gas.
Drooling on Jesús' bed, he lies twitching,
dreaming of yapping wiener dogs,
and poodles.

2

On the other side of town
a vagrant hound howls,
mournfully infuses a bright autumn day,
disturbing the peace
with a formidable melancholy.

The old Navajo listens, nodding,
prepares for the daily rituals
of a filtered, whitened world.

A pert poodle, Sanakra,
sacred incarnation of Lady Sananda,
has a dog-whisperer,
belongs to a middle-aged new-age divorcé.
Cohabiting meditation space,
vibrational colors fusing in sacred heart-chakra,
they channel evolved spirits of Christian lineage.
Outraged when mistress shares
pelvic-chakra with a new-age man,
she poodle-pees the bed.
Then Sanakra disappeared,
grieved for dead,
flutes and incense brought tears.
Channeling in reverse,
she stays tuned to her mistress,
radio-operator attuned to the ether,
who gives channeled help,
relaying suspicious actions to the sheriff,
guiding communication to worthy deputies.

The old Navajo janitor works for the sheriff,
cleans and arranges in harmony
with laws of nation and state,
longs for a time when things make sense,
the Yaibichai over and balance returned,
Bluebird's song heard by the hound again.

Stephen Maurer

Vectors

For Jeff R.

A little New Mexican town,
after dinner in a Spanish cantina,
my engineer friend, precise and eager,
analyzes the stress-load dynamics
of a cantilevered deck.

I watch flies and moths
circle a hanging candle lamp,
methodically vanish in pungent puffs.
Merging flight patterns clarify their plight.
I observe, "They seem aware of the danger."
"The bright light or cozy warmth?" he wonders,
"maybe they're testing what's safe."
More wink into oblivion.
"Survival doesn't seem to matter," he postulates.
"It does if I'm after them with a swatter" I say.
Taking turns, they wait
an orderly cremation of fellow believers.
"Drawn by some inner logic," he concludes.

Back on topic,
at the apogee of a thought,
he's distracted by a singular vision:
a happily bouncing bosom on display,
gratuity offered with the check
by our young Mexican waitress,
leaning low to whisk away his dirty dishes.

Victoria's secret revealed,
the signaling brown breasts weigh heavily.
He looks to be figuring a spreadsheet,
his keen engineer mind
assessing relevant numbers,
g-forces, load factors, shear consequences;
factoring his model several ways,
calculating the risks;
finally sampling the dirt and coring deeply.

Slightly drunk, probability in mind,
his narrowing eyes return,

again and again and
follow her hypnotically
into the bright kitchen light.

Michele Janko

Desert Past

Chief Cochise died of natural causes in 1874 and was secretly buried in the Dragoon Mountains. Only one white man, his blood brother Thomas Jeffords, and a few Apaches in his band knew of the location. They took that knowledge to their graves.

I hiked to Cochise
His stronghold
Crossing steps
Of the past
The mountains
Of a hidden burial
The breeze
Caressed my face
A presence
Embraced my soul
Rocks echoed
All that was there
And I tingled
From the vibration
Birds sang desert joy
And I heard
The most silent note
My hair lifted
From the wave
Of peace
That flooded
The sandy floor
And as solitude
Soared through the horizon
I felt only sharing
The essence
Of the Spirit
Was there
God was there
And all humanity
That came before.

Emily Williams

I Love You, But I Hate You

Dear Family,

Like any other person, I love you through and through.

When you support me with my choices.

When you give me your utmost attention.

However family,

There are occasions where it's time to be alone.

24 hours of attention is too much for me.

And I'm glad that you agree with me.

My mom,

I love when we can go out of town together.

It's fun and you call it our mother/daughter time.

But unfortunately that time has come to a close.

I no longer have any Orthodontics appointments.

My dad,

Even though you tease me and mock me day and night.

I don't mind. It's fun, plus unavoidable.

It's fun when we play our sports together, all that baseball, basketball, and golf too.

Good times, good times.

That's pretty much our relationship, isn't it?

My brother,

Even though your away at school and never call me, I don't mind.

When you visit, I have fun with you.

The way we talk about nonsense our parents don't understand.

I'm still carrying a silent grudge about that Avril Lavigne concert.

Darn singer, why did she have to be sick?

Skipping a whole week, when I could have been at Disney Land with my class.

Best friend,

I love the way you make me feel.

Visit each other's houses.

Read the same books.

Take the same classes.

But I hate the way I feel guilty, when I don't talk for three months.

To be honest, sometimes I'd rather be at home all day and play on my laptop computer.

Because it's black, pretty and it fits perfectly in my lap.

When I'm secretly annoyed with your presence, that's when things feel awkwardly silent when I'm around you.

But best friend,

I love the way you smile when I say yes to your request.

When you want to see a movie.

Or simply talk and hang out at your house.

But best friend,
Sometimes it's difficult to understand, what you want from me.
When you're annoyed that I don't say enough, or when it's time to call it a day.
But best friend,
Anytime you need me, I will be there.
Just dial the special seven numbers and my voice will answer you.
I just hope I'm not annoyed when you do.
If I'm not there, then leave a message and I'll call you back.
Maybe, but it's not a 100% guarantee and the sad thing is, I'm sure you already know it.

Best friend,
While you're away in at San Bernardino,
It's time for change, I want new friends.
I have decided to have different best friends.
They like what I like.
We like the same books.
We like the same movies.
And we are in the same class.
But don't worry best friend.
You have been in my life since preschool.
Even though I didn't like you until third grade.
I will never forget you.
I wouldn't be able to, even if I wanted to.
School,
I love the way you drill my mind from day to day,
With many different subjects to choose from.
But school,
You make us take so many grueling tests,
That you make us study day and night for.

But school,
I love the diploma that hangs in my room.
The good grades I achieved.
The friends I've made.
But school,
It's never going to end forever.
There's always more to learn and more to achieve.
But school,
I want that knowledge that you have to offer me.
To further myself,
To be prepared for anything that turns my way.

Karate,
I love the way you make me feel,
After a hard days work.
The way you make me think, 'Mind over matter.' I'm beginning to hate that saying.
But karate,
I hate the physical pain I get through you.
The way my arms and thighs burn through your torture.

It takes a week for me to get over you,
Only, to have to deal with you two days later.
But karate,
I love the new things I'm learning from you,
The physical endurance and having the will to fight.
I stretch, punch, kick, and run every time.
But karate,
I hate the tasks you make me do to get it.
Teacher I remember the time you tried to make us do the splits.
I will never forget the punch aimed at my stomach.
When it's boys against girls, I get to go all out.
Teacher, you say to make the boys sweat.
When you want the boys to put their leg over my shoulder while standing,
I make sure it happens the best I can.
Dear everyone,
When it's time to get my revenge, I love you again.
Family, when I return all your teasing with sarcastic comments.
Friends, when I make comments that you think are "smart."
School... Well, yeah, you've just been the one thing I can't avoid.
Karate, when I hurt you boys with my punches. (At least I hope I am.)
He, he, he, it's all fun.

Reshawna Ragels

Omnilife

What do you want, what do you want from me?
This is what I will give you.
A small part of my feelings today.
I want to tell you that my favorite movie is the Boondock Saints.
I want to tell you that I am upset because I haven't seen it for a while.
It makes me feel like I don't matter for a min.
No one cares about my ability to shoot anything.
It was once a dream of mine to become a marksman but will that ever happen?

Okay, I can tell you about my favorite ice cream.
That would be Thrifty's brand and the flavor would be chocolate chip.
Sounds original enough with the important ingredient,
Chocolate.
Thrifty shaves the chocolate.
It makes a difference when the vanilla and chocolate melt in your mouth.
We can also talk about flowers since I mentioned chocolate and videos.
I kind of feel like we are on a date.

Let me tell you,
I am really feeling stressed out.
About class,
About my baby starting her eighth grade of school.
For the second time this year.
I need to be more responsible with my life.
I need not to make any mistakes.
I want to do what I need to do to become a good parent.
Please God, give me the wisdom and patience to be a good parent.
Help me when I need it.
Because sometimes I'm not thinking like I should.
I sometimes get too stressed and raise my voice when I shouldn't.

I know I am spoiled but I spoil myself.
My aunt told me no matter how you feel
You should still get up
Still take a shower
Still go and do whatever you need to do for the day
Well,
Everyday I feel miserable.
Ugly
Ill
Depressed
Tired

Sleepy
Overwhelmed!!!

I will feel beautiful today
Pretty
Nice
Good
Healthy
Smart
Intelligent
Then I can have a good day.

I will not feel brokenhearted
I will not feel abandoned
Or abused
Or neglected
Or disabled

I am getting older everyday that I am here.
I now have my biggest priority, my daughter.
I hope I don't mess up
I hope I can be strong for everybody
Especially her

Please Lord, tell me I can do it
Tell me I can be a good parent
Soften her heart so she knows I love her
Help her to understand in time
That everyday she wasn't with me I thought of her

She is very beautiful
She is very young
She is still my baby
Please help me to be a better parent

I want to be on time to pick her up everyday
I want to always be there for her
Whatever she needs
But I can't and won't over-indulge her
I think I should have the plasma
She has her new lap top
Her "Victoria Pink"
As she named it
Yes, she named her lap top
I can and will finish what I need to do
I will successfully complete all homework
I will not fall behind this semester
I will not procrastinate this semester
I will stay better organized

I will work on my homework everyday

I will finish my household chores as needed
I will do things for my friends so it fits my schedule
I have to do a few things different this time
It is important if I want to be the best
The best at completing my schoolwork
The best at parenting
The best wife
Or, if I can't be the best at these things then,
I want to be good

Everyday I have to plan my time wisely
I have to learn how to say no
I must get all my tasks completed well, and on time
I have to pay attention to my daughter
I have to go outside with her
Maybe ride bikes

I hope the doctor can help me
I don't want to be in pain anymore
He or she can take the x-rays I need
I will get some relief
I will feel better soon
I have to wait two more days
I can do it
I am almost there

Get the phone, call him
He has time for me
He sometimes says I don't make time for him
I have to finish my homework
This is my grade
This is what I am scheduled to do
Please don't make a mistake now

Ava

Small Murmurs

I'm a bystander,
Hidden in the background,
A simple observer,
You'll never notice my passing.

I whisper to myself,
Can you see me?

I keep searching for my clarity,
To understand my being,
Why the turn of events that brought me here,
Mean what they mean.

I whisper to myself,
Do you know why I'm here?

I need to get away,
To a place where I don't have to pretend,
That my life is as carefree as I make it look,
I rarely act like myself.

I whisper to myself,
Do you really know me?

I shout at the top of my voice,
Needing to release,
But hoping no one will hear,
I am quite the coward.

I whisper to myself,
Do you think I'm brave?

Everyone else seems to have it together,
Moving forward so easily,
Natural for them,
I don't have a clue how to move my clumsy feet.

I whisper to myself,
Can you help me walk?

I can't stop looking at my darkest corridor,
It keeps me rooted to the ground,

Solidified forever,
As my biggest fear.

I whisper to myself,
Why to me?

I run to keep up with the world's pace,
But there are lead shoes on my feet,
Slowing me down,
Making it impossible.

I whisper to myself,
Is it suppose to be this difficult?

I was loyal to the core,
It was nice to feel so innocently happy,
And relaxed but those feelings,
Don't always last.

I whisper to myself,
Do you feel like a monster?

Happy smiles and light moods,
Just like that time before,
Everything went to crap,
I feel a little better now.

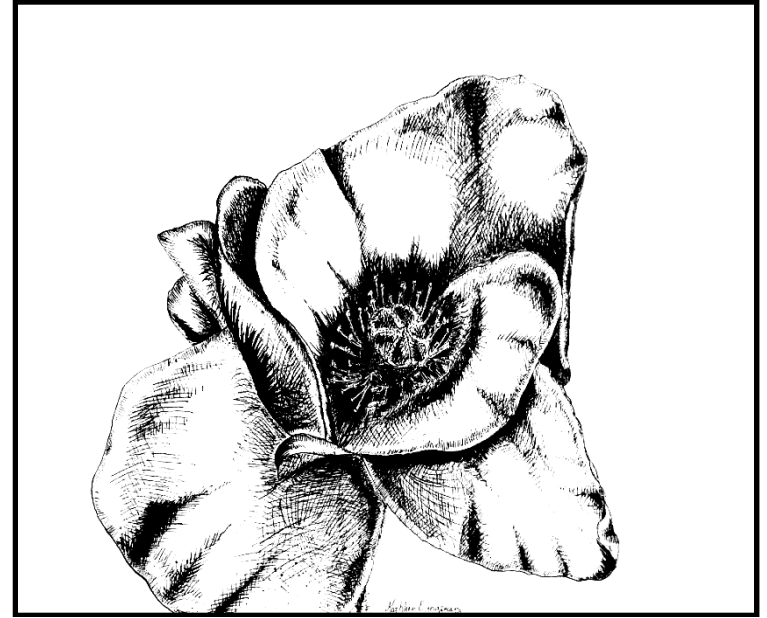
I whisper to myself,
It's not so bad.

Time to pull my own weight,
Doing my best to improve,
And build over the rubble,
That I was once lying under.

I whisper to myself,
It almost killed me.

Crying on my shoulder,
Like an infant child,
Being denied of happiness,
I'm the stronger one now.

I whisper to myself,
Did you really use to be my hero?



Essay

Nose Job

When I was 13 I broke my nose for the second time. I was horsing around with a kid named Danny Basset, and when he threw his arm across his face to protect his eyeglasses from my raised fist, my schnozz made contact with his right elbow at the wrong angle.

I knew immediately that I was in big trouble. Blood gushed forth so suddenly and in such huge amounts that I wound up swallowing a lot of it. After ingesting what seemed like a quart, I finally began to throw it up.

Later that evening I was taken to the emergency room. By this time my nose had finally stopped spewing, and I had stopped puking. While I was lying face-up on the X-ray table, the technician decided to flip my head to the side in order to get a great “profile” shot of my nose. This made my nose gush once again. The X-ray tech wasn’t happy about the mess, but neither was I.

I was told that I needed to see a specialist about getting my nose fixed. I wasn’t too clear about what needed fixing. However, I couldn’t get an appointment for three days, so by the time I saw the doctor, my nose had already started to heal. He told me he had to rebreak the bone and reset it, or else I’d have trouble breathing. The doc had me sit in a dentist’s-type chair where I was strapped in. (It turned out this was for his benefit, not mine. He probably knew from prior experience that he’d need protection from his patient.) After giving me a few sips of a liquid that was supposed to relax me, the doctor approached my sore nose with what looked like a pair of huge pliers. He stuffed this instrument up my nostrils, performed some sort of highly technical procedure – which hurt like hell – and made my nose bleed some more. While all this was going on, tears were running down my cheeks. He wasn’t sympathetic.

When the doctor was done “specializing” on me, I was fitted with a protective metal plate that was supposed to let people know that I had a broken nose. If you’ve ever had a busted snout, you’ll know that it’s hard to hide. People with broken noses immediately develop two glorious shiners, which eventually turn all sorts of colors as the bruising fades from black to brown to green to orange to yellow. I was told that since there’s no way to put a cast on a human face, I’d have to wear this silver piece of metal for three weeks. They didn’t really expect the plate to protect my sensitive schnozz, but they hoped that it would keep me from bumping into things – and prevent people from bumping into me. So I left the ear-nose-and-throat doctor’s office with a piece of metal taped to my face, all the while wondering how I was going to get through my school day unscathed.

The nose plate was made out of what I think was aluminum and was about an inch wide at the top where it rested on my forehead. It ran down the bridge of my nose and flared out slightly, just covering my nostrils. The inside of the plate was coated with a very thin piece of white foam rubber-like material that was attached to the metal. This rubbery stuff was the part that touched my skin. Attaching this thing to my face was the tricky part; the doctor used two pieces of super sticky tape. One piece of tape was placed across my forehead above my eyebrows. The other

piece ran from one cheek, across the nose plate, and was anchored on the other cheek.

I suppose a young boy might have been able to muster some courage to go out in public by pretending this monstrosity was part of a Greek warrior's armor. It did—except for the color—sort of look like the nosepiece of an ancient helmet. However, I was an eighth-grade girl in the throes of adolescent angst over boys and popularity, and I really didn't want to be seen as any sort of warrior at all.

I first realized how truly awful the next three weeks were going to be as I walked down the school's main hallway the next morning. Kids passing by all stopped and stared gape-mouthed. "Hey! Whatsa matta with your *face*?" they cried, over and over. "Didcha break it, or what?" In each of my classes, I found myself explaining – briefly – that I really wasn't the Man in the Iron Mask, and no, it wasn't a Halloween costume, and unlike the guy who got his nose bitten off in the movie *Cat Ballou*, I really did still have mine under the plate. I then noticed that it was only lunchtime, and I was going to have to survive running the gauntlet of the cafeteria line and all of my afternoon classes as well.

The weeks drearily wore on for me, but the other kids at Eliot Jr. High seemed to relish seeing this weird girl with a shiny silver attachment on her face. Boys would stop me in the hall and use the reflection of the metal as a mirror so they could comb their hair. One girl even asked me to hold still while she touched up her mascara. I remember seeing the wand brushing over her eyelashes just inches from my own. Her mouth formed an "O" as she professionally flicked her wrist to apply the cosmetic, all the while staring at, yet not really seeing, my nose—and all without blinking once.

As if having kids use my face as a mirror wasn't humiliating enough, I developed a head cold while wearing the damned thing. Blowing my nose (which was still packed full of gauze up to my sinuses) was not possible. Not only did I not want to force a blast of air through my tender proboscis, there was no way I could hold onto my nose with a Kleenex. The snot would seep around the gauze and ooze its way down to my nostrils. All day long I sort of dabbed at the septum, surreptitiously sneaking the wad of tissue up close to the faucet. I already sounded weird when I spoke because I couldn't breathe through my beak. Now I sounded like Elmer Fudd talking under water.

After almost three weeks of being the butt of hourly jokes and rude comments, I found out how truly thin-skinned I was. My face started to fall off. I developed a reaction to the tape holding the nose plate on my face. The skin under the tape first developed small bumps, then turned a delicate chartreuse, and finally started to slough off. Pretty soon the tape started to come unstuck because the skin underneath was peeling away. Teenage acne is supposed to be bad, but this was ridiculous.

Fortunately, none of these horrific conditions turned out to be permanent. After what seemed an eternity, my sinuses finally unclogged themselves, the plate was taken off, my glorious shiners faded, and the skin on my face grew back. I was relieved to find that I had successfully passed through the purgatory of the temporarily ultra-weird and returned to my place – albeit near the bottom – within the eighth grade pecking order.

David Lee

Laugh Until It Hurts

One of the lessons that was drilled into my psyche from my earliest recollections by both my Mother and the so-called "Sisters of Mercy" at the catholic grammar school I attended was that everything was not funny. For the longest time, I begged to differ and paid the price -- for that difference of opinion -- along the way.

In the summer of 1983, I was 22 years old. The things that defined me until that point -- athletics and school, and most definitely in that order -- were both over. Both were left incomplete, which at times I just had to shake my head at and laugh, especially when I considered the other option.

On a late Friday afternoon that summer, I found myself where I often found myself; sitting on a barstool at the Main Tavern, the local dive bar of choice. It was after work as I sat there with the three guys I grew up with, Ted, Mike, and Jack. If we had anything in common besides the neighborhood where we grew up, a current tendency to underachieve, a taste for the illicit mind bending treats of the day and the desire to imbibe our time away at the bar, it was to laugh. We put a lot of energy into trying to make one another laugh. If it were possible to time something, so as to make someone spray beer out their nose, well, that was as high a pinnacle of achievement as we were interested in accomplishing. These guys were not stupid. All three were advance placement calculus guys in high school, gone wrong. They found more purpose and satisfaction in laughing than plotting graphs on a linear plane through the manipulation of polynomial equations; or something like that. I was the dumb jock; they were in charge of math. I was funny enough -- at least to them -- so I joined them at the bar, and pretty much everywhere else they went too.

On the Friday afternoon -- in my memory -- we sat at the bar verbally jousting, waiting for something to point us in a direction to move. I read from that day's New York Daily News sports section. I found the newspaper to be a good place to peruse for material. "Did you guys know the America's Cup yacht racing is getting underway tomorrow in Newport, Rhode Island?" Sometimes that was all the sign we needed.

Three hours later the four of us were in my brown, 1975 Plymouth Fury station wagon, fighting the tail end of New York City rush hour traffic as we crawled east over the George Washington Bridge enroute to 'The Cup Races'. In back, a cooler the size of King Tut's coffin full with beer and ice; in the front, under the passenger seat, a first-aid kit stocked with enough provisions and fortification to make Hunter Thompson's Rauol Duke character green with envy. We got into character as we entered 'The Nutmeg State'. That's where the term, 'The Cup Races' entered our vernacular. It would remain with us for three days. None of us had actually ever seen a yacht, but we instinctively knew we would have to go through some changes. Four jerks from Jersey were just not going to cut it. We developed our new personas as we drove. We were going to need an exotic place of origin: California. Yes, four surfers from California jetting in for 'The Cup Races.' It could happen. That was our collective decision. We had long hair and tans already; we just had to come up with,

and apply the finishing touches. "Surfers", Jack offered, "say 'dude' a lot." Ideas like that are what kept Jack riding in the front with the first-aid kit.

We arrived in Newport about five hours later, all of us in agreement that Connecticut was a lot bigger than it looked on a map. We had our supplies, one change of clothes, and every dollar we could withdraw or borrow before we left. We stopped at one hotel and were shocked -- absolutely shocked -- to discover they had no record of our reservation and no available rooms due to "The Cup Races". We all smiled and nodded in acknowledgement of one another; happy to learn our new terminology was right on the money. We did not bother to check another hotel. Instead, we stopped at the first of many bars and decided, as fortified as we were, who would need to sleep! "And besides," Jack suggested, "I think surfers just 'crash' wherever they're at anyways." We all readily embraced that concept. I know I was not tired.

It seemed as we drove to Newport, and in every bar we entered, one song was always playing; 'Safety Dance' by a one hit wonder band named Men without Hats. On one of the first dance floors we encountered -- and we encountered many, as they popped up out of nowhere at us, being as the last place we looked to dance was an actual dance floor -- it occurred to Jack this was a 'surfing song'. As the song blared over the bar's sound system, Jack broke down into his surfer's stance, and rode the imaginary wave to the music. This sounded like a truly brilliant idea at the time. After all, we were surfers. We surfed on dance floors at 10 A.M. where it had not dawned yet on anyone else to dance. We surfed on sidewalks, boat launches, hotel beds (we "crashed", or tried to), on top of cigarette machines, windowsills and coffee tables. Any place would do, and everything we did approached our self-declared standard of the 'Borderline Acceptable, Public Spectacle'. As that grey area expanded in direct correlation to the number of hours we had been awake, we attributed it all to our 'surfing ways'.

At one of the many Newport fern bars that we infiltrated, a woman we were chatting up between waves asked us, "Where in California are you guys from?" Before anyone else could process the inquiry fully, Jack leapt into the fray, as if waiting for this precise question.

"Surf City, we're from Surf City." I could see by a quick glance, Mike and Ted struggling to hold it together behind the sunglasses we wore everywhere we went. Jack took on the veneer of complete sincerity. She followed with, "What part is that? Where exactly?" Again, with no hesitation, Jack responded. "It's where the waves are." Three beer bottles went up together as we fought back the urge to burst out laughing, and sought out the green-tinted shelter. Jack did not need to hide; he was becoming a surfer.

For many years, that was the essence of my life: impulsive, desultory behavior, with funny, but indulgent people. We continued like this for some time. Mike eventually crashed a car through the Palmolive Company headquarters front gate after he had been up for a week. He missed a turn on Tuesday and he hit the gate on Friday. It was quite a ride. The end result is twenty-three years of clean and sober living. He went back to college, finished, and earned some sort of engineering degree and has worked for Verizon for years. Ted eventually returned to school. He lives in Boca Rotan, Florida now, and works as an international accountant. As the only non-Irish among us, he had a seemingly natural genetic advantage, and never had to stop drinking or go to rehab.

By January of 1988, Jack had progressed into a full-blown junkie. Before entering prison in January of 2007, Jack was the only person I ever saw to stick a needle in his arm. He had managed to run up a debt totaling nearly \$5,000 to people did not believe in collection agencies. To remedy his situation, one Sunday that January, he wagered \$5,000 on an NFL playoff game on credit with a bookie. With the wrong team obviously running away with the game, late in the third quarter, Jack got up from his barstool at the Main Tavern, and went home.

I was living in Huntington Beach, California, by then, and had embarked on my career in odd jobs (part time) and under achievement (full time). It was just before 7A.M. on a Monday morning when the phone rang. As soon as it did, the timing had me thinking something was wrong. Ted's shaken voice confirmed my intuition.

"Jack's dead," he informed me, "he killed himself." Nothing else was known. I popped open a beer from the refrigerator and went and sat in the living room, watching it grow gradually brighter from the rising sun. I put some music on; "Black Peter" and "High Times" by the Grateful Dead. I listened over and over about 15 times through "Masquerade" by George Benson, and the 12-pack was gone. I picked the phone back up, made a plane reservation and went out for more beer.

Two days later, I was sitting on a stool at the Main Tavern in the same spot Jack had watched the fateful game from, listening to the bartender recount Jack's abrupt departure that day. Jack had been quiet all afternoon, which was very unusual for him. He left a \$38 tip, well passed unusual. Ted, who had flown in from Charlotte, North Carolina, where he worked for IBM, sat next to me and we both drank Rolling Rock beer from cold sweaty bottles. Mike stood behind us anxiously and deliberately, sipping club soda with citrus of some sort in it. He chose to stand uneasily, rather than to slide down next to us and get comfortable. I could not help but notice perspiration building on his forehead. I remember thinking it wasn't because in an hour we would be at our old friends wake.

As we stood in line approaching the open casket, about ten feet from Jack's heavily made up face, news made it to us down the line that Jack had hung himself from his shower curtain rod in his bathroom. There was this peculiar silence that might have lasted ten seconds but seemed more like several minutes. Then I heard Mike whisper behind me, just loud enough for a couple of us to hear. "He should have come over to my house. He'd still be in the bathroom. I can't throw a pair of wet socks on that thing without it falling off the wall." There I stood next to kneel before the coffin, suppressing laughter so hard I thought my head would explode. As I knelt down, I casually bit through my tongue to counter balance my urge for hysteria, and looked at Jack's face. I don't believe in ghosts and I waiver greatly on the afterlife question, though I lean towards worm food. But I could have sworn I saw a grin -- a smirk -- on Jack's dead face that was not there a few seconds earlier.

Two days later I was off on a plane, heading back to the real 'surf city', where I had learned to ride actual waves full speed ahead into decades of avoidance, hiding from the people who loved me and knew me when the word 'potential' seemed to be a part of my name. I saw both Mike and Ted again in 1994 at Mike's wedding. Ted and I, who were both in the wedding, got drunk, had plenty of laughs and a really good time. I still don't feel like apologizing to the cosmos for that. Mike uneasily drank club soda with assorted citrus while excusing our behavior to his new sober friends, who, quite frankly, seemed uneasy too, and weren't much fun. I saw neither of them again until February 2008.

Ted wrote to me and mentioned he had a week's worth of work in Las Vegas. After which, he would try to make it up to San Luis Obispo, California, where the prison that warehouses me, is located. He talked Mike into flying into Las Vegas from New Jersey and joining him at the last minute, without telling me. When I walked out to visiting – the first and only time – I nearly died from shock. I am still searching for the correct words of thanks. Ted bought us a few diet sodas and we took a seat together at a table. They really did not want to hear what happened to me, did not need the details of the story, which led me here, unless I wanted to tell them. Although both volunteered and agreed they could see drinking and driving bringing me down. My story went untold, and we got down to business. A fellow inmate walked by with a shaved head. On the back of his head was a tattoo made to resemble Adolph Hitler. "You know what that guy should do?" Ted suggested, his eyes following the tattooed head. "He should grow a small patch of hair where the mustache is. How cool would that be? Huh! A three dimensional tattoo! I coughed diet soda out of my nose. I re-grouped and looked up to see Ted smiling and nodding very contentedly with himself, looking at me like he had accomplished what he had come across the country to do.



Fiction

John Longstaff

Hang Time

He's in bed again just after five, but only dozes. Twitches. Wakes in small fits of eye openings and caught breaths. Full awake at 6:55, he lies staring up at the ceiling, as if to watch her plane take off, the swirls of plaster the clouds she lifts into. And he loses her there.

It strikes him then that her goodbye wave had seemed more like a little girl's than a wife's. Behind the wheel of her rumped Taurus Sally'd held up her hand palm out and wagged her fingers toward him. Three times. She smiled between the curled-up ends of her grayed pageboy and backed out into the five a.m. summer light.

The dog paws him from the edge of the bed and nudges him up. Leads him into the kitchen. Sits and watches. The rattle of dry pellets in the dog's s bowl echoes in the room. The cat comes in.

He shuffles to the den and pulls her itinerary from a pigeon hole in his rolltop. Bills and letters wedged in with it drop to the desk, one draping over the picture of their daughter Cathy and the grandkids, leaving only the kids in view.

Look more like their Grandma Sal all the time, he thinks.

LV ATLANTA 655A/UAL563/AR CHICAGO/OHARE 914A/ØSTOPS

I'll know in what? Two hours. No, wait, 9:14, that's Chicago time. Be 10:14 here. Three hours. Damn.

He goes to their bedroom and pulls on yesterday's chinos, a tee-shirt over his sagging gut. Sally's nightgown lies in the sheets where he helped her out of it. He buries his hand in its silk. Smiles. Toes into his runover thongs and walks out to the road to get the morning paper.

Good it's a nonstop, he thinks. Only have to take off once. And land.

The toast doesn't want to go down, for all the jam he's spread on it. The paper is nothing but disasters.

I'll shower. Cook the back of my neck a few minutes.

Calm me down. No. Can't hear the phone in the shower.

Well, work then. Would've finished it if she hadn't teased me up to bed. Sure hasn't lost her touch.

He takes his second coffee to the den, taps the computer to life and opens the work file. "...said parts will maintain tolerances of plus or minus four ten thousandths..."

The old fear rises again. Not really a thought any longer, its words so worn and frayed, so ingrained from decades of haunting him that he doesn't really hear them. But only feels himself hanging between having Sally with him and not knowing if he will again.

"...plus or minus four ten thou..."

Call Cathy. That'd be first. She'd come. Handle things. I'll take care of everything, Dad. He could hear her.

But then what?

His fingers rest on the keys.

Cathy's got her own life.

He leans back, his eyes wander and catch the glow of the tiny orange pilot light on the cup warmer next to the keyboard. He remembers thinking what a silly American indulgence it was when he found it in his Christmas stocking. Remembers looking at his wife in disbelief and hears again her Well you're always complaining about cold coffee! He lifts the warm cup to his lips.

I could stay here. Live with the ghost. Flour on her hands, flipping through a cookbook. Tapping her toe in the garden where she'd want me to spade. Smiling at me from her vacant pillow.

He stands. Clicks off the computer and carries his coffee cup to the kitchen sink, washes it and dries his hands on the dishtowel.

That always ticks her off. Use the hand towel!

He looks at the clock/radio above the fridge. 8:37.

Red digits. The two dots pulse.

Put the garage in order.

He steps down from the kitchen to the garage. The dog dives between his legs, knocks him against the door jamb.

"Damn it, Cody!" The Lab looks back over his gray muzzle and lumbers into the yard.

Handles of rakes and spades, garden forks, picks, scythes, hoes, weed cutters and pruning tools lean into the dark corners of the garage like falling tee-pee poles. He rolls the wheelbarrow out onto the driveway, and the seed spreader, its wheels screeching to tear his brain.

Maybe Iowa.

He clears a wall of coiled hoses, stepladders, brooms, paint cans, lawn chairs with their webbing torn.

Iowa City. Get myself a couple three rooms. Old frame house near campus. Big bay window. Bookshelves.

He moves to the corners of the garage and starts to sort through the forest of tool handles.

Nobody left there, though.

He lays out the tools on the garage floor where her car had been. Studies them and the cleared wall above them.

Starts to plan where the tools will hang with the least amount of wall space wasted.

Hang out around campus. Sit in on a couple of classes.

Let's see. Put the pickaxe on the left. Tuck the bucksaw under its arc. Short spade on the other side.

Stop for a beer at Kenney's. Joe's Place. But hell, they're probably long gone. Sally'd be there, though. Her ghost. Huh!

He kneels to position the pickaxe on the floor, the bucksaw and the spade, just below where he'll hang them.

She'd be all over the place.

He sees her again like the first time, her arms full of books, snow on her scarf and russet hair. He holds the door for her again. Schaeffer Hall? She smiles a thank you and waits inside to walk to class with him, gives him a chance to make more of their first moment.

He stoops and lays a hoe on the floor to the right of the pickaxe and spade, then a rake.

Iowa City. She waits in his rusty Packard. She's angled it to the curb in front of the WSUI studios. The radio's on. She's listened to his show and come to get him, slides only to the middle of the seat when he gets in. She's singing his closing number.

"Meet me... ba-by... down in... Duke's Place!" He sings the lyric aloud and sets a three-pronged fork on the floor beside the rake, an edge of pain in his back and knees.

Couldn't get rid of my roommates. Just ask them to get out. Compromise her like that.

He lays the fork to the right of the rake and with his toe taps it parallel.

Drove to the river, her tongue in my ear. Had a hard on so fierce I could hardly work the clutch. God, the heat of her. Her thighs on my palms in that big back seat. Something to be said for Packards, all right.

He lays a scythe along the fork's handle and drags a lawn edger across the floor.

No. Iowa City wouldn't work. Got married there, for God's sake. Sally'd still be there. Not there.

So where, then?

Back to Visalia? Santa Cruz?

Same problem.

Be better to go some place we didn't live together. Like when I left her and went up to Portland.

He holds the edger, measures it against the scythe.

Had to tell me. Couldn't live with it, she said. Only meant to go down on the guy. Jesus. Only...?

Left her like I said I would. Warned her. Hell, before the wedding even.

Two years up in that country. Without her. The coast... the Gorge.

Couldn't shake her. Even running with the others. Sleeping around. Only forgot her for a night or so.

It came to him then that there was no place, could be no place.

No damned place I can live without her.

The edger drops to the floor.

Have to die with her.

He stares at the bared wall.

Well...sure.

That's what.

The first ring fades. He's through the kitchen door and over the phone, waits out the second ring, staring at the tremor in his hand. The clock reads 9:43.

"Hello?" he says.

Silence.

"Hello?" again.

The phone gives up only a faint hissing sound.

"Who's there?"

He strains to hear.

Hummingbirds flit at the feeder beyond the window, throats flashing iridescence in the sunlight. Gone.

"Who is this?"

Seven paced beeps.

"This a god-damned computer?"

A click. Dead line.

He holds the phone away from him and stares into the receiver. Closes his eyes against screaming. Drops the phone in the cradle, leans against the counter and waits for his pulse to slow.

In the bathroom he pees. He splashes cold water on his face and looks up to see himself flushed, blinking at the mirror. "Jesus!" he says aloud and almost laughs. Damned nobody-there calls. Drops fall from his nose and chin. He turns his head side to side searching for a hint of composure. "You damned fool."

He crosses through the kitchen and glances at the clock. 10:12. In the garage he looks at the tools half organized on the floor.

What in hell am I trying to do here?

He picks up the tools and stacks them again in the corners.

Hell with them.

He rolls the wheelbarrow into the garage, and the seed spreader. Finds a can of oil and bends to touch it to the squeaking wheels. Remembers the night he put the spreader together for her. In the living room while she watched.

A dozen pages of step-by-step, Insert cotter key E into axle end B... Parts in the carpet. His concentration pitted against the pull of his second scotch. Her smile growing from slight to bemused to broad. Her arms crossing, head shaking slowly at his moment of triumph. The last part in place. Her question, Why do you insist on making things harder than they have to be?

He had no idea then either.

Oh hell, of course I could live without her. Done it.

Just wouldn't want to anymore.

At the kitchen sink he rinses a heavy lather from his hands. It's 10:42.

She ought to be on the ground by now.

He dries his hands on the dishtowel again.

I could call the airline. Just make sure. Just punch in the numbers, get the arrival time off the recording. Couldn't hurt. Nobody'd know.

He searches the dishtowel for stains, folds it in quarters and hangs it on the rack inside the cupboard door below the sink. Picks up the phone mumbling the airline's 800 number.

"Hi!" she says.

"What the..." The phone slips. He grabs it. "Sally?" He blinks. "It didn't even ring."

"Really?" she says. "Spooks, maybe." She chuckles, and in her deep alto he hears for some millionth time that sound like marbles knocking in a leather pouch. "Well, I'm at O'Hare. Cab stands are mobbed. I won't get down to the conference for, well, I don't know when. So, I thought I should call."

He fills his lungs for the first time all morning.

"You didn't need to do that," he says. And on his outflow of breath, "So! How was your flight?"

Lioness

Alysa, her pale, sagacious face wrinkled up in thought, traces of henna on fingers, is reminded in a moment. The milk jug, smoked and sour, is the source of memory.

“I prowled clay plains like a young lion.”

She is seeing limp leaves, burnt sticks, her whole childhood in Kenya.

The leather milk jug, constructed of a camel skin cylinder, soft cowhide lid, and wooden base, still stinks of old milk. Traces of henna cling to the camel hair that covers the outside. She is not repelled by the smell.

“I was like some red lion cub.”

She remembers drinking milk out of a jug like that, sitting beside an evening fire.

“They made a fire for us, but the wood was green. Smoke was pouring out of it, driven upwards by the heat. I was given a special place that was close by the elders.

“They had never seen anyone with red hair like mine. Someone said that I was as pale as a crescent moon. There were a lot of people around, because of a funeral, and no one was showing any signs of going home. I was only about eight. I remember lots of warm bottles of Coca-Cola. And the milk, which wasn’t very fresh.”

Alysa puts the milk jug down. Her hands now smell like smoke and skin. They feel oily. She rubs them together for a moment.

“My parents had gone to the city. They left me there, in the village. Most of the people who were there that night, in the little family compound with the one-room block house—and two or three brush huts—weren’t from the village. I wasn’t scared. I knew Godwin, and Mercy, his wife. They were looking after me.”

I give her a paper towel. She wipes her hands carelessly with it.

“It was the funeral of a little girl exactly my age. She had been born with a heart defect, and always been sickly and weak. I remember seeing her from time to time. But I hadn’t ever played with her—she was too fragile. Too fragile to play with anyone. She mostly sat in her parents’ house or outside, in front of it, on a camp bed covered with blankets. There was always dust, and she would get dusty, sitting outside.”

I sit myself on the edge of a couch, but Alysa continues to stand, to tell me her story.

“There was a slight breeze that evening, the evening of the funeral. It was cold and dusty. I sat near the fire, the smoky fire, as the stars came out. The Milky Way. A planet on the barren horizon. Someone was coughing because of the smoke from the fire. I drank the milk that was already turning. It was lukewarm.

“An old man seated himself next to me, by the fire. He had filled a paper plate with heaping mounds of food—chicken, roasted pumpkin, rice, canned peaches—I don’t remember what else. I watched as his plate slowly sagged under the weight of the food. In a moment, most of the food went sliding off of the plate and onto the ground. Some young female relative, embarrassed, helped him reposition what was left back onto the middle of the plate. Someone brought him a bowl of chicken soup.

I was given one, too. The old man's hand was still soiled by the food that had slid off of his plate. He set the plate down on a rock and rubbed his hand on the ground. He laughed, and then he and I began eating our soup with wooden spoons. The soup was hot and slightly bitter.

"Mercy, who was always kind to everyone and walked with a slow, very dignified step, came to check on me. She asked if I was doing okay, and if I wouldn't mind speaking to the mother of the little girl who had been buried that day.

"I nodded 'yes' to her request."

I'm happy that Alysa has chosen to tell me this story. I don't know anyone else at the party, except for Sarah, our host, and she's busy making sure that everyone is happy, has a drink, and is enjoying her cooking. I was looking at the milk jug because I was feeling awkward with no one to talk to, when Alysa came over and took it from me, to examine it herself. She chooses each of her words carefully, and her voice is charming.

"When the mother of the little girl who had died joined me, there by the fire, she held a sheet of paper in her hand. It was lined newsprint, the kind that we used for lessons at the village school. My parents had enrolled me in the village school that year, although they eventually sent me to boarding school a year or so later. The mother of the little girl was wearing a worn house dress and headscarf that looked just like the one that Mercy wore. We sat together in silence for a moment. I didn't want to look into her face, because her eyes were so red from crying. Even the irises looked red. I gazed up at the sky, at the stars. She finally spoke. Her English had a peculiar accent. She asked me if I liked looking at the stars. I answered that, yes, I loved looking at the stars, especially the Milky Way. She told me that a comet had appeared the year before in the northern sky, and everyone in the village had been frightened by it. An old man had even told her daughter that the comet signified the end of the world. Her daughter, who loved to watch the skies at night, used to sit and watch the comet, and one day she told her mother that she couldn't believe the world was coming to an end and she had never gotten married. Her mother's voice broke as she told me this. Looking down at her hands, she seemed almost surprised to notice the sheet of paper she was holding. She scanned it silently for a moment, and then told me it was a math assignment her daughter had been working on, the day that she died. The village schoolteacher had let her follow the lessons at home, but I recognized it as one that I had also been assigned. It was a math riddle. We had to figure out what combination of twelve coins would equal exactly one Kshilling. Looking at the paper, I could see how hard she had worked on it. One combination of coins after another was tested and crossed out. She had finally arrived at the right combination, which was written carefully in blue pencil on the bottom of the page. Her mother asked me if I would take the paper to school the following day, and turn it in to the teacher for her, and for her dead daughter."

Alysa takes a small hemp wallet out of the cloth bag slung over her shoulder. She opens her wallet and takes out a folded, yellowing paper, opens it up and hands it to me. The name Martha, written in a child's hand, is scrawled at the top of the page. Below it are the calculations, a maze of attempts that express difficulty, but do not fully portray what effort they must have cost a weakened, faint little girl, who was fighting for every breath of life. I hand it back to Alysa.

"I didn't have the heart to tell her mother that the teacher didn't want the paper. The math riddle had been a treat, a fun assignment that wouldn't be graded,

something for us to take home and enjoy. Something that we could use as a brainteaser on our families.”

Before she leaves the party that night, Alysa makes a point of saying goodbye to me. I thank her for her story as I offer her my hand. I catch a glimpse of her, holding the milk jug one last time, opening it, smelling it, before she quietly disappears out the door.

Are You There?

The squirrel had tried to climb out the sides of the rain barrel, over and over, until the cold slipped up its legs and claimed its small heart. It floated. When Sarah lifted it, water drained from her cupped hands, flattening the squirrel's fur against its skeleton. She felt the smallest tremble against her palm: the heart still beat. She held the clammy skin to her cheek and the trembling stopped. She was ten years old.

She has been compelled ever since, death's deliverer and witness. Somehow she finds them: in the cold, in the water barrel, on the freeway, in the ditch, in the gutter, on the asphalt, in the heating vent, in the tangle of weeds no one ever looks at.

Twenty years later, her compulsion has drawn her here, to this job, which pays little, in this town in the desert of nowhere. Death gnaws at the edges of this town. It pads across the cracked ground, through the blank silence that aches between mountain and mountain. It sleeps beneath sun-bleached trailers, inside gutted trucks, between cracked bar stools, within the stained circle that collects, drop by drop, from the stump of the neck of the goose hanging in the shed doorway, feet up. It skulks in the parking lot of the lone gas station, in the snake whose two halves writhed out of synch while a pink pool leaked from its crushed center. Sarah released the head from its misery with one quick snap of her heel; it was dead before the tail knew what was happening.

She should have nightmares. Her dreams are beautiful, full of rich colors absent in the grays and browns of her waking life: colors like teal, cerulean, forest green, lavender, fuschia.

If she could sleep all day she would.

Her office at the animal shelter is a small room with one dirty window, through which dust sifts to coat every surface. Sometimes the animal control officer stops in to visit her and pour a cup of stale coffee from the half-empty pot.

—Morning.

—Morning, the officer replies.

—Coffee?

—Thank you.

The officer is a big woman, not fat but large-boned, with a broad face and coarse yellow hair frayed at the tips. After this courtesy, the officer's talk runs out, but she stands in the room anyway, sipping her coffee from its Styrofoam cup. She has unexpectedly fine hands: the long slender fingers and smooth nail beds curl around her coffee cup. The hands are kind to the animals the officer rescues, as the officer must rescue them, as this is the officer's job, and dying at the shelter is kinder than dying outside in the sun, on the highway, behind a parking lot, inside a dumpster, chained in an abandoned yard.

Like the officer, Sarah's hands are also kind, but her job is the last frantic breath, the slow tick of nerves, the sudden still. She is death's deliverer and witness. She offers no rescue.

Today is a bad day. The officer has brought her a litter of puppies. Inside their cardboard box, the puppies bump against each other and squirm blindly. Two puppies are already dead, dark lumps sticky with birth sac. The officer's eyes are wet.

—Found them by the highway, coming in to town.

—Thank you, I'll take care of them.

Sarah takes the cardboard box from the officer, and sets it on her stainless steel work table. She walks to her shelf and removes a small glass bottle. Its top and sides are coated in dust. She peels a syringe from its plastic sleeve. The needle breaks the foil seal of the bottle; liquid fills the syringe. Behind her, she hears the door close. The officer does not stay to watch.

The puppies' veins are small and elusive to find; she strives to get it right the first time. As is her way, she holds each body close to her face. Some squirm and grunt weakly. Some are quiet. One tries to suckle her finger before its lungs still. That one has a mark on its head like a white fingerprint. She places her own finger there, before returning the body to the cardboard box.

Her apartment is one of five identical, square, flat-roofed, single-story buildings, two units each, all in one row facing the gravel road. Each apartment opens onto dirt, small prickly bushes growing right up and into each doorway, from which ants slip easily within. Her rooms are laid out in one straight line, and so she must cross her living room to reach her kitchen, cross her kitchen to reach her bedroom, and cross her bedroom to reach the tiny bathroom with its plastic sink and shower.

Her bedroom is plain and unornamented, two mattresses alone in the corner, a thin sheet and bedspread, a yard sale dresser crammed tight with clothes. Her kitchen is also spare, with one pan and one pot, a few mismatched dishes, a solitary onion on top of the refrigerator. Her living room has two plastic lawn chairs, a plywood board over cinderblocks for a coffee table.

She knows it is not normal to live a life without friends or social engagements. Even in college, her studies expanded to fill her empty hours; she memorized bones and the muscles attached to them, nervous systems, the fine red-blue tapestry of veins and arteries.

She has no friends, unless she counts the animal control officer, which she does, although their friendship is limited to the cramped confines of her office, the lukewarm coffee pot, the solemn transaction of their work. She likes and envies the officer, who is straightforward in her grief and in her mercy. But even so, Sarah recognizes in the officer's face the unease she has grown accustomed to find in those who understand her life's work.

This morning there is a visitor. He is tall, too thin, older than her, dark. He wears jeans frayed at the cuffs, a plaid shirt missing a center button, boots, a faded baseball cap. His eyes are black, as if all pupil and no iris. He carries a small tawny dog in his arms. His face is wet.

—I need you to put her down, he says. The dog is healthy and uninjured. She licks tears from his chin.

—I can't put down a healthy animal, Sarah replies. --Why don't you take her to the vet?

—Can't afford the vet. He is missing a lower front tooth.

—Why?

—She's a mix, he says, —she's half coyote. A chicken killer.

The dog looks gentle. Her tail is thick and hangs from his arms, her eyes are bright and alert.

—We can put her in the kennel, try to adopt her out.

Fresh tears leak from the corner of his eyes, but aside from this and the rawness of his voice, his face and manner are calm.

—She's a mix, he says again. —She's too wild for people, but she ain't scared of them, either. She bit my neighbor pretty bad. You'll have to kill her anyhow.

He sits on the linoleum floor of her office, still holding the dog, who is struggling to escape. Sarah retrieves several dog biscuits from a sealed jar on her shelf that she keeps for exactly this, and hands them to him.

The man feeds them to his dog. Sarah unpeels a syringe and, while filling it, watches him covertly. His back is stiff. She knows he is trying very hard to hold himself together for her, to contain his terrible grief.

She kneels on the floor facing him. Her needle is ready.

—She's a good girl, he says. The dog licks his hand for the last taste of biscuit.

—She looks like a good girl. How long have you had her?

—Oh, eight or nine years. Roundabouts. She drove all the way from Texas with me.

The dog's tail is thicker than usual, and her neck has a pale ruff. Other than her eyes, she looks like any small dog of uncertain descent. Her eyes are pale yellow, lucid in a way that dogs' eyes are not. They are unmistakable coyote eyes.

—Coyotes are very smart, she says. —Females in heat will often lure male domestic dogs away from their yards, so the pack can kill and eat them.

She is suddenly self-conscious. She remembers that she culled this information from a Jack London book she read during her freshman composition class; and that it was about wolves, not coyotes. Her face grows hot.

Unexpectedly, he smiles. His eyes are bloodshot and there is a small drip of moisture from his nose; the hole in his gums jarringly visible. There are fine lines around his eyes. But the smile is nice.

—Yeah, wolves do that too. Coyotes and wolves are real smart, he says.

—I'm ready now.

The dog shies its leg away from her hand. The man reassures the dog with his palm and voice, —Shhh, now, shhhh. His voice is ragged but he is no longer crying.

Sarah steadies the dog's thin-boned leg against the man's calf and holds it; she leans in to see better and in so doing, enters the space of heated air around him. She can smell them both: man and dog mixing together. Her needle finds its mark.

The dog has stopped struggling and is watching her with bright, lucid eyes. Then the eyes dull imperceptibly; the dog's head sinks back and onto the man's denim thigh.

—Is she?

—Yes, she replies.

—But I can feel her moving. His hand is spread over the dog's quiet side. The fingers are long and chapped around the nails, which have broad, white half-moons.

—Those are nerves, she says. —They are slower to go.

He puts his cheek against the dog's stomach. His eyes are still dry, but the pupil has contracted in grief. She sees a very subtle tonal difference between the pupil

and iris—the iris is flicked with dark amber around the center. His face is calm and listening.

—It stopped, he says at last. A bad smell fills the room.

—The bowels tend to release, she says. —I should have warned you, I'm sorry.

He raises his head and looks at the thin brown liquid that has spilled across his calf, between the dog's back legs. —That's fine, he says, --I don't mind. It's natural.

She rises and finds a roll of paper towels under her stainless steel work table and, tearing off a handful, passes it to him. He takes the paper towels but does not use them. He is looking intently into the eyes of his dog. She squats on the other side of him and begins wiping off the mess. He pays no mind to her. He is still looking at the eyes of his dog. She folds the dirty paper towels into themselves, and tosses the wad into the garbage can. She kneels back down.

He looks up, his eyes wet with grief. She has seen this before, this moment when the eyes become transparent. She feels she can see all the way down to his core, to his naked center.

He says, —Thank you.

She walks him out. They pass by the animal control officer sitting at her desk, who glances up from the piled papers and empty Styrofoam cups, her face frank with sympathy.

The man still carries the dog in his arms. He will bury her on his property, although she has offered to cremate the body at reduced charge. Sarah stands by the door while he settles the dog on the passenger seat of his beige work truck.

The keys to his truck dangle from the ignition. That is the way in this town, leaving doors unlocked, keys in trucks, a habit she has herself picked up. It is the one nice thing she can say about this place. The cruelty is impersonal; it singles out no one. Cars and trucks and possessions are safe.

He straightens up and turns back to her.

—Well, goodbye, he says.

She searches her mind for something to say. The silence grows awkward. On the highway behind them, a truck roars around the sharp bend and dopplers into the distance. She wants to rest her face in the crook between his chin and shoulder.

He gets into the truck and shuts the door, then sits for a minute looking at his hands on the steering wheel. He is still looking at his hands when he says the next thing. —Maybe it's dumb but I really loved her. My wife did, too.

Sarah is still processing the shock of this—*my wife*—when he starts the engine. His truck rumbles down the driveway and toward the road.

As she watches, a van speeds around the bend of the highway and hits the man's truck. The crash rings in the still air and the sun flashes off a sideview mirror, hurting her eyes. The truck travels along the road sideways, spins, then stops, the driver door crumpled. The van also stops. Then a woman opens the passenger door of the van and falls out. She lands on her knees and stands back up again. The woman's mouth and knees are bloody. She is wearing a skirt and the skirt is hiked up.

The animal control officer has run outside. —I'll call 911, she says.

The woman has crawled back into the van and is trying to help a man out of it. He is older and heavy-set, with a grey fringe of hair along his bald scalp. There is no sign of the man in the truck.

Heat rises off the asphalt. The driver door hangs open, crumpled on its hinge. Sarah finds him thrown against the passenger door, his dog on the floor. The dog is lying head-down, back legs half-propped on the seat.

She climbs inside careful not to rock the truck, bracing her weight against the steering wheel. The bench seat is covered in matted sheepskin with cigarette burns. There are empty Coke cans on the floor, and several cassette tapes. One leg is draped over his dog, the other sprawled across the seat. She places her knees on either side of his thigh, easing her weight down very slowly. When she is braced she feels his throat. There is blood running down his face from under his baseball cap. He opens his eyes and they are unfocused. The window behind his head is cracked.

—Where's my dog, he says.

—She's here, she says.

—Is she okay?

—She's fine.

—Okay, he says. --My head hurts.

—You'll be fine.

—I think I pissed myself, he says. --I'm sorry about that.

The seatcover is damp under her palm. --That's okay. Try to stay still.

It is very hot in the cab of the truck. Dust and dog nose prints smear the late morning sunlight streaking in; the cracks in the window refract it like prisms. The nearest hospital is an hour's drive away. There is no local ambulance.

—I can't see so good.

Sarah uses her sleeve to wipe blood from his eyes, taking care not to jostle his head.

—That's better, he says.

—You must stay still. The blood has darkened his shirt to his chest. She eases her knees away from him and delicately backs up.

—Don't go. He says it without moving his head.

—I'll be right here.

The officer is with the woman and older man. The woman is pacing and crying, holding her bloody mouth. The older man is sitting on the floorboard of the van and has his head between his knees. The officer is covering him with a blanket, even though it is hot. The top of his bald head looks very white.

She eases her body back inside the truck.

—Just stay still. The ambulance will be here soon.

—Okay. He vomits.

She uses her shirt again wipe the vomit from his mouth.

—I'm sorry, he says.

—It's okay. It's natural.

—Okay.

—What is your wife's number?

—I don't know, he says.

—What is your number.

—My wife is in Texas, he says. —She's with someone else.

There is vomit on his chin that she missed. She wipes it off. —Your parents?

—They're dead.

—Is there anyone.

—Is my dog okay?

—Yes, she says, --your dog is fine.

There is a small pool of blood inside his left ear; a thin thread spills out the edge, winds its way down his neck. She clears more blood from his eyes.

—I'd like to lie down, he says.

—Don't lie down.

Through the windshield, she sees a lizard flash across the silent road. The cab of the truck has grown unbearably hot. His blood begins to dry on his face, the edges growing crackled and dark. The dog's body has somehow slid over Sarah's foot. She tries to nudge it off, but the limp weight resists.

He vomits again and coughs. With one finger, she gently probes the inside of his mouth, scraping out the extra fluid. She feels his breath on her knuckle and withdraws.

—Thank you, he says.

—You're welcome, she replies.

—I'm scared to die.

—You won't die.

The heat is making her drowsy. Her legs are growing tired from bracing her in this awkward position. She says, —Stay awake.

He opens his eyes. —Okay.

She hears the siren several minutes before it arrives, and slips awkwardly from the truck, moving out of the way as the paramedics bring a stretcher. Some circle around the bald man, and others rush toward the woman who is now lying down on the ground some distance away. Sarah returns her attention to the man in the truck. She watches the paramedics secure his neck and then lower him onto the stretcher. His palm falls out.

While they are distracted with this, she slips over to the truck and lifts the dog from the floor. The dog's body is warm from the trapped heat and growing stiff. She holds the dog to her chest.

—I want to go with him, she says as they lift him into the ambulance.

—I'm his wife, she says, and they do not stop her when she climbs inside. The paramedics ignore her as she takes a seat by his head, the dog clutched to her chest. One paramedic prepares a catheter and tapes it to the man's arm. The paler skin inside his elbow indents just before the needle slips within.

Through the open door, Sarah watches the other two stretchers being loaded into the second ambulance. On one of them, the woman is quiet. From his own stretcher, the bald man calls to her: —Jesse? Jesse? The woman does not reply.

Sarah closes her eyes, pressing the dog to her chest. Inside her eyelids, bright colors spark: emerald, amethyst, sapphire, garnet.

—Are you there? he says, somewhere in the dark.

—I'm here.

She watches the colors.

—Do you have her?

—I have her, she says, and opens her eyes.

Contributors

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* * *

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Desert Voices accepts submissions throughout the year. We accept and publish short fiction, creative essays, and poetry that have a distinctive literary voice and style.

For fiction and essays, send one original short story or essay. For poetry, send three to five poems.

You may submit your work by post or e-mail.

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All submissions must include a cover letter with a brief biography of the author and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. *Desert Voices* will not return manuscripts sent without a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

For e-mail submissions, please send your manuscript as an attachment in Microsoft Word format (*.doc or *.docx). You will receive a confirmation e-mail when *Desert Voices* receives your submission.

For more information, please send a request via post or e-mail.

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