

SPRING 2018

October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



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Volume 2, Issue 1

Welcome to October Hill Magazine

Welcome to the one-year anniversary of *October Hill Magazine*.

It's been an exciting and eventful year. We are pleased to present you with an issue that we feel extremely proud of and hope that you will enjoy. First, you may notice that the design of the magazine has changed. It is one of our goals as a publication to keep advancing and to strive towards what makes us better. Just the same, we are committed to publishing some of the best short stories, poems, and visuals from authors and artists of all experiences.

In commemoration of making it through our first year, we would like to forego our usual introduction and instead present to you a Q&A session between the Editorial Director, Richard Merli, and Editor, Samantha Morley.



Richard, thank you for taking the time to answer some questions that myself, and I'm sure the readers, have been wanting to ask. Before we get started, is there anything you'd like to share in regards to the one-year anniversary issue?

This is a very exciting time for *October Hill Magazine* and for me personally. We've cleared the hurdle of our first year and are poised to broaden our editorial offerings and grow into new areas in 2018. I feel as if we have already gone a long way toward fulfilling our mission of creating a platform for new and aspiring authors of short stories and poetry. It's certainly gratifying to see how the literary community has embraced us.

What inspired you to start *October Hill Magazine*?

Knowing how difficult it can be for new authors to become published, I believed the literary community needed an outlet for new authors, a place where they could find their voice. The hope all along was that within these pages a new generation of authors would receive exposure and that, perhaps among them, the next Sylvia Plath or Ann Sexton or Will Faulkner would emerge.

The magazine name is very interesting. How did you come up with it? What is the significance behind the name?

For years I used to travel up to the Hudson Valley of New York on weekends. It's some of the most beautiful, breathtaking land in America. I used to walk down an old dirt road. Around a bend there was a hill where the trees turned the most magnificent scarlet and gold colors in October; and halfway down the hill, a lone apple tree, long neglected, perhaps from an old orchard – a survivor tree, so to speak. I'm not sure if the hill had a name, so I called it 'October Hill.' Its beauty always remained in my mind.

What were some of the biggest struggles in this last year? Accomplishments?

Probably the biggest struggle involved the technical aspects of the launch itself. I had a specific vision for the design of the magazine. I had to work very hard with our design team to translate that vision into a working reality, a functional template, something both attractive to readers and easy to navigate. I feel we've accomplished that. Our digital format has enabled us to publish some very, very talented first-time authors, which has been very rewarding, and given us the capability to broaden ourselves into new areas, such as photography and illustration.

How do you foresee the future of the magazine?

I'd love to think that we can develop a print companion to our digital offering. I think the demand will be there. We have some very exciting plans in the works to conduct our first literary contest for authors of short story and poetry. That's going to generate competition and, I expect, some really exciting new works by participants. Further down the road perhaps, I'd also love to create our own annual writer's retreat outside of New York, a venue in which writers would benefit from five or six days of classroom discussions, networking with fellow writers, and quiet time for writing. It could become our signature event. But then again, we've got lots of exciting ideas. Stay tuned!

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A special thank you to our volunteers:

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Fiction

He's a Lucky Man

By Ann Ormsby

Sierra sometimes found her married men at the mall. She would go to the fine jewelry department at the pricier department stores and pretend to be looking at the jewelry as she scrutinized the men, looking for a victim. She would make herself available to comment on their selection and that would lead to a conversation. Her vetting process started with their haircut. Was it a \$200 cut or a \$15 barbershop special? Next, the clothes. Tailor-made or off-the-rack? Casual clothes were okay off-the-rack, but no GAP or Old Navy. She liked Theory or Ralph Lauren. Shirt tucked. No socks and loafers. Wedding ring—check.

It had been two weeks since Doug, her last victim, had said goodbye in Bermuda. He'd called two or three times but she hadn't picked up. She hoped he had spent sweaty nights thinking about that little lap dance she had given him. Who was he to have a guilty conscience and need to make amends with wifey? Sierra looked down at her tight black shirt and impressive cleavage. She hoped his balls were blue.

Anyway, onward and upward she always said. She needed to offset the tawdry with some glamour. A girl needed more than sex; she needed a fancy restaurant and new bauble to make her feel special.

She pulled into the Nordstrom parking lot and looked around for a new sports car to park next to. Men looking to break out of their humdrum lives usually started with a new car to make them feel young again. She made two loops around the garage but didn't see any Porsches or Mercedes. She parked next to a Honda, grabbed her Prada bag, and hurried into the store. Fine jewelry was always on the first floor. She had purposely worn the large ruby ring that Doug had given her so that the store clerks would know she had the money to buy fine jewelry. They treated you differently if they thought you might buy something and weren't just wasting their time.

Glancing around the department, she immediately saw two targets. A tall black man, late forties, nice coat, bald, made it hard to judge his barber, but his skin looked like he had recently had a facial. The other man was white, also in his forties, with nice shoulders and thick, wavy dark hair. Grey at the temples and the sideburns. Expensive loafers, creased jeans. Hard to choose. Sierra walked over to the counter where the black guy was being shown a necklace. A solitaire diamond. One carat. Nice. Sierra looked over at the necklace but the man kept talking to the saleswoman. Usually they would ask her a question like “Do you like it? It’s for my wife.”

Sierra continued her faux shopping, moving from counter to counter until she ended up at the counter with the other man. He was looking at a sapphire ring. Probably two carats, surrounded by diamonds set in platinum. Could be an engagement ring for his next trophy wife, but could also be a birthday gift or an anniversary present for wife number one. Sierra looked at the ring as if she was admiring it and then up at the man’s face confident that he would see her interest and look over at her. Instead, when Sierra looked from the ring to the man’s face he was still staring at the ring. She watched him perch it on the tip of his pinkie and stick his arm out to see it from a distance.

“Can I show you something?” asked a petite blonde saleswoman, startling Sierra.

“Oh, yes, I’m looking for a gift for my sister,” she lied.

“Are you looking for a sapphire? What is your price range? I can show you a selection of nice pieces.”

Even the conversation had not turned the man’s head. “She likes pearls. Show me some pearl earrings, please,” said Sierra. She felt stunned. Off her game. How did she look? She peeked in the large mirror behind the counter as she and the saleswoman walked over to the pearl counter. She looked gorgeous. Satin-smooth hair, large luscious lips, what was wrong with these men? Their wives must be shopping in the store and they didn’t want to get caught admiring her. Yes, that was it. They had arrived at the pearls. The saleswoman took a keychain out of her pocket and opened the cabinet.

Sierra busily pointed out three or four pairs of earrings to look at closer. Sierra knew that she was laughing a little too loud, smiling a little too bright, flipping her hair too many times. The saleswoman carpeted the counter with velvet and brought Sierra’s choices out of the cabinet. Sierra had never had to buy jewelry for herself, so she was shocked at the prices of the earrings. \$200 for

the plain ones. \$380 for the ones with a little diamond. The drop earrings were \$460. Her imaginary sister definitely wasn't getting those. Sierra knew she could walk out of the store without buying anything, but she was reeling from the imagined rejection of these two men. Had she lost her appeal? She quickly decided on the plain ones and paid with her debit card.

Feeling dizzy she went and sat in one of the posh seating areas in the mall. Holding the small Nordstrom bag with the tissue sticking out she stared straight ahead and tried to collect herself. *Breathe in through your nose. Keep it together Sierra.* Two men engrossed in their purchases doesn't mean anything. She would come back tomorrow and try again. Maybe black leggings were too working class. Maybe a nice pink, barf, little dress. No, pink just wasn't her color. Red. Yes, red could work. She looked around the mall at the women coming and going and tried to study them. Many were wearing jeans with rips in them and colored shirts. Blue, checkered, pink, yellow, flowered. She had never worn flowers in her life. She was strictly a monochrome girl. When did all this color become fashionable? Next, she would have to wear something with a cat on it.

Maybe she should just go shopping instead of trying to pick someone up. Maybe it was just her wardrobe that needed fixing. She felt panicked. Where should she shop? Where did all these WASPy women shop? She wasn't WASPy. That had always been her appeal. She suddenly felt fat, underdressed, large of hip, whore-ish, slutty.

Desperation filled her. She looked around the mall at her options. Banana Republic. Anthropologie. Lucky Brand. Madewell. She usually shopped online. Let's see... Lucky had ripped jeans, she decided to go there. As she was getting ready to get up, a young man, maybe her age, with a toothy grin and a mop of unruly hair plopped himself down in the chair next to her. He smelled like transmission fluid. Sierra wrinkled her nose.

"Hey beautiful. Why so sad?" he asked.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me," Sierra noticed that his eyes were a vivid blue and his fingernails dirty.

Sierra closed her eyes and tried to compose herself. This was the kind of man who was attracted to her now. What could he possibly offer her? She was sure that her apartment was nicer

than his. Her car newer and more expensive. Her clothes, well, her clothes, she had decided were her problem. A problem she needed to fix immediately.

“I need to meet my fiancé,” she said with finality. Her voice closed down the pick-up.

“Too bad. He’s a lucky man,” said the stranger pulling a toothpick out of his shirt pocket and putting it in his mouth.

Sierra got up to leave. Looking down at the young man she said, “Thanks. That’s really nice of you to say.” As she walked slowly to the Lucky store she realized that that was the most honest sentence she had ever said to a man. 

Ann Ormsby, author of the novel *The Recovery Room*, is a freelancer writer who holds a Masters Degree in journalism from New York University and a Bachelors Degree in English and Writing from Drew University.

Night Flight

By Mollie Reznick

Jonah knew precisely how much time he needed to get from one terminal to the next for his connecting flight in Atlanta. So, when his first flight took off twenty minutes late, he became a little worried about getting home that night. As the flight began its descent in Georgia, Jonah looked down at his watch, his brown wavy hair falling into his green eyes: 9:40 p.m. He nervously chewed the inside of his cheek. He'd cut it close before, sprinting through Hartsfield-Jackson only to clear the gate door as it was beginning to close. But he had always made it. Tonight was shaping up differently. When the plane finally pulled up to the gate, it was 9:59. Nine minutes to get across the terminal? No way.

He sauntered off the plane, pulling his small carry-on suitcase down the dark jet way, knowing there was no reason to try and even hurry at this point. He approached the ticketing desk to inquire about flights out to Denver. Since it was after 10 p.m., he knew it would be unlikely. The ticketing agent, a tall black woman in her forties named Angela, confirmed his fears. He glanced up at the board of departures. Maybe there would be a flight somewhere within driving distance of Denver? Jonah was immediately struck by a 10:30 flight to Detroit, and it was departing from the very terminal in which he stood. He knew he didn't have much time to dwell on a decision. Passengers lined up behind him. His teeth found their familiar indents on the inside of his cheek. Angela gently prodded at the silence that hung between them after she had asked whether he would like her to book him on the first flight out to Denver at 6 a.m. the following morning. Jonah stood in silent indecision for a full ninety seconds, Angela smiling nervously. Finally, he said, "I'd like a ticket for the 10:30 flight to Detroit. And I guess I'm in a bit of a hurry." Confused, Angela quickly set out to check the availability on that flight. "Detroit is pretty far from Denver, isn't it?" she asked with a nervous laugh. Jonah was silent. "Well, you're in luck, I can get you on that flight, but you're gonna hafta hustle!" She printed the ticket and handed it to him with a warm smile: "Gate 37!"

Jonah leaned back in his seat, breathing slowly in an attempt to quell his nerves. He was terrified to be quarantined with his thoughts for the next two hours. He thrust headphones into his ears, but none of the music on his iPod could drown out the thoughts assaulting his mind. At 12:26 a.m. he would land in Detroit, but he hadn't the faintest idea what he would do then. He could spend the next couple of hours torturing himself in an attempt to figure that out and let the anxiety overwhelm him. Or he could exercise some self-kindness and trust that his impulsive decision was the right one. It had been ten years after all; he ought to be ready to face his past.

When he was a junior at UMich, Jonah's mother, Rachel, was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer that rapidly laid siege to her entire body. At first, he had reservations about going to school so close to home when most of his high school friends relocated to various places all over the country. But when his parents called him to share her diagnosis, his mother's voice cracking with fear and his father even quieter than normal, he felt fortunate to be able to hop in his car and drive the two hours back to his childhood home in Grand Rapids. That day, he made it in ninety minutes.

When he got home, Jonah dragged himself out of the car and was surrounded by a swirl of fallen leaves as he approached the porch. He hesitantly walked up the steps towards the front door. The sense of urgency he had felt speeding along the highway gave way to dread. He attempted to still his racing heart as he turned his key in the front door. He was immediately face-to-face with his mother. He was surprised to see that she looked exactly as she did when he left for school two months prior. He knew this wouldn't be the case for much longer and found himself staring at her, trying to preserve that image of her in his mind before the cancer and treatments inevitably ravaged her body. He announced to his parents that day that he was going to drop out of school and move back home to be with them, but they wouldn't allow it. Instead he drove almost the entirety of I-96 every weekend to visit. Each Friday afternoon when he arrived back home, he saw the damage the previous five days had wreaked on his mother's frail frame. She continued to lose weight each week, her clothes hanging loosely at her sides. Her once round face became long, her cheek bones protruding. Retaining his frozen image of her healthy self became like holding an ice cube in his hand and willing it not to melt.

His heart ached as he watched his father's eyes become dark and sunken. Jonah tried to reach out to his father, suggesting they watch Lions games together or play some cards, but as his mother's condition worsened, his father seemed to be disappearing too.

Sam, Jonah's father, married Rachel when they were quite young. They met several months after graduating college. When Sam stood in front of Rachel on their wedding day, his sweaty palms gripping one another behind his back, he imagined at least another sixty years with her. To be robbed of those last couple decades and watch his young wife deteriorate in front of him was excruciating. He found solace in nothing and no one, including Jonah, who suffered beside him. Sam wanted his son to enjoy his youth and do well in school, but couldn't help resenting him as he watched Jonah's car back out of their driveway every Sunday evening. Sam had no escape, no beautiful college campus and classes and friends to retreat to each week.

For Jonah's part, he resented *having* to go back to school and attempt to lead a normal life. He knew he should've viewed being in Ann Arbor all week as an escape and as time to himself, but he also knew the time he had left with his mother was limited. Seeing her two days a week just didn't feel like enough. Moreover, every time Jonah left his home and returned again he noticed the chasm widening between him and his father. Whenever he tried to approach him, Sam would just shrug Jonah off, citing grief and exhaustion as the culprits. Jonah tried to quash the thought when it bubbled up, but he imagined his mother's inevitable death would allow the gorge between them to close. They would have each other to lean on, and that would bring them closer again.

Jonah drifted off into a brief state of semi-consciousness and dreamt that he was falling. Waking when he hit the bottom, his eyes flew open revealing the blue, faux leather airplane seat in front of him. He looked at his watch, calculating the minutes left until he arrived in Detroit: 54. Out the window, the clouds swirled past him, emphasizing the speed at which he was traveling towards an unknown fate. It suddenly occurred to him that he clearly wasn't going to make it to the office tomorrow. He pulled out his phone and dashed off a quick email to his supervisor: *Hey Rick, was on my way home from Miami tonight when a family emergency came up. Have to head to Michigan. Not sure when I'll be back, will keep you posted.*

He dwelled on the words “family emergency” for a moment and felt a twinge of guilt about how opposite of the truth that statement was. For nearly a year he had lived in a true state of constant family emergency, ready to race home the second he felt his pocket buzz with a text message from his father. Now, for the past decade, the concept of family was all but absent from his life. However, this trip felt to him somewhat like an emergency, like somehow the fates conspired to send him back to Michigan.

As the plane neared his childhood home, Jonah visualized the next few hours. He would land in Detroit, rent a car, and drive west on I-96 from Detroit to Grand Rapids. Jonah mentally guided his car from the highway onto the winding local roads of his hometown, somewhat surprised by how easily he would be able to navigate himself back to the home where he grew up. His imagination could guide him to the house, but it failed him when he tried to picture what would happen when he stepped out of his car.

Jonah’s weekly pilgrimages home continued through the snowy Michigan winter and up until the cherry blossoms announced themselves all over Ann Arbor. He knew the end was near, but was nevertheless shocked by how quickly it came. He assumed he had another few weeks. The arrival of spring angered him. He detested the feeling of warmth and rebirth as death consumed him. That Tuesday afternoon in April when his phone rang, he knew before even looking at the caller that his mother was dead. He climbed into his bed and cried uncontrollably, something he hadn’t allowed himself to do for the past nine months. Once his tear ducts were empty and he was able to regain control of his breathing, he packed a small bag and headed back to Grand Rapids, where he had left not even 48 hours prior.

The entire drive back he tried to imagine walking into his parents’ house and his mother not being there. He could not reconcile being in that house without her presence. But nothing could quite prepare him for the quiet and emptiness that ensnared him. His father embraced him wordlessly. They shared take-out pizza in silence, Jonah not quite sure what to say, Sam terrified to speak. After dinner, they both retired to their own bedrooms, Jonah sensing Sam’s desire to be alone and Jonah needing some time to write his eulogy.

After Jonah heard his father turn off the television for the night, he climbed out of his childhood bed – still clad in X-Men sheets – and made his way downstairs, instinctively skipping the fourth stair which always creaked. He hesitated as he approached the guest room where his mother had been living for the past couple of months. He felt as though he was going somewhere he ought not but he managed to turn the small bronze knob and enter the room. Tears threatening to reappear, he dropped himself onto her bed, the smell of her filling his nostrils. How could she be gone if he could still smell her? When he closed his eyes, he could imagine her there beside him. Disturbed, he shook off that image and switched on the lamp on the bedside table. The stark light shuttled him back to reality. The dresser across the room which only a couple months ago had been home to family photographs was now littered with dozens of unnecessary medical supplies. Jonah rose and surveyed these items. His veins suddenly turned to ice; there were significantly fewer vials of morphine there than when he had bent to kiss his mother goodbye on Sunday.

The cold assailed Jonah's lungs as he breathed in the March Michigan air. He stood beside his rental car, stunned by how familiar and yet foreign it felt to be on Michigan soil again. Bleary-eyed, he climbed inside the vehicle, turned the key and read 1 a.m. on the dashboard. He needed to make it to Grand Rapids that night for fear that if he stayed at an airport hotel in Detroit it would be too easy for him just to hop a flight back to Denver in several hours. He recalled a Holiday Inn right off the highway and so he set a course for there on his GPS. Two hours and seventeen minutes.

Jonah's journey from the airport was exactly how he had visualized it on the plane, but he was surprised and frightened by the memories and feelings that bombarded him. The last time he had driven on I-96 West towards Grand Rapids he opened all of the windows and let the slight chill of early spring fill his car. He blasted Radiohead, the most depressing and yet simultaneously rousing music he could think of, and sang at the top of his lungs to keep the panic and tears at bay. *"There's always a siren, singing you to shipwreck! Steer away from these rocks, we'd be a walking disaster!"*

Jonah lay awake the entire night before his mother's funeral, his suspicions plaguing his mind. His grief was momentarily superseded by a blinding anger towards his father. His clammy hands repeatedly forming fists, wordlessly enacting a confrontation with his father he knew would never happen. He felt betrayal he never thought was possible. His father robbed him of his final moments with his mother, and for that he could never forgive him.

From thinking about that last journey home, Jonah's mind jumped to the image of the missing morphine bottles on the dresser and he shuddered. Back then, he did not think he could ever forgive his father, and still wasn't sure he had, or whether distance and time had just anaesthetized the sting. The same day as his mother's funeral, he packed his bag and drove back to Ann Arbor, still in his black suit. That very evening, he sat in front of his computer, staring at the application and requirements for transferring to the University of Colorado.

Jonah winced as he reflected on how foolish and cowardly his younger self had been. Not until he found himself on that highway home again could he see suddenly, and with exceptional clarity, just how much of his reality he had repressed.

Back at the house, Jonah could still feel the slight burning on his palms from the heavy shovel he had wielded as he spilled dirt on his mother's plain, pine casket. Now he sat cold and motionless in the large brown leather arm chair in the living room as friends and family ferried in and out. He accepted condolences with nods and hugs when required. Jonah followed the afternoon sunlight across the large Oriental rug in the middle of the room. The house was mostly quiet by the time it reached the other side. The only voices he heard from the kitchen were his father's and a close family friend or two. Jonah tapped his foot as the anticipation of a potential confrontation with his father brewed. The presence of dozens of people in their home all day had put some comfortable distance between them.

But the pressure within Jonah had already mounted considerably when Sam entered the living room. Sam suggested it might be nice if Jonah could come help them pack up the food in the kitchen. Jonah wasn't quite sure where it came from, but all of a sudden Jonah felt the words "You killed my

mother!” spill out of his mouth. A look of abject horror came over Sam’s face, and he was struck speechless. Jonah launched himself out of the chair, almost falling over, and ran upstairs. He shoved all of his clothes into his small black duffel bag and barreled down the stairs and out to his car, leaving his father still standing, mouth agape, in the living room.

As Jonah’s car neared the hotel and the surroundings of his hometown slowly became familiar – like remembering the foggy details from a dream the next morning – his sense of urgency to return to his home escalated. It was after 3 a.m., so he figured that would give him plenty of time to think before he would ring the doorbell at an appropriate hour. It suddenly occurred to him that it was possible his father had sold the house and felt no need to update Jonah on his whereabouts. A cold sweat broke out all over his body as he considered how foolish and impetuous his decision to fly to Michigan had been. He pulled into the driveway and was simultaneously relieved and scared to spot the black Subaru Forrester with the blue and yellow University of Michigan sticker in the back windshield.

Seeing that familiar car again, and the blue colonial house looming in the darkness behind it, made the situation unbearably real for Jonah. He repeated to himself over and over: “I am going to see my father again” in an attempt to strip the statement of its bizarreness. Until about six hours prior, Jonah was content, or so he thought, with the idea of never setting foot in Michigan ever again. Sitting there in the driveway, despite his palms sweating and the insides of his cheeks near bleeding, he felt more certain about his decision to return than he had all night. He pictured his younger self fleeing through that front door and felt completely disassociated from that person; he could no longer tap into those feelings and relate to the decisions his old self had made. And for the first time in a decade he experienced a sense of calm; he was no longer that person. He realized he hadn’t actually been angry in a long time but had accepted the distance from his father and his home as a given. He was baffled that it took him so long, and coming all this way, to realize that. It wasn’t an apology he needed from his father, but rather one Jonah badly needed to extend. It was he who needed to apologize to his father, not the other way around.

After closing his eyes and breathing deeply, Jonah fell into an unexpected sleep. Dreaming, he found himself trudging through the forest. He came upon a clearing where a badly wounded deer lay before him, breathing slowly and shallowly. When he looked down, he realized he was holding a shot gun in his right hand. Was he hunting? He had never hunted before. He'd never even held a gun before. The deer's suffering didn't look to be ending quickly, and as scared as he was, Jonah knew what he had to do. As he raised the gun, a tap on his car window woke him with a start. He labored to open his sleep-deprived eyes and haloed by the rising sun behind him stood Jonah's father peering down at him. 

Mollie Reznick is an amateur writer from New York who has only recently delved into the realm of creative writing after many years of academic and memoir writing. “Night Flight” is a part of a collection she is currently building called “Missed Connections.”

Visuals by Robert Cosmar



Cleansing by the Creek



Powder Blue Softness

Robert Cosmar is an amateur photographer specializing in High Dynamic Range photography. His interest has been lifelong, but now is a passion to express his feelings in images at this stage of life.

La Fiesta de San Felipe

By Rosalina Diaz

The town of San Felipe was picturesque as a postcard. Festive lights glittered from palm trees surrounding the town square, adding to the brilliance of the star-filled sky. Sounds of splashing water emanated from a fountain. The band played a lively mix of merengue and salsa. In the midst of the square, Isobel could make out a swirling sea of brightly colored skirts. Her uncle, Marco, walked her over to one of the *kioscos* selling café, dulces típicos, frituras and other Puerto Rican specialties. They ordered virgin coladas and *alcapurrias* and joined the couples sitting on stone benches. Isobel's eyes wandered to the Spanish Colonial-style cathedral that dominated the eastern end of the plaza. Wreaths of hibiscus and bougainvillea flowers hung on the doors. The façade was white with a soft blue trim and renaissance-style windows that glowed from within with an unnatural red light. The building was very old and appeared to be standing guard over the plaza. Marco noticed where Isobel was staring.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

“Yeah, but kinda creepy.” Marco looked at the church pensively. The few days he had spent in the sun since their arrival in Puerto Rico were already reflected on his skin; the bronze glow visible evidence of his indigenous ancestry. In spite of the tiny lines at the corners of his intense gray eyes, Marco looked more handsome than ever. Coming back home had definitely agreed with him.

“Hmm...actually, *el Catedral de San Felipe* has a very compelling history. The locals think it's cursed by demons.”

“Seriously? People still believe in demons here?”

“You'd be surprised at the superstitions that survive in these small isolated *pueblos*. Spanish settlers built the Cathedral in the mid-17th century, but they unknowingly built it over a *Taino* burial ground. According to locals, the ancient God of the underworld, *Maquetaurie Guayaba*, sent an earthquake to destroy it in November 1787. It was not rebuilt for almost 60 years, due to several

‘suspicious mishaps’. Then three days later, another earthquake struck, causing significant damage to the structure. That time, it took almost a half century to repair, only to have the vault collapse in the earthquake of 1918.”

“You gotta be kidding, *Tio*. Three earthquakes?”

“*Imagine!* Local government officials were ready to give up on the church, but a prominent founding family intervened and funded the renovations. To me, the church has always seemed more a monument to European stubbornness and persistence than to God.”

“But is the story true, *Tio*?”

“Well, the history is very real. As for the rest of it, who knows? I think all stories have a seed of truth in them and, apparently, the locals agree. They leave fruit offerings every day to appease the ‘*Op’a*’ bat spirits, guardians of *Coabay*, the underworld.”

“Cool. Sooo, the *Taino* history and culture survived too, right?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s right, Isa.”

“What are the bat spirits supposed to look like?”

“Like you and me, but better looking. According to *Taino* legends, they wander the forest at night trying to lure unsuspecting humans. They engage you with witty conversation, but follow them at your peril. Those who do, never return.” Isobel stared into the night thoughtfully. “There is one way to identify them though. They have no belly buttons.” Isobel looked at him incredulously and laughed aloud.

“You had me going there, *Tio*.”

“What do you mean? I’m not kidding, Isa. They don’t have belly buttons because they are not born of human women.”

“Yeah, right,” Isobel responded sarcastically. Before Marco could explain further, Luis Miguel’s *No Se Tu*, began playing over the sound system. It was one of Isobel’s all-time favorite ballads. Then, almost as if she had willed it, a devastatingly handsome guy was standing before her. Isobel almost choked on her drink. He was dressed all in black and wore form-fitting jeans and a *guayabera*. It was open slightly at the neck and the sleeves were rolled up exposing strong well-defined arms almost completely covered by an elaborate ivy tattoo. His hair was pulled back into a

ponytail, which accentuated his strong jaw, full mouth and midnight blue eyes.

When Isobel looked at him, his mouth opened ever so slowly, his tongue darting out to moisten his lips. Then, as if catching himself, he closed his mouth quickly and looked away, purposely avoiding eye contact with her. Unable to speak, Isobel glanced over at her uncle who was openly staring at a petite young woman standing next to the guy.

“Adan, it’s good to see you.” Marco extended his hand to the young man. “I don’t think you’ve been formally introduced to my niece, Isobel. She’s visiting from New York City for her summer break before starting college.” Adan shook Marco’s hand and then glanced at Isobel for only a second, barely acknowledging her.

“Dr. Ortiz, I just wanted to make sure you were alright.” When he spoke, his words, deep and resonant, caressed Isobel’s skin like crushed velvet and left her tingling.

“Thank you, Adan. If you hadn’t come along when you did the other day, I would probably still be sitting in that junk heap of a car in the *Cordillera Central* praying for a miracle,” her uncle added.

“It was our pleasure,” the young woman responded, her voice deep and sultry. When Isobel turned to look at Adan, she caught him staring, but he when their eyes met he quickly looked away. His behavior both troubled and intrigued her. He seemed indifferent to her presence.

“This is my sister, *Irka, Señor...*” Adan dropped his eyes and paused for a moment to gather his thoughts and Isobel noticed that his cheeks reddened slightly. “With your permission, *Señor*. Isobel, would you honor me with this dance?” His request caught Isobel off guard. How could he ignore her so completely and then expect her to dance with him?

“I’m sorry but I don’t dance.” Isobel responded curtly.

“*Por favor*, Isobel,” Irka insisted. Isobel noticed an unusual accent. “Please say yes. Otherwise, I will have to dance with him all night. He will not let me dance with anyone else.”

“Well, we certainly can’t have that,” Marco responded too quickly. For a moment, they all stood in awkward silence and time stood still. Isobel could suddenly make out the sounds of a group of men playing dominoes just outside the plaza, the *bones* hitting the table with a jarring crack. Then Marco laughed, breaking the tension, and gave Adan a small nod of assent. Adan took

Isobel's hand and led her out onto the dance floor. He pulled her body toward his gently but firmly. Her arms instinctively went around his neck. She felt herself tremble and hoped he could not feel it. Adan stood a full head above her. His arm around her waist felt like a steel vise – solid and unbreakable. Isobel allowed her head to rest gently on his chest. He responded by pulling her closer and she suddenly felt very conscious of herself as a woman.

Marco watched Adan lead Isobel onto the dance floor and then immediately redirected his attention to Irka. She was staring out at the dancers in the plaza. She was a rare beauty; impossibly smooth, porcelain skin; dark, luxuriant hair; lips so ripe and moist they seemed about to burst, and a petite frame that disguised a sinful voluptuousness. She turned to him, her large eyes black beyond all imagining. He felt himself falling into that darkness to some unknown doom. Mercifully, she lowered her eyes, coquettishly fanning her long lashes over pale cheeks. And then she smiled, a shy smile that sent a jolt of sensation through his body. She dipped her head and turned away, as if embarrassed by his frank appraisal. He leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“How about a walk?” She nodded her assent. He took her hand and led her away from the plaza and the crowds. Her hand was warm and moist like the Puerto Rican night air that surrounded them.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked.

“Does it matter?” He watched her as she stared off, as if in thought, before responding.

“No. I would go anywhere with you.” She leaned into him and her breast inadvertently brushed against his bare arm. He felt a tingle race through him, igniting long buried desires. He watched her expression and caught the briefest of smiles flit across her perfect features. There was no doubt in his mind that she knew exactly what she was doing. They walked through the labyrinthine narrow streets of *San Felipe*. The town was well maintained and constructed in *reticulos*, a well-organized grid system established by imperial decree and set forth in *Las Leyes Indias*, for all towns built in the New World prior to the 19th Century.

But the outskirts were abandoned and desolate, the structures crumbling and in severe disrepair. Marco began to doubt the wisdom of walking in this part of the *pueblo* at night, and was

just about to suggest they turn around, when they reached the edge of town. They followed a small dirt road that climbed into hilly woods. Within moments they had lost sight of the plaza and were surrounded by forest sounds; the whistling of coquis, the hum of insects, the occasional beep of the Puerto Rican Tody.

Irka leaned back against a huge Ceiba tree invitingly. Marco placed his hands on the rough bark on either side of her. He leaned into her slowly, carefully gauging her reactions. He could feel her warm sweet breath at the base of his neck as she arched her back very slightly, suggestively pressing her breasts against him. The smell of Patchouli, and something else, wafted up to him from her silken hair. He felt drunk, his senses overwhelmed. He closed his eyes, considering his next move, when she suddenly slipped under his arms and ran off into the woods, her deep throaty laughter trailing behind her. He fell against the tree and leaned his forehead against the cool bark to regain his equilibrium.

“Marco...” He could hear her calling him in the distance and stumbled forward, feeling compelled to follow her. He thought he saw her running between some trees just ahead, but she moved so quickly he thought he must have imagined it. And then the thick brush opened into a small clearing by a creek and there she was, sitting by the water, waiting for him. Her blouse had fallen off one shoulder, exposing more of her perfect porcelain skin which seemed to be glowing in the moonlight.

She reached out to him, eyes hungry like a wild animal, and he rushed forward catapulting himself on top of her like an untried schoolboy, pressing her into the soft grassy earth with the weight of his body.

“Am I hurting you?” He mumbled while his lips trailed kisses along the smooth column of her neck. She only laughed and pulled him closer. The rational part of his mind watched critically from afar. This sudden urgency he felt startled him. His experience told him to go slow and easy, but something was driving him hard, and it dawned on him that if he did not slow down this would be over before it even got started.

Suddenly, Marco sensed that something was very wrong. Before he could think twice, he was thrown backwards onto the ground. Black clouds swallowed the moon and the night slipped into

complete darkness. Marco could barely make out Irka's silhouette, as she climbed on top of him. He felt her fumbling with his pants before a searing pain made him convulse and spasm uncontrollably. The pain was so intense, his vision blurred and his limbs grew weak. What the hell had she done to him? He reached out blindly and grabbed a handful of her silken hair. She easily escaped his grasp and his hand dropped uselessly to his side. He had the strangest notion that he should have checked her for a belly button. He laughed weakly and surrendered to unconsciousness, as black soulless eyes watched over him dispassionately from a blue iridescent face.

Isobel looked up to find Adan studying her with penetrating blue eyes. His expression was cold and distant. She responded indignantly.

“Why did you do that?”

“Excuse me?” Adan answered, confused.

“I mean asking my uncle permission to dance with me? I do what I want. I don't need anyone's permission.” Adan studied her for a moment before responding.

“Honestly, Isobel, I am not concerned with what you want. It is a matter between men. You are a female in his charge and, as such, I owe him a measure of respect. It has nothing to do with you.” Isobel was momentarily too flabbergasted by Adan's words to react. What the hell was with this guy? She pushed on his chest and turned to walk away but Adan quickly reached out and caught her by the upper arm.

“Let me go, Adan. This dance is over.” She struggled to free herself but Adan's hold on her was too strong.

“Be still, Isobel. People are staring. I apologize if I offended you. It was not my intention. At least allow me to escort you back to your uncle without shaming us both.” Isobel stopped squirming and turned to face him. Her anger was softened by his remorseful expression. She suddenly felt a strange warmth spreading through her limbs and found she was having trouble focusing.

“Are you alright, Isobel?” His voice sounded very close to her ear and she realized she was

in his arms again. How exactly that had happened she was not sure.

“Hmmm? Oh, yeah. I’m fine. Just a little dizzy.”

“Isobel, would you permit a personal question?” He inclined his head slightly so she could hear him over the music. Adan’s scent was overpowering, a blend of woods, the ocean, the night and something deeper. He smelled like the Earth itself, natural and primitive. She was finding it increasingly difficult to focus on his words.

“Uh huh...”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.” She felt his body stiffen slightly. “Why? How old are you?” Adan did not respond or even acknowledge the question.

“Are you alright, Adan?”

“Your uncle and my sister seem to have disappeared,” he responded, looking around distractedly.

“No worries. Your sister is perfectly safe with my uncle.”

“It’s not my sister I am worried about. Irka can be very impulsive, unpredictable. I wouldn’t want your uncle getting hurt.” His words seemed to be coming at her from very far away and her body felt strangely light. Isobel closed her eyes.

“Isobel...?” When she opened her eyes again, Adan’s arms were wrapped tightly around her, concern etched on his face.

“What happened?”

“You fainted. We need to find your uncle. You should go home, immediately.”

“What? No, I’m fine. I don’t want to ruin my uncle’s evening. Can we just sit down for a minute?” Adan nodded and led Isobel to an unoccupied bench near the fountain.

“Shall I get you something to drink or eat?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Are you comfortable? We could go into the *cafeteria*. It’s air-conditioned.”

“Please, stop making a fuss.” Adan’s sudden concern for her was disconcerting. In fact, his rapid-fire mood changes were starting to give her whiplash. Isobel leaned back and closed her eyes, but Adan’s silent presence at her side was unnerving.

“Where are you from, Adan? You’re not originally from San Felipe, are you?”

“Yes... and no. We have no home to speak of. We are *gitanos*... like gypsies.”

“What about school?”

“We’ve never gone to school. The world is our school; Life, our teacher.” Isobel considered his words. Her life had been built on the premise that academic success was necessary for a secure future. The lifestyle he spoke of now challenged that belief. It was a foreign, but intriguing, concept.

“What about dating, falling in love, marriage, kids?”

“We don’t marry outside our own people. It’s forbidden.” Isobel was suddenly distraught. She noticed that he was staring at her face intently again, as if searching for a reaction.

“You don’t look well, Isobel. We should find your uncle and Irka.” This time Isobel did not argue. The air between them had grown thick with tension and Isobel was suffocating. Adan helped her to her feet and they began walking silently back to the dance area. She looked around and noticed that the door to the church was ajar. The light that escaped beckoned to her. She broke away from Adan’s side and ran toward the church.

“Isobel... wait!” She did not look back. He did not follow. No doubt he was relieved to be rid of her. He had probably only asked her to dance out of some misplaced sense of social obligation. Had she only imagined the chemistry between them? How utterly humiliating.

Isobel dipped her fingers in the holy water and made the sign of the cross on her forehead before walking down the center aisle to the sanctuary. An old, partially damaged wooden crucifix hung just behind the church altar. The Christ figure was wearing a loincloth draped across his narrow hips, as was the norm, but the right side was broken off, exposing the full length of a lean but muscular thigh and hip. Brownish-red blood ran down his sun-bronzed face from the crown of thorns on his head and down the side of his pale body from the deep gash in his side. Scraggly dark

hair partially obscured midnight blue eyes that were down cast and pained. Isobel, drawn in by those eyes, was suddenly overwhelmed by unexpected emotions - anger, bitterness... betrayal? She was startled from her reverie by someone tugging on her arm and turned to see a tiny white haired old woman. Her crinkly pale skin stood out in sharp contrast to her black dress, and her white hair was pulled back in a chignon at the base of her skull.

“*Mi’ja, estas en peligro.*” When Isobel did not respond the old woman tried again in broken English. “You are in danger, my child. The Demonios... they have marked you. *Me permites?*” Isobel nodded and lowered her eyes respectfully. The old woman placed her hands upon Isobel’s forehead and mumbled a prayer of protection. Then she made the sign of the cross over Isobel’s head. “If you need us, we are here, always here, in the Church. You will find us again when the time comes. *Si?*” Isobel nodded again and then rushed down the center aisle and out of the church. As she looked around for her uncle, her gaze landed upon the fountain. From a distance, she had assumed the winged statue on top of the fountain was an angel. She had been mistaken. It was a male demon with huge bat-like wings, screaming up to heaven. Inside the fountain, at the demon’s feet, was a woman, either unconscious or dead. The entire image was beyond beautiful. It was haunting and terrifying.

“It’s called *El Fuente de los Murcielagos.*” The disembodied voice almost made Isobel jump out of her skin. “I’m sorry *Senorita* Isobel, did I frighten you?” Isobel turned to see a tall dark young man wearing loose fitting blue jeans and a black tee shirt.

“I’m sorry, do I know you?” He shrugged nonchalantly.

“Perhaps. It’s a small town. I’m Angel.” His broad smile was contagious and Isobel found herself smiling back at him. “The fountain has an interesting history. Do you know it?”

“Let me guess,” Isobel responded sarcastically. “It has something to do with demons.” Angel laughed out loud and Isobel laughed with him, feeling immediately at ease.

“I see you’ve already heard some of our local legends. But the story of the fountain is really a love story. I will tell it to you some day. But tell me, are you enjoying your time in San Felipe?”

“I’m still trying to decide.”

“Well perhaps I can help. Would you honor me with a dance under the stars?” Isobel looked around nervously.

“I should be looking for my uncle. He must be worried about me.”

“Dr. Ortiz? Isn’t that him? He doesn’t look worried to me.” Isobel spotted Marco dancing a *merengue* with Irka. He looked young and happy, Isobel almost didn’t recognize him. They made a striking pair. As Isobel watched, Irka whispered something in Marco’s ear and he threw back his head and laughed aloud, pulling Irka closer. Inexplicably, a feeling of dread washed over Isobel and settled, heavy as a stone, in the pit of her stomach.

“Are you okay, Isobel?”

“What? Oh, sure. I’m great. What was that you were saying about a dance?” Angel grinned and took her hand in a spontaneous gesture as he pulled her onto the dance floor.

Adan stepped out from behind the fountain, his expression grim. He watched Isobel and Angel dancing, feeling utterly powerless. He had always prided himself on his detachment, a trait that had enabled him to survive the unnaturally long years of his life and the horror of his existence. But the moment his eyes had met hers, all that had altered. With one look, she had carelessly cracked the hard shell he had so painstakingly built around his soul and, in that instant, his world shifted. He had been driven to see her, to understand why, after all these years, he should respond so powerfully to a mere girl. But in so doing, he had inadvertently put her in mortal danger. Irka had already staked a claim, and now Angel... Too late now to retreat. If he didn’t take action, someone else would, and he couldn’t bear that – not with Isobel. He sauntered over to the church and listened beneath an open window, deriving some small comfort from the prayers of the old women. He sensed the moment they felt his presence, and one voice rose strong and powerful above the others. It was Dona Amparo, the old witch.

“*Auferetur Daemonium!* Begone Demon! There is no salvation for you here.” He sighed and whispered, just loud enough for her ears.

“Te videre in inferos, Witch!” and walked away bitterly.

The heat was stifling. Isobel had been floating in and out of sleep for several hours before finally rising to look out her window. The waxing moon illuminated the trees outside with an otherworldly light, enhancing shapes and shadows. She froze. A man stood under her window, his hair loose and wild, his shirt open and exposing an ivy tattoo that glowed crimson in the moonlight. It was Adan. He looked troubled. She stepped back from her window and was immediately aware of a change in the air. It was infused with a scent, primitive and earthy.

“Isobel.” She turned and saw Adan standing beside her bed, in her room. She grabbed a bed sheet to cover herself and looked at him in stunned silence. He stared back with an intensity that immobilized her, his scent, now all around her, making her dizzy.

“Close your eyes, Isobel.”

“What?”

“Close your eyes, baby. You’re dreaming.” His voice was soft, sultry, seductive. Isobel’s eyes closed of their own volition and the white bed sheet slipped from her fingers. 

Anthropologist and Associate Professor, Rosalina Diaz incorporates the rich cultural history and mythology of Puerto Rico into her fiction. She has published several research articles and chapters, including a memoir, “The Amazon of Matinino: A Personal Legacy of Female Empowerment in the Greater Antilles,” and most recently, “Grito de Caguana: Identity Conflict in Puerto Rico” in *'O Brave New World.'* “La Fiesta de San Felipe” is based on the complete book one of “Nocturne: The San Felipe Incubus Chronicles.” She currently resides in Puerto Rico, assisting in recovery efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

Repentance

By Pei-Hsuan Hsieh

Yen leans forward, excited to hear the story.

“It was past midnight when we got back to the camp site. We were all exhausted. The hike was long and tough that day, and after we set up the tents the adults said the view was the best they’d seen so we had to get out and see it. No one wanted to walk out of the tent. We just wanted to sleep; it had been a long day. But somehow, we got out and gasped at what we saw. The stars were everywhere. Everywhere, and I would not have been surprised if they started pouring down on us. I’m not exaggerating. The sky looked like a huge bowl and we were lying beneath it. It was truly beautiful. But I had a bad headache and I felt like I could throw up any time. Maybe it was because of my period.”

“I can relate.” Yen nods a little too eagerly, leaning closer.

I shouldn’t have told her that this was a fantastic story. It’s a good one, but probably not good enough to meet her expectations.

It’s Saturday night. We’ve been staying in my room doing nothing for the whole day. We’re supposed to be studying for the high school entrance exam but we both feel like there is still time. My parents are out for the weekend, so I invited Yen to stay over last night. I might ask her later to stay for tonight. I need company. The empty house can be somewhat creepy at night and Yen’s the type of person whose very existence makes you feel safe, secure. I glance at her. She’s cleaning her glasses with the rim of her pyjamas, the one that has pictures of rabbits and carrots on it. What she doesn’t know is that this will only make the glasses even dirtier.

“There were about a hundred people. Everyone was more or less smitten by the sight; whispers and laughter popped up from time to time. Oh, and it was cold. My face felt numb and my fingers hurt in the gloves. I started to feel dizzy.”

“You must have been.” Yen says thoughtfully, slowly moving her fingers as if they hurt too.

Yen is the kind of person whose mind is just so easy to read. Befriending her has been one of the easiest decisions I've made. She is always there. Always listening and saying she understands. But I bet most of the time she doesn't. Yen, the simple, kind Yen; she would not understand the epiphanies I had or the complicated feelings I endured. And that's why a good person like her can become annoying sometimes.

"And there was a boy on my team, the youngest in the group," I continue. "I can't remember his name, but I remember his face. He has an older brother who's also on the team, but he didn't seem very fond of him. Probably had his own group of friends. So, the boy was on his own most of the time.

"And that boy was very, very sweet. Everyone else just called me by my name, but for some unknown reason he sometimes called me captain, which was weird in the beginning but then I got used to it."

"You got used to it. I see." Yen says, adjusts her position, and leans close. I make the decision that if she leans in even closer again I'll have to move away. It will be rude, but I'd have no other choice.

"The way he looked at me was as if he knew that if he rolled down the mountain or had an unexpected seizure, I was going to be the one who saved him. The complete trust I saw in his eyes, his smiles - It was amazing."

Yen nods again, her mouth slightly open, which gives her a funny look, almost like a cow.

"Anyway," I continue. "To tell this story I must first say a little about what happened that day, before we saw the stars and before we set the tents. So, going a few hours back. We were on the mountain. The sky was so clean. The sunlight was blazing but it was cold.

"You've climbed that mountain before, right? Then I'll spare you the details. You know how beautiful it is. The boy had to stop multiple times. It was his first time. The climbing was too challenging for him, so I stopped and rested with him. We drank water, a lot of water. The truth is, I got pretty tired too, and because I was the captain I couldn't just stop and catch my breath. So sometimes when he asked to stop I was almost grateful."

"Did he know that?" Yen asks, pouring some coke into her mug.

"I don't think so. I hid it pretty well."

"I see." She reaches for her mug and knocks it.

"I'm so sorry!" she says as the brown liquid spreads slowly across the table.

"It's okay." I get up and grab the rag from the kitchen. I don't really care as long as it doesn't spill on the carpet.

"We stopped very frequently and took quite a lot of rest. It was nice, but a few hours later we were very behind. And then this happened..."

'You guys alright?' one of the guides of our team approached us.

I nodded.

'Stay safe and catch up. There's no one behind.'

'How far are we from the peak? 500 meters?'

'About two kilometers.'

I heard a small sob, probably from my heart. I glanced at the boy; his bright, innocent eyes met mine.

'Thanks,' I said to the guide, thinking maybe he would join us and lead us and protect us from whatever possible danger there was in the mountain. 'We'll be fine.' I should have asked for help, but the words escaped too soon.

'Okay.' He walked briskly past us, and after a while he said without turning his head, 'You better speed up! Sun's going down.'

'You heard what he said.' I made a sound that's between a sigh and a cough and helped the boy adjust his backpack. 'We're very behind.'

But I regretted saying that when I realized it sounded like I was saying it's his fault. But since I couldn't take the words back I guess there's no point in regretting.

It was getting colder and soon I could see our breath in the air. We were both tired but it was just starting to get challenging. The slope was steep and the mountain seemed so huge and we so small. But when I looked around us I couldn't help but wonder at everything I saw. The sky turned orange and our long shadows stretched along the endless field. 'It's beautiful, isn't it?' I said to the

boy. 'Yeah,' he replied. We didn't talk much. We were both panting. Then we ran out of water, and that was when we really started to speed up. But apparently it was not enough; I could barely see the people ahead.

'I'm cold,' he said during a longer break. I took a careful look at him. And, my god, he did look cold, he lips were chapped and almost purple. He seemed to be even smaller than he actually was, as if he'd shrunk during the past few hours.

'I don't have gloves,' he added. I took another careful look at him, this time not only at his face but also at his unprotected hands, his khaki pants that didn't look warm at all, and his black, heavy boots.

'Why didn't you bring gloves?' I said almost in despair.

'I forgot. I'm sorry.'

'You don't have to apologize for that. But why didn't you tell me?'

No response, and then he said quietly, 'I'm sorry.'

'Didn't your brother tell you to bring them? They keep you warm. Gloves are the most important things, maybe except for your alpenstock.' I wanted to add, 'Without the stick, you fall. Without the gloves, you freeze.' It's was a clever line. But it wouldn't do him any good, so I kept it to myself.

The boy didn't respond. He just stood there staring at his hands as if he thought if he stared at them long enough a pair of gloves would miraculously appear out of thin air.

'You know what?' I sighed. 'Never mind. I might have an extra pair.'

And luckily, I did have an extra pair. I gave them to him and watched him put them on. The gloves belonged to my father. They were big on me, so you can imagine what they looked like on him.

Now we had really lost sight of all others. It was only around six o'clock, but it was getting darker.

'Ready to go?' I patted him on his back, knowing that taking care of him made me feel good.

He bent over and vomited in response. I stepped back immediately, my hand away from his back. Then I felt ashamed and walked back to him. Luckily, I don't think he noticed anything.

Yen nods. I know she's waiting for the part that will make this story as interesting as I promised. "I get it, but where's the climax?" she must be wondering. As I said before, it's easy to read her mind.

But we made it. We finally got to the top and reunited with others. We took pictures and started to walk to the buses that would send us back to the camp site. It was very warm inside and I picked a seat in the back row. It was dark outside. I looked out of the window and saw the boy getting onto the other bus. His brother was behind him. He said something to the boy and they both laughed. I had a very strange feeling that the brother was taking over my position, although I'd never really made him laugh.

"How did you know? You probably had." Yen interrupts. I see pity in her eyes. Pity! Since when did I allow myself to be pitied by someone like her? But I know she is of the best intentions, so I simply shrugged and said nothing before continuing on.

We got back to the camp site, set up the tents, and were finally able to rest. But they wanted us to watch the stars, so we did. I lay there with my head pounding. It wasn't the most painful thing I'd experienced, but still very unpleasant. Then I saw the boy walking to me. He was the only one standing and his small figure looked big and lonely. Well, big was the fact, and lonely is my opinion.

'I have a headache,' I told him. He put his small hand on my forehead and said, 'It's not a fever. I don't think it's a fever.' And I said, 'Thanks, doctor.' The pain was growing stronger, and the glittering of the stars started to get blurry. And that was when it happened.

I saw my life, all of my memories, displayed right in front of me.

It was very, very strange. And besides that, all I felt was a strong, deep pain. Fiercer than my headache. In my fourteen years of life, I'd cheated on tests; I'd bullied people who are kind to me; I'd given them a hard time and sometimes I enjoyed it; I judged everyone everywhere. I know I didn't kill anyone or burn down houses but all I could think of was how obnoxious, how despicable this

person was. And I started to panic when I realized this person was me and would always be me, and that all these hateful deeds cannot be undone.

How I wished I could start my life all over again! When the vision was over, I turned to face the boy. His face was pale but except for that he looked quite well and he said, 'Thank you.' I said, 'For what?' And he said, 'You were so good to me today.' He made me feel relieved. That's not bad, I thought, at least I did something good today.

“And that’s the end.” I leaned my head against the cushion and spent a few seconds reminiscing. What I didn’t tell Yen was that I revised the ending a little bit. Yes, I did take care of the boy that day and that has made me feel good but he didn’t come to find me that night. If I remember correctly he didn’t even come to the stargazing because he was too ill. And I didn’t have the vision, either. And to be honest, I don’t really know why or when I decided to change the plot. But it’s a good story, and I like this new version. I think Yen does, too.

The original ending is that a few days after the trip, I got a message from the boy’s mother saying how much she wanted to thank me for taking care of her son. I read it three times. And when I was about to start the fourth, I suddenly realized how much I needed this message, this thank you note, and that in a small corner of my mind I’d probably been anticipating it for a while. And I didn’t know until then that I believed so deeply that kindness should be rewarded, especially my kindness.

But I didn’t tell Yen all this. I don’t expect her to understand. I wonder if Yen thinks so too, that she deserves her kindness rewarded? I cannot read her mind for this answer. And at this moment I realize that I don’t know her at all, this girl I’ve been friends with for almost three years now, whom I like but always despised a little. She’s sitting opposite to me, gazing at a spot on the floor; she seems to be in a deep thought. Who did I think I was that I could despise her and mark her as a simple person? I watched her and suddenly feared that she would look up at me and say, “You’re not half as smart as you think, you know?” But she didn’t. She just kept staring and thinking. I was afraid that she knew what I thought of her all this time.

“Yen?” I call her without really knowing why I’m calling her.

“Yeah?” She seems a little shocked to be interrupted from her meditation.

“Nothing, sorry. I forgot what I wanted to say.”

“It’s okay,” she says, adjusting her stained glasses.

“Actually, are you hungry yet?” I ask.

“Not very. But we can eat now if you want.” She stretches, revealing the pale skin under her pyjamas.

“We can go eat at that new restaurant. I heard it’s good. Then we can watch a movie.” I get up and grab my sweater.

“Sounds great,” she says.

“Oh and, do you want to stay over tonight too?”

“Yeah sure. But I’m running out of socks and underwear.”

“You can wear mine.”

“Thanks.” Yen smiles at me. Then she rises from the sofa and starts to change. 

Pei-Hsuan (or Angela) Hsieh was born and raised in Taiwan and is currently a freshman at NYU. She has always loved to write and started writing fiction at the age of six but had an entirely new appreciation of fiction after reading James Joyce, Raymond Carver, and Alice Munro. They have become her role models in writing short fiction. She hopes that her works can capture a certain feeling, or a twist of the feeling, in some way, and that the readers will leave reminiscing that feeling.

Colored Compulsions

By Maeghan Suzik

The Night Before: Ben

Two, four, six, eight, ten.

Counting will always calm me down.

“Honey, try to wrap up your homework. I’ve got dinner on the table.”

Mom. She tries. She doesn’t know. Counting helps more than she can. Two, four, six, eight, ten. Two, four, six, eight, ten. Never count the odd numbers. They worry me. They’re not complete. They don’t have a buddy.

“I’ll be down in a second!”

The red pen is gone. My best red pen. Usually swirling in the mason jar with my scissors and sharpies, next to my stack of four red composition notebooks. I never misplace my red pen. Red is good. Red is my favorite.

“Let’s go or you’re going to have some soggy lasagna!” Great.

The only thing I like about lasagna is the sauce. I’ve got no red pen and a dinner that is stuck together. Two, four, six, eight, ten. Need to get to dinner. Mom will think I’m masturbating. The pen is probably downstairs anyway. I count the first-floor landing as a step so that it’s even.

Marcus

I do not ever know when an artistic mood will hit. It is never planned because it a feeling of true and honest spirituality that I have no control over. I also never realize the importance of my work until after it is finished. I lose consciousness, as any authentic artist would, during my process of creation. I think of myself as a God of some sort. An almighty, supernatural being blessing this Earth with my imaginative formations. This is my purpose. My passion and right, which is not bound by any man-made constitution. And my finest quality, as the critics would say, is my choice of medium.

Ben

“You are always so rhythmic coming down those stairs, Ben. You ever notice that?” Yes, Mother. I’ve been doing this for 13 years now, don’t you keep track of anything? “Nah. Didn’t realize.”

She gives a look of phony disbelief. The usual. As she falls into her own pattern of rolling her eyes and sighing out through her crow’s feet wrinkles she places a glob of layered cake gone wrong onto the plate in front of me. At least it’s red.

“Have you seen my red pen?”

Mockingly: “Oh no, not the red pen.” She chuckles at her own sarcasm. Cue the routine advice. “There’s about a bajillion pens in the junk drawer. Go grab one and I’m sure it will fill the same need.”

Two, four, six, eight, ten. Fuck you. Two, four, six, eight, ten. Slide the top cheese layer off. It goes to the right side of the plate. Then the ground beef. Left side. The slimy pasta remains in the middle. Looks like a crime scene. Messy, but good. Each piece leaves behind a snail trail, but at least it’s red.

She studies me carefully with wide eyes. Sits. Takes a bite slowly as if she were secretly evaluating me. “So...what took you so long to get down here? You weren’t...masturbating, were you?”

Called it. “Mom!”

Mimicking my tone: “I’m just kidding!” Two, four, six, eight, ten. “But this is just a funky time for you and I guess I want to be a family that is really...open and honest. Okay?”

“Sure.”

Yeah, no. It’s time to find my red pen. I’ve already finished the middle layer of rose colored beef anyway. I count the second-floor landing as a step so it’s even.

“Ben! I’m sorry! Please come back and finish your lasagna!”

Marcus

Tonight, my humanness is nauseating. Writer's block. A dancer on crutches. An actor who forgets their soliloquy on opening night. Boo me off the stage. Throw tomatoes at my failing soul.

“Goddamnit, Marcus!”

The basement smells like it is rotting again. It is time for a clean slate. A blank canvas for my immortal heart to leap onto. But my paint is all dry. Just like my pockets. I take the form of a true starving artist in this portion of life. I must be reborn.

Ben

Found it. Slipped down between the desk and wall. The red pen fell into the crack and I didn't even notice.

I see it roll away in my head. Roll away. Roll away. How could I have not noticed?

But I have it now. So, I write. Ink on paper. Ink on paper. Smooth, steady lines. Flowing. Contained red chaos in pools that I control. I love the red. I let it fill my hand. Then my arm. Then my chest. The red *feels good*.

The Morning of: Ben

The alarm clock must go off six times. I'm awake by the third, but I let it continue. Four--
“BEN! SHUT THAT THING UP. RISE AND SHINE.”

Six. Off.

The morning is easy. Up. Make bed. Socks on to go to the bathroom. Wash hands. Brush teeth. Wash face. Wash hands again. Dress. Red shirt. Jeans. White shoes, red stripe. Re-pack bag.

Take notebooks out. Then back in. Out. Then back in. Check for pen, phone, wallet. Pen, phone, wallet. Pen, phone, wallet. Done.

“Two pancakes or three?”

Two, of course. I always have the same answer. It's Friday. Pancake day is Friday. Direct deposit went through, so we celebrate. I always want two. She should know this.

“Two, I know. I don’t know why I even ask. Here. You’re in charge of how many chocolate chips. Have at it!” Thank fucking Jesus. I take over. I am captain of my eight chips scattered perfectly in the sizzling lump of dough. Beautiful. I can eat this. Clean up Mom’s drips first.

“I don’t have to go into work until a little later today, so I was thinking I could maybe walk with you to school? Not to the front door...just until you’re a block away. I don’t like you walking all alone each day. Makes me nervous.”

You chose this neighborhood so I *could* walk to school. I start my second serving. “Plus it’s nice out...”

Mhm. Sure. Two, four, six, eight chips. Perfect.

“...and I feel like we haven’t really hung out in a while.”

Boom. There it is. I flip the pancake neatly. “I’ve got it, Mom. We can hangout – er - tonight.”

I focus on pressing my breakfast flat into the frying pan. A small sigh from behind me. In this moment the meal takes precedence. I can see it’s symmetrical qualities. Unlike Mom.

“Well, alright.” She’s not a fighter. But will walk me to the end of the driveway nonetheless. Compromise.

Marcus

No rest for the wicked? No rest for the weary? No, no, it is no rest for the innovative divine. I have got to awake from this sleepless slumber.

Bang. Bang. Bang. The pressure may inspire my head to develop some sort of elegant draft.

Bang. Bang. Bang. A little harder this time. I must be released from my homo sapien form.

Outside the cracked glass window my little neat freak of a horny middle school neighbor walks down his, shockingly, weed infested driveway. He steps over the baby leaflets as his mother naively clomps on each crack in the worn concrete.

I think it’s time for a visit.

Hours Before: Ben

Middle school is so dirty. Infested. I can see hormones everywhere. Crawling. Flopping towards my skin. But today is red. I've got my shirt and pen to protect me. Finished my writing assignment in English. Twelve minutes to spare!

Even when Kristen walks by. Not running away today. Her red Kool-Aid dyed tips whistle at me. Sends fire to my jeans. All I see is red. It's a good day.

Marcus

Whack. Unlock. "Good morning!"

She is quite beautiful. I must admit the onset of middle age looks good on her.

Pressing on the door handle and gently swinging back and forth on its hinges, she repeats back with plastered smile, "good morning!"

She is obviously not a visionary. Though she smells of paint.

Seconds Before: Ben

The walk home from school is boring. Not much red in the natural world. It is the inside where it thrives.

The sound of the door bolt whacking into its cave in the frame makes me feel safe. There are consequences to leaving the door open. Mom's bad habit. *Whack.* Lock. *Whack.* Unlock. *Whack.* Lock. *Whack.* Unlock. *Whack.* Lock. *Whack.* Unlock. I pull my shirt up and wrap it around my palm. No doorknob germs for me today.

Seconds After: Marcus

I have found it. The medication for my feebleness! The muse for my deific power! A thick, swirling rapid that can be excavated from a single puncture. Stepping back, I awake from my artistic dormancy and marvel at my achievement in this doorway. This work will be remembered. The medium of all mediums! It is the inside where it thrives.

As I rise to my angelic stature and out of my fleshy entrapment, the goddamn door begins to click.

Ben

I slip.

Marcus

I run to the backdoor.

Ben

I never get much quiet. My head is too loud. Constantly refreshing images live in me. So, when I wake up, the fuzz in my ears is shocking. This silence is new. But like a tsunami, the sound must recede before it crashes. I am scared for the landing, but then I realize the sea I'm already in.

My mother has risen.

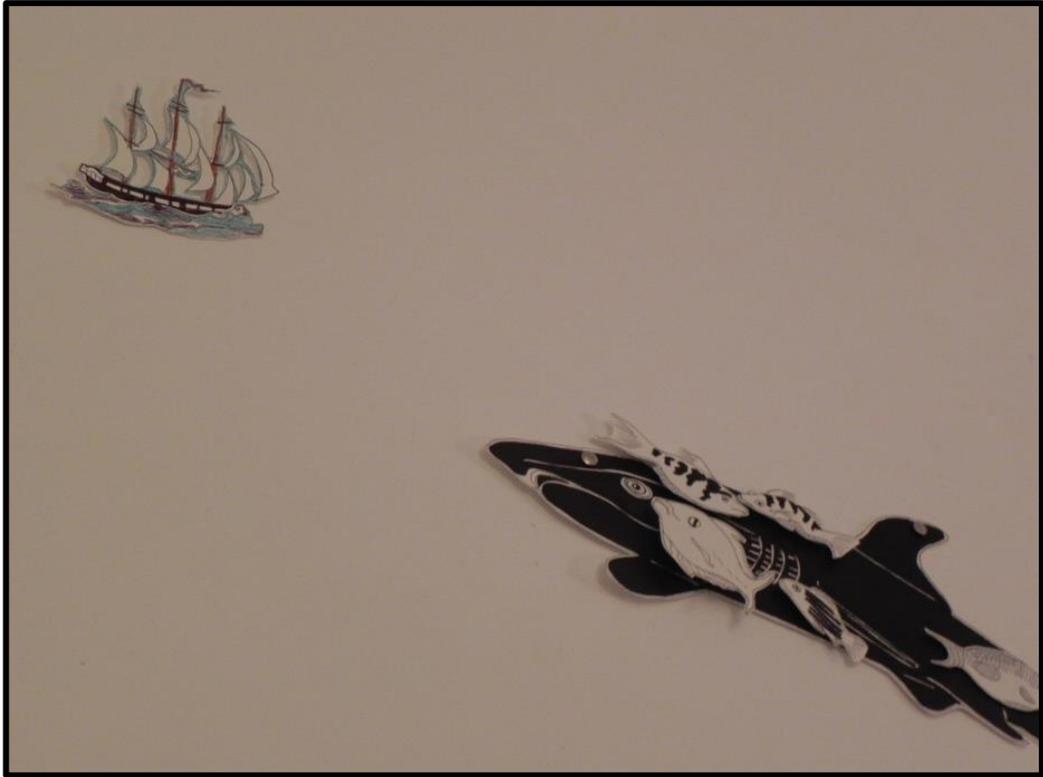
Red. Red. Red. Everywhere. Red. Thick. Red. Mess. Count? No. Red. Good? Count? Red. Good.

That Night: Marcus

That boy got the credit for my masterpiece. 

Maeghan Mary Suzik is currently attending New York University Tisch School of the Arts to receive her BFA in acting as well as a minor in creative writing. She has always been interested in creating work that shares voices of those not always given the microphone, especially dealing with mental health. With only a few published poems, she is a new writer looking to make an impact.

Visuals by Annaick Caraes



The artist focuses on the simplicity of the action. There is something disturbing here, but despite the differences in size, we do not quite know why. The paper and felt materials highlight the minimalism and the fear. Perhaps the most notable aspect is the use of space.



This statuette is part of a series on the theme: bearer of worries. The peculiarity of this is that it is a child. The glass jar both protects him and limits him. Problems have abstract forms, and by placing the idea in a small statuette, one can gain insight by seeing the doll at a distance. The papier-mâché painted in oil highlights the symbolism of this doll as she stands looking out of her own little world.



A couple passes each other, maybe in the street. They are only going to cross but they tell everyone that they would have liked to have spoken to each other. But this spark is fleeting and captured only in this moment of misconnection. The material of papier-mâché - both fragile and strong - echoes this single moment in time.



The image of the bird: freedom as we know it. The artist's theme of birds is recurrent, and they use this old symbol to mimic this longing for freedom. It is the oldest dream in the world - to fly. This is the technique of the monotype. A form of printing that can only be done once but is painted again with different colors to emulate different birds. In this way, we are all distinct patterns and pictures, but at the core we share a basic stamp.

Annaick Canaes is a graduate in visual arts from the University of Rennes, France. She likes to play with images and mix different visuals. She works with oil paint, acrylic, gouache, and, more recently, linocut and papier-mâché. She has worked with Bordas-Larousse, the magazine Sciences et Vie Junior and Editions Michel Lebrun. Annaick also teaches drawing at the Philotechnique Association.

Poetry

Godiva

By Megan Anning

Eleven-oh-two is a moment I imagine:

My head seeps through, into the blue

Pool of my iris with its

Black pupil peering at my fingers,

Piercing into you and you and you.

I see all as a watcher in the woods,

As a caged serval cat, pacing,

As a tortoise shell Morpheus

Dreaming behind bars, awakened

In the night to begin this hack through the snow,

This canter I do just to look back to see

Shadows of my own steps.

White down of winter has awakened

Yet again and I ride through,

A naked Godiva plowing into cold,

Night streets by the light of a reading lamp.

Rain is falling outside behind curtains

Drawn shut on a starless sky:

It smiles a crooked smile in an eyeless face

As I spur on, through all these lonely minutes

Like a fox, like a long-haired daemon with
Wings and a horn and an ivory box,
Out of which comes the shape of my dreams
Which leave dark shadows in this whitest of sleet. 

Megan Anning is an Australian writer and teacher who is working on her first novel, *Last Artist*, which is a story about art, love and tragedy, set in the Bohemian enclave of West End, Brisbane. Her short stories have appeared in *Text Journal* and *The West End Magazine*.

Adoring You

By Rodney Paige

My heart is the temple
Where I worship you
I arrive there
A worn and tattered pilgrim
Having traversed the darkness
Of my Soul
I stand naked before your altar
Stripped bare of pride
Anger and fear
Summoned by whispers
Of love's sweet refrain
I light a candle
I close my eyes
And see your face
In the distant horizon
Fleeting verses ride my breath
Like prayers lifted
To the heights of heaven
I sing of your glories
Silently awaiting your blessings
Adoring the light
In your gaze

The truth in your words

The love in your ways

Adoring you. 

Rodney Paige resides in Atlanta, Georgia. He is a part-time writer who likes to put life experiences to prose.

Leaving Rome

By Paulette Guerin

Along the Spanish Steps, streetlights popped on
like syncopated fireflies. Walking up Via del Corso,
I passed shop mannequins with averted eyes,
pulled my coat tighter, thinking of Keats,
dead at twenty-five. A cyclone of cars spun
at the foot of Vittorio Emanuele's grimy shrine.
The Coliseum's pocked crown rose above
the Forum's broken bones. I mailed a postcard,
the scene depopulated and clean, knowing
it would arrive months before I returned home,
knowing it looked nothing like what I'd seen. 

Paulette Guerin lives in Arkansas and works as a freelance editor. Inspired by Thoreau's *Walden*, she is building a tiny cabin and blogging about the experience at pauletteguerinbane.wordpress.com. Her poetry has appeared in *Concho River Review*, *The Tishman Review*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, and others. She has a chapbook, *Polishing Silver*.

My River Never Runs Dry

By Milton Ehrlich

I'm never alone—

your reservoir will never run dry.

I skirt bloodsuckers and stings of bumble bees—

listen to nightingales and applaud butterflies.

I tell my story to every starfish and anemone

that will listen and scrutinize corals

of every color, shade, and hue.

I dive into the bottom of the river

to get a glimpse of the epilogue at the end.

It is full of surprises.

Gone is yesterday's scorpion with hairy legs.

Fish smile back at me pleased with the bugs

they have found to eat. I sleep, a sated babe

on a stone washed clean of my sins.

Baptized in the river,

I make the sign of the cross

in case there is a God—

I wear a yarmulke
to cover my bald spot,
and a Foy-Mall on my wrist
because we're meditators
who sit back-to-back as one
in a love that never ends. 

Milton P. Ehrlich, Ph.D. is an 86-year old psychologist. A Korean War veteran, he has published numerous poems in periodicals such as *Descant*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Rutherford Red Wheelbarrow*, *Toronto Quarterly Review*, *Antigonish Review*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Huffington Post*, and the *New York Times*.

By the Creek

By Shawen Greer

Sunlight glints off the murky creek water.
Weathered boards of the old pier groan,
whisper memories to me
sitting on its edge, bobbing my legs over the swell
over the swell of the impending tide.

I wonder, in this quiet place,
with ducks rustling, hidden by the marsh grass,
and toads finding their evening voice:
what is truly valuable
that you left behind for me?

I have learned that Nature speaks to us
if we take the time to listen.
Often, we don't hear
the message, because we don't try.

It is good to laugh
heartily and often, and to smile
through sorrow. Always look to see the goodness in people,
not their shortcomings.
Goodness is deeper.

You believed that life is a series of beginnings and endings.
A blooming of color, of fragrance and fullness
that cannot be concealed, even by the coldness of winter,
under a blanket of snow. Hope comes again
with the warmth of spring when buds appear and all is renewed.

Life is what's valuable, whether on two legs or four.

God views us all the same, in the end.

I can leave the creek behind - your spirit is not here.

It resides now and always, with me. 

Shawen A. Greer comes from Chesapeake Bay country, where blue crabs are a way of life. Her poetry has appeared in *Mockingbird Journal* and her short story, "The Vistor," placed first at GNB Writers Block. She finds inspiration for her work by being an avid people watcher and voracious reader.

Night

By Assad Ali

when I was young

I used to think that heaven was white and lit brightly all around

then I grew up

and noticed that the most beautiful and serene moments of my life

took place during the night

among darkness

with only the moon and streetlights offering illumination 

Assad Ali is a twenty-five year old American writer from Queens, New York who uses the art of poetry as both a tool for creative expression as well as for self development. He hopes to publish more of his work in the future.

The Moth

By Christina Manubag

I stretched the thin skin, plucked out the eyelash
rogue in my pupil. On the mirror rested a moth
with battered wings, still, like a ghost
and reflected against skin. A flower
drawn in ink on skin, made me a heretic
to your Catholic sensibilities; behind the glass ticked a clock

brass on the wall. It rested, the clock
plated with V's and I's and the eyelash
wet on the finger of a heretic
whose eye still red and viscous saw the moth
who the day prior had beat its wings patiently on a flower
but soon will become a ghost.

In the yellow light I was a ghost,
sallow and dripping against the tock of a clock,
stuck with a finger tattoo of a purple flower
on which lay the mucus-encrusted eyelash.
I counted two wings on the mirrored creature, the moth,
who, perhaps in another life had also been a heretic,

a spritely and outspoken young woman, a heretic
whose small and sullen form had proven the non-existence of ghosts.
Instead there lay the open nerves of a moth

whose wings syncopated against the beat of a clock,
A taunting presence, no wider than an eyelash
Longing for the scent of her resting flower.

My father had called me “Sweet Pea,” a flower,
in the days before he’d deemed me a heretic.
He had taught me how to wish upon a rogue eyelash
(before he taught me how to pray to risen ghosts).
He taught the difference between his watch and my clock
that hung white and suspended like a taxidermic moth.

I was never one to smother spiders or moths
or pluck the green stem from a freshly bloomed flower;
what use is the shattered face of a clock
when thrown to the ground by a remorseful heretic?
And what purpose have you, flickering non-ghost
of dwelling on the loss of a stray eyelash?

The petals of a flower, the eyelash damp on the ground
How rapidly these ghosts dissolve by command of the clock
And, as moths, former heretics, forgotten. 

Christina Manubag is an undergraduate student at New York University concentrating on Spanish, Linguistics, Creative Writing and Studio Art. Her works of poetry have been published in the NYU comparative literature journal, *Brio*, and are lined up for publication in the upcoming year. Her literary influences include George Saunders, Zadie Smith, Marianne Moore and Maggie Nelson.

To My Dad

By Lorraine Damonte

I remember you.

Colouring books were your expertise.

I remember you.

Colouring around the edges to make the pictures look pretty.

I remember you.

Your tobacco stained fingers and roll ups.

I remember you.

The splashes of paint, the wall paper paste.

I remember you.

The happiness, attention and love I felt.

I remember you.

The unexpected meeting in Warrens sweet shop.

I remember you.

The excitement and joy and an armful of novelty toys.

I remember you.

The skip all the way home to the Flower House Estate.

I remember you.

The appreciation I felt, because mum had agreed, that I could now see you.

Weekends at yours with girlfriend Louise.

I remember you.

Car drives to Uncle Raymond's and Aunty Mary's.

I remember you.

Aunty Mary's delicious jam tarts.

I remember you.

Holiday to Butlins, poor Jane went home with chicken poxs.

I remember this too.

On the train to Margate, the fun fair awaiting.

I loved my time with you.

A trip to see Wendy together.

It was just us two.

On the tube home, I promised to always do the washing up for you.

Cinema trips, the last film we saw was Star Wars.

I remember, do you?

Nannie's spicy apple pie with cloves.

I remember her too.

Grandad always sat in the chair quietly.

I remember him too.

Then his chair was empty.

I remember that too.

The swinging sofa in the garden, blue strips with tassels.

I remember waiting there for you.

But what I remember the most was feeling special and at home with you. 

Lorraine Damonte has published two children's books: *Spot the tick in Barbados* and *Spot the tick in England*. She is a Lyme awareness advocate and is in remission from the disease.

Invitation

By Joan Mc Nerney

Would you like to unwind
an afternoon at the lake?

Solar sparks spilling over us
in showers of golden sizzle.

Put on short shorts, skimpy tops,
stick our toes into oozy mud.

Breezes will shake treetops
while we listen to birdsongs.

Why not float on new grass
facing an Alice blue sky?

Read celestial comic strips
from mounds of clouds.

We can count sunbeams,
chase yellow butterflies.

Devour bowls of cherries
painting our lips crimson.

This noontime is perfumed
with millions of wild flowers.

Let's go away all day...be
embraced by the goddess. 

Joan McNerney's poetry has been included in numerous literary zines such as *Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze*, *Seven Circle Press*, *Dinner with the Muse*, *Blueline*, *Halcyon Days* and included in *Bright Hills Press*, *Kind of A Hurricane Press* and *Poppy Road Review* anthologies. She has been nominated four times for Best of the Net.

A Street in Union Square

By Hannah Bub

Imitation cobblestone
paves the street,
where the pigeons search
in the cracks by the road,
often startled by the scuffed sneakers
of careless or cruel passerby,
their beaks beating the sidewalk,
sometimes returning with crumbs. 

Originally from Texas, Hannah Bub has recently transitioned to living in New York City. She is an undergraduate student at New York University pursuing studies in English and Creative Writing.