



Sorcerer, Mixed Media by Deb Bonam

Poetry

How Hard Can It Be
by Jeanette Stingley

The Milk Box
by Randa Talley

Fiction

Remember, Hetty?
by Kristen Houghton

The Seed
by Darling Poor

Non-Fiction

Cliffs, Wings and Love by Kimberly Tilghman

A Tribute to Rita by Renee Wolf

Face The Facts by Sheila Sproule

Art & Photography

Broken Window by Michelle Anne Cope

Butterfly with Flower by Kim Kenney

Cactus Detail by Jill Florio

Features

Poetry

- 3 Abandoned by Alessandra Diridoni Grigsby
- 3 Solstice by Wolf LittleBear
- 3 How Hard Can It Be by Jeanette Stingley
- 4 Mature Hands by Michelle Anne Cope
- 4 The Milk Box by Randa Talley

Non-Fiction

- 5 A Tribute to Rita by Renee Wolf
- 5 Face The Facts by Sheila Sproule
- 6 Traveling Fools! by Connie Werner Reichert
- 7 Cliffs, Wings and Love by Kimberly Tilghman
- 8 Traveling Tid Bits: Managing Common Sense
and a Daredevil Attitude by Bethany Zick

Fiction

- 10 The Pension by Michelle Anne Cope
- 11 They Do Not Spin by Jane Lebak
- 13 Mumbai Baby by Heather Goodman
- 18 Remember, Hetty? by Kristen Houghton
- 21 The Seed by Darling Poor
- 23 Birds' Nest Soup by Leni Hester
- 25 Shades of Bleu by Janie Emaus

Art and Photography

- 1 Cactus Detail by Jill Florio
- 3 Disseminate by Jeff Cope
- 4 Root, Water, Sky by Jill Florio
- 6 Grand Canyon and Raven by Jill Florio
- 7 Undulate by Jeff Cope
- 10 Butterfly with Flower by Kim Kenney
- 12 Broken Window by Michelle Anne Cope
- 14 Spawn by Jeff Cope
- 16 Precious Metal by Diane Cipollo
- 18 Saguaro and Sky by Jill Florio

Departments

- 2 Letter From the Editor
- 29 Contributors
- 33 Masthead

On the Cover

Sorcerer, Mixed Media by Deb Bonam



Cactus Detail, Digital Photography by Jill Florio

MUSED

BellaOnline Literary Review

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Editor in Chief: Jill Florio

Art Director: Diane Cipollo

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MISSION STATEMENT

Showcase original work in traditional and experimental modes that coincide with BellaOnline's missions of women, empowerment, charity, the environment and of course artistic and literary merit.

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Letter From the Editor



Dear Mused Readers,

On a cold winter Solstice night (and surely snowy somewhere), we are proud to present the premier issue of *Mused - The BellaOnline Literary Review*. Our review journal showcases the work of women (and some men) on themes of empowerment, helping others, and appreciation for the environment... captured through prose, verse and art.

BellaOnline - the second largest women's site on the Internet - has a mission to train writers to build a weekly non-fiction writing skill set. As we grew, we wished to also provide

a platform for non-fiction writers focusing on one or two specific pieces, rather than a weekly column. We dreamt of expanding our horizons, to provide an outlet for women desiring to pen poetry and fictional short stories.

Then last spring (the season of new beginnings), BellaOnline's intrepid publisher Lisa Shea read the biography of Clarina Nichols (an 1800s women's rights speaker). Lisa remembers thinking, "That reminded me just how far we've come from 'not that long ago' when women were dismissed completely as being able to speak on an issue."

Lisa continues, "One of the things Clarina worked on was publishing prose and poetry for women. I know that recently I was interested in having a short story published, and didn't find many venues I felt enthusiastic about. I thought the review would be a great way to extend our reach of helping aspiring writers."

And Mused was born. Our volunteer editorial board shares a love of art and the written word; all are well-published and learned wordsmiths themselves. Feel free to peruse our Editorial Bios to get familiar with Mused's top notch team.

Of course we are exceedingly proud to show off the work of our fine contributors. Our cover image, by Deb Bonam, is a revealing mixed media artwork concerning women and empowerment...her Fury-like Sorcerer is yet another facet of the Muse that inspires. You can sense the epic tale unfolding "behind the scenes."

We also selected lush nature photos, unusual color compositions and meditative digital fractal images. For example, Jeff Cope's designs somehow coax maternal, spiritual and new-born presences through a mathematical, ordered, digital medium. Kimberly Kenney's *Butterfly With Flower* offers an ephemeral glimpse of hope and beauty, adding the promise of renewal in the midst of our own winter.

Our written entries display short stories, poems and essays chosen to both delight the mind and provide examples of each genre at their best: Wolf LittleBear's *Solstice* verse is both lyrical and apropos. *Abandoned*, a cunning poem by Alessandra Diridoni Grigsby, exposes women's inner call to seek worth via social acceptance. Heather Goodman's *Mumbai Baby* is a raw, heartbreaking tale many women will find almost too uncomfortably real. *The Seed*, by Darling Poor, also cuts close to home with its message of loss and hope. Our non-fiction entry *A Tribute to Rita*, is Renee Wolf's touching salute to an inspiring woman. And Sheila Sproule's desperate entreaty in *Face the Facts* puts a humorous spin on the "face" of a wrinkly subject!

We hope you enjoy this first issue of Mused...and encourage you to submit your own touching, profound, lyrical or whimsical creations for our next issue!

All my best wishes in this clarifying season of winter,

Jill Florio
Editor in Chief

Poetry

Abandoned

by Alessandra Diridoni Grigsby

The golden globe screams and
pleads from the forest of Delta green,
"Pick me, pick me! I grew up with all
my brothers and sisters through the
fog-kissed mornings, through the
showers both drenching and quenching,
through the blazing sun that turned all our
emerald green skin to the color of
the horizon at sunset.

I'm still here waiting to be chosen as the
centerpiece in a succulent compote, or
as the honored guest in a sweet pastry.
When the big steel blades swept through
our home, their long arms couldn't reach
quite high enough and left those of us
who basked in the sunlight all season.

Pick me that I might not linger too long
on this branch and suffer a fall to the
ground below, where I will meet a most
undignified end and be consumed by
the earth, to nourish yet another
generation of brother and sister pears."

Solstice

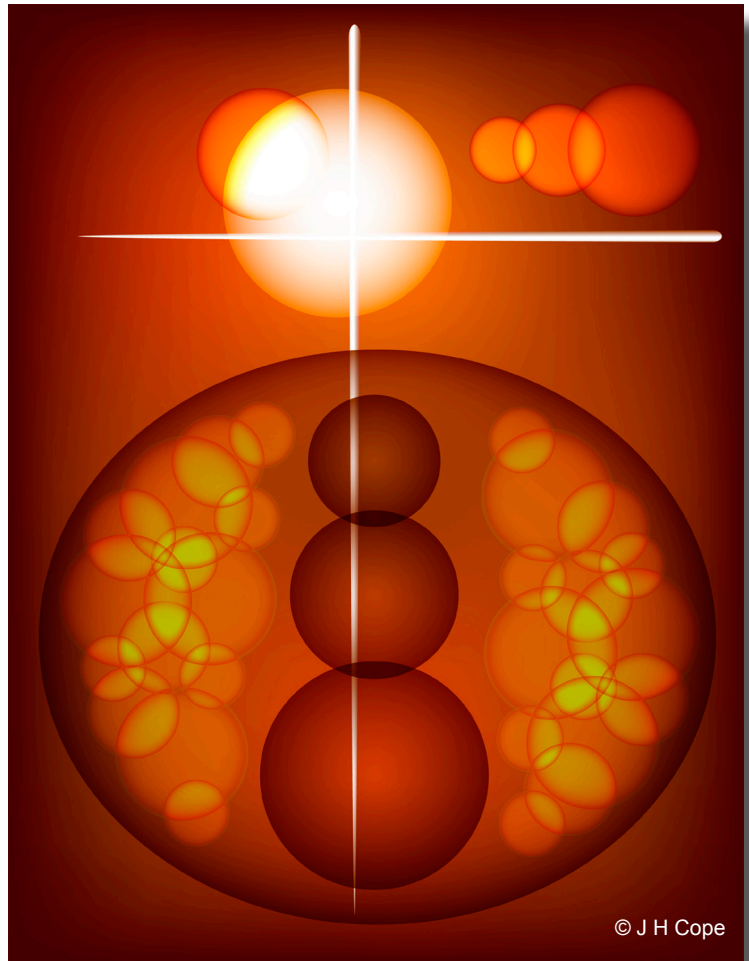
by Wolf LittleBear

Freshly fallen snow hugs the ground like a blanket
Anticipation of birth in the crisp winter air
The Moon shines in the darkness secure in the future
As the first rays of Sunlight signal the birth drawing near
Women commanding over the power of nativity
Men confident in their seed to multiply
Each respecting the other's role in the circle of life
And the symbiotic relationship with the Earth
Winter is a time of reflection
Time spent with family and friends
A reminder of the fragility and wonder of life
And so it is that the wheel forever turns
Memories embed deep in our souls beneath the insulating
snow
The fierceness of a blizzard will blind our path at times
But eventually the Sun will break through
And the land will be reborn
So we may sit in the green grass in the shade of an Oak
Loving one another
And living each memory as if it's our last

How Hard Can It Be

by Jeanette Stingley

Look me in the eyes
And tell me you love me.
How hard can it be?
Hold my hand
And tell me how beautiful I am.
How hard can it be?
Get down on one knee
And say we will always be one.
How hard can it be?
We can have the moon and stars
Only if we work together.
How hard can it be?
Love can't be a one way street.
One person can only give so much.
The storm clouds rise in the distance.
The thunder speaks to me.
Time to move on,
Time for me to be me.
How hard can it be?



© J H Cope

Disseminate, Digital Art by Jeffrey Howard Cope

Mature Hands

by Michelle Anne Cope

They crave more lotion
these days.
My hands
decorated by God
with liver-colored spots.

Used and worn
from work and worry
My hands
have yet to betray me—
it must be angels that
keep them from
twisting and curling
into painful knots.

The pair,
my hands,
my dependable friends;
they serve me well.
We grow together.
The priceless tools of my trade
these seasoned hands
still have much to do.

The Milk Box

by Randa Talley

The longest day, having to wait,
Naptime forced, then freed to gait
To driveways end, where bus arrives
Sister has tucked away a prize,
For me who missed her all the day,
She thought of me along the way
Inside her satchel, my treasure sits
How selflessly, she thought of this
Her small hands reach in to find,
A small box to place in mine,
And I, with hearty pre-school glee
Open this carton meant for me
In bliss I savour every drop
As home we go and do not stop.
What joy this act of love did bring
When chocolate milk, made my heart sing!



Root, Water, Sky, Digital Photography by Jill Florio

Non-Fiction

A Tribute to Rita

by Renee Wolf

It has been 16 years since I first meet Rita, and I still find myself going back to her each year for her wisdom. Through all my years of photography, all the people and places, all the memories, she remains unique. I hope I can evoke a little of her presence for you.

Born in Martha, Texas, Rita had known the hardships of growing up on a farm, and she was always tougher than the toughest times. For over 60 years she has begun the day before sunrise, rising at 4:30 A.M. to feed her chickens. Rita is almost 80 now, but I can remember a time when she didn't need to use a walking stick. Now, when she goes to feed the chickens, her walking stick must accompany her on that short trip.

The years have taken their toll on her body, but her spirit is younger than her years. Those well-defined furrows in Rita's face reflect not only a life in the Texas sun, where Rita enjoyed most of her life planting her flowers, but also the wisdom of her life. I have always felt that her flowers embodied all the love she gave them. When she gave me flowers, or other presents, the warmth of her heart radiated from them.

When Rita takes my hand to greet me, she puts one hand on top of mine, a gesture that seems to say how sincerely glad she is to see me. Her words are always delivered in a soft, gentle tone. When it is time for me to leave, Rita's goodbyes are as strong and gentle as her greetings.

I once took really sick while on a visit to her farm. She cared for me as she would have cared for her own child, without hesitation, without grumbling, without holding back. She offered me her bed that night, and I surrendered to her generosity only after every refusal of mine was met by her insistence. I remember lying on the bed while she rubbed an herb called "rue" on me and chanted a prayer, in Spanish Was it the chant, the herb, or just the love that made me feel better?

My trips to her farm have given me insight into a truly beautiful heart, whose simple message is to find pleasure, value, purpose and gratitude in the most humble tasks. In her appreciation of the small things in life, she finds value in every human being. Rita is so fully present with everything she does, and fully present for every person she loves. I cannot remember her ever complaining, or ever taking credit or wanting reward for any of her many kindnesses and tireless efforts. Her rewards come from a place deep within her heart, where her life and her love touch your own.

More than anyone I have ever known, Rita embodies the Taoist proverb that the most extraordinary achievement is to be ordinary. Rita is ordinary in her simple way of living, but extraordinary in her all-embracing love.

Face The Facts

by Sheila Sproule

It's my mother's fault that I'm getting wrinkles. There, I've said it. Sorry, Mom, but for once I feel justified in blaming you for something.

You see, when I was a baby, you would - as you were advised to - lay me on my stomach to sleep. And there it began...

Here's my theory. Being a stomach sleeper, I have become very aware of the pressure placed on my cheek, which appears to 'pudge' the flesh around my mouth and nose, creating an accordion effect. (Yes, I am looking in the mirror right now, pretending my hand is the pillow to see what goes on.) Hence the lines on my upper lip and the crescent-shaped wrinkles on either side of my chin. Is it a mere coincidence that my left side is more deeply wrinkled than my right? I don't think so - I sleep predominantly on my left cheek, hanging off the side of the bed. (Apparently I am not a very balanced person.)

I've been lying wide-eyed at night contemplating my wrinkles. O.K., I'm not awake specifically to worry about fine lines - sleeplessness just happens to be another symptom of middle years.

I have tried to change my sleeping position - back, side, standing, sitting. No matter what, I end up on my stomach. Clearly I can't fight this habit of a lifetime, but perhaps I can try to reduce the inevitable wear and tear that it is causing.

Relax the neck. Stretch out those facial muscles. Unclench the jaw. Think nice, calm thoughts. Well, maybe it will help. It can't hurt.

'Mayday! Mayday! Tightening muscles in the jaw. Relax! Relax!'

Potions, lotions, mantras, tantrums - I'll try them all. I realise that I'll never look ten years younger again, but for my own self confidence, I want to know that I at least look the best I can for my 45 years.

Oh, and by the way, Mom, don't feel bad. Today's babies might be blaming their mothers for their flat, wrinkly bottoms in years to come!

Potions,
lotions,
mantras,
tantrums

-
I'll try
them all.



Traveling Fools!

by Connie Werner Reichert

My idea of camping is staying in a hotel room without room service and a wall-mounted blow dryer. Give me a clean hotel room with 400 thread count sheets and a lanai I can walk out on so I may greet the early morning sunrise.

I long for a place with a cool swimming pool and hot tub to soak in after a long day of sightseeing.

Needless to say, we didn't camp this summer. Instead, without any particular itinerary, our family embarked on a road trip to experience the spectacular United States. Fueled with excitement as well as gasoline, we stayed in a different hotel each night. We could've flown, but that takes the fun out of a good old American road trip.

Sure, airplanes get you there faster, but the seats are rather uncomfortable. Remember when it was glamorous to fly? Well the style and sophistication have been replaced by stale sandwiches packed in plastic trays served by snippy flight attendants. The golden days of train travel have also disappeared. Instead of nice meals served inside a dining car, we now eat microwaved beef dinners and look out dingy windows as we chug along the tracks.

Besides, there is something comforting and thrilling about traveling long distances by car. It's a spontaneous, panoramic adventure into the real world. You can stop and go as you please, and if the kids have to pee for the umpteenth time, who cares?

The pleasure of being "somewhere else" gives us a burst of energy. Travel has proved to be the ideal Rx for boredom, broken hearts and strange illnesses. I think part of that is because no matter where we travel, we look at similar things through a different pair of eyes. A cocker spaniel panting on the sidewalk on a hot summer's day in Santa Fe is suddenly much more interesting than a dog panting on the sidewalk back home. Heck, we'll even take its picture on our digital camera.

An old historic building in North Carolina is more exciting than one with similar architectural features at home. Breaking down in the middle of a cornfield in Iowa is much more adventurous than having your car stalled on Main Street at home.

We even look at people crossing the street in awe. See the old man in Martha's Vineyard smoking a cigar on that bench over there? Such a scene suddenly seems poignant to us.

Moreover, everything is unusually significant because we aren't going to stay there too long and we are compelled to experience everything within our reach.

We'll eat in a café in Ontario and although the scones are like hockey pucks, we convince ourselves it is the best thing we've ever eaten, just because we're so far away from home.

We'll eat stale bagels in New York just because not eating a bagel in New York is a sin.



Grand Canyon and Raven, Digital Photography by Jill Florio

We also tend to do foolish things we normally wouldn't dare do at home. Things like dancing in the water fountain without our shoes on, for example. Sometimes I like to speak with a Russian accent to see if I can fool people. I find it to be a very inexpensive form of entertainment. These people will never see us again.

I have an entire collection of hotel lotions, shampoos and bars of soap and shower caps I will never use, but I feel compelled to "steal" them anyway.

Many of us convince ourselves that we'll be more productive at work if we take a vacation. Ironically, when we return it's the same old thing all over again and we realize we need another vacation to recover from the original vacation.

And I think we travel not only to see new places, but to appreciate where we live.

Dorothy was right: There is no place like home.

Cliffs, Wings and Love

by Kimberly Tilghman

So... there are many theories on dating, sex, relationships and love. I think each of us tends to start out in life rushing down the relationship road in a fast-paced frantic search for the 'mother load' of relationship bliss. Many of us skirt and turn a blind eye to difficult issues in hopes that the brilliance of the treasure - love- will more than make up for any tarnished spots beneath the glimmer. Sometimes this works out just fine, however, more often than not once the glimmer has faded and the act of removing the tarnish begins couples find that the items in the treasure chest were not what they initially had expected or hoped to find. Ok, I know that was a thickly analogical way of trying to say that by rushing into things, one can completely ignore the most basic principals and needs of a truly stable and secure relationship. The length

as though if I'm not careful this happiness will slip through my fingers and disappear into the sand. It's a fear I can deal with – slowly. The biggest part of this relationship for me is the friendship. I can talk to him and he listens. There is a respect, acceptance and appreciation between us that is almost alien to me because it's truly something I've never had in a relationship before. The result is my having to temper the euphoria with a patience which will allow me to savor the newness of these feelings and circumstances. What a waste it would be to toss back and swallow the experience whole without lavishing on every extravagant drop.

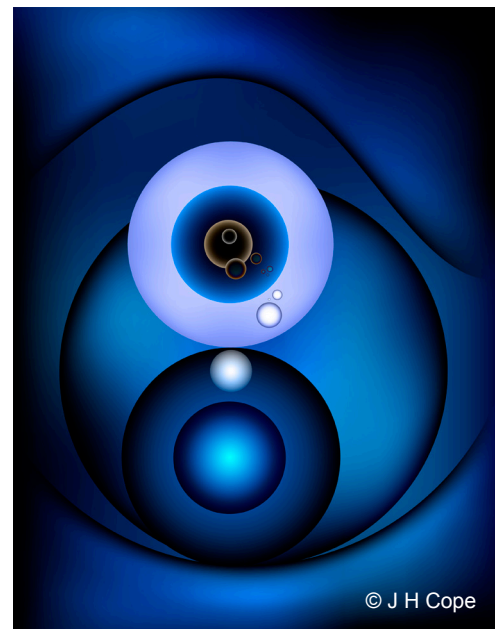
I hope that my experiences of the past have allowed me the restraint to move forward at a pace that is both conducive to building a strong foundation for the relationship while still being honest and true to what I am feeling without compromising or suppressing my heart. What a balance that alludes to. Funny...

This fear is a little more ambiguous than that. It's almost as though if I'm not careful this happiness will slip through my fingers and disappear into the sand.

of time necessary to "get to know" a person has been deeply debated for a very long time. I'm not sure what the point of that is really – since every person is different and every relationship is different, couldn't one assume that the length of time necessary would thereby be different as well? I certainly believe that not only from past experience but by considering the past experiences of my friends and acquaintances as well. Really, at the end of the day, love is a gamble with probably the highest stakes available in life... truly though, it's also a gamble that presents the opportunity to reap the greatest rewards. I think that has to be why we rush so much when we are younger, more naïve and still wielding the belief that we are indestructible. There is this unerring drive to attain the presumably unattainable status and rewards of "true love".

This same drive is what picks us back up and brushes us off time after time when we have fallen and not landed softly in the lap of love but rather face-planted on the cold concrete of a miscalculation of the heart. It happens; to some more often than others. I believe that each face plant teaches something very important. Climb slower and you won't be as far up the mountain if the cliff dive should come. Great advice but sometimes very difficult to take when the new relationship is swirling around you like a maelstrom, sweeping you up into euphoric chaos. I'm finding myself in just such a place. I've never been happier. Go ahead – smile and nod, chuckle and say that we all say that at the beginning and it's just because of the newness-buzz. I mean it. This man makes me well up inside with a myriad of emotions and at the same time calms me and makes me more focused than I've been in a long time. I feel blessed... and afraid. It's not a fear I'm accustomed to though – no fear that he's going to run off with the blonde bimbo down the road or that he's suddenly going to look at me and say 'Ha! It's been fun but I'm done with you now... moving on.' This fear is a little more ambiguous than that. It's almost

for once in my life I feel capable of attaining it. Perhaps I am finally in the place I've always needed to be and thankfully at the right time. So, I choose to climb the mountain beside this amazing man, slowly, one step at a time. I'm fairly certain there are many beautiful views for us to share along the path and a nice comfortable spot to nestle down into at the top, but should the cliff present itself, I hope to come to it with the understanding that the journey is when we grow and learn and eventually I'll have the wings to lay me down softly where I belong, wherever that may be.



Undulate, Digital Art by Jeffrey Howard Cope

Traveling Tid Bits: Managing Common Sense and a Daredevil Attitude

by Bethany Zick

The moment my foot connected with Dominican soil, I smiled mischievously, and my adventurous spirit took flight. I wanted to gobble up everything set before me: the new land, language, men, food, dancing, beaches, and everything else that was so terrifically unknown to me. Technically, the purpose of my semester abroad was to master the Spanish language, but off the record, I was there to have fun – and I did just that! There is something about taking off on your own to a foreign country that is so incredibly frightening that it gives you the kind of ecstatic adrenaline that you might experience jumping out of a plane, but stretched out over a four-month period. This particular adrenaline drove my common sense completely out of whack. My mother would've had a heart attack if she had seen half of the things I deemed to be reasonably safe.

In Santiago, any old spinster with a car that runs can join the public transportation network. The only requirement for these conchos is that they have a sign identifying which route they run. A typical concho costs about three pesos (thirty-three cents), crams in seven passengers, and lacks major parts of the vehicle, such as a window or door handle. There are motoconchos, as well; these tend to be small motorcycles, mopeds, and dirt bikes. Usually, motoconchos zip around carrying the driver, a passenger and his or her groceries or small child, and often, another adult. Drivers of both conchos and motoconchos are delightfully dangerous. At night, options are limited to walking or taking a taxi. I quickly found that cab fares are subject to change, depending how much of a sucker you are. For me, prices were quite steep, until I learned that combining a little sass with a lot of charm got me hefty discounts.

An air of
paranoia and
slight dread
loomed all
around me,
as stories
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my head.

Nevertheless, I became pretty annoyed each time I had to shell out the extra cash to take a taxi only a few blocks away, merely because I was a woman and it was nighttime. One evening after our late class had finished, a few friends and I met at a nearby pub to watch a baseball game. When it came time to leave, Jaira, another frustrated female, and I decided we would make the fifteen-minute walk back to our apartments together. Mine was only slightly farther than her's, so I figured I could forge the last few minutes alone. After parting ways with Jaira, I realized the neighborhood seemed to take on a new personality when walking in the dark, and I couldn't quite remember which street lead to which. I nervously sighed as I decided to take the only route of which I was sure – I would walk the sidewalk that accompanied the eight-lane highway, bypassing all those maze-like neighborhoods. It would only add a few minutes to my trip. I found that any guiding light I had was not so

comforting. Occasionally vehicles zoomed past me or I went by a lonely, blinking halogen lamp.

An air of paranoia and slight dread loomed all around me, as stories of attacks popped into my head. There I was – a decently dressed, obviously American, young woman walking solo with her purse slung over her shoulder in an area where no other pedestrians were detectable. The first other visible human was a bulky man walking towards me with a small club in his hand. I was, at first, absolutely terrified, then relieved to the same degree when he walked past me briskly without even acknowledging my presence. At that point, I decided I must prepare. I began stuffing the contents of my purse in pockets and down my shirt, and I arranged my keys so that a key stuck out between each finger. I held them tightly in a fist, making a weapon similar to brass knuckles.

The night
began when
I went out
dancing
with my two
friends, Mary
Luisa and
Pola.

Sure enough, not even two minutes later, I heard someone approaching me at a run from behind. I whipped around frantically to see a teenaged boy, about my size, advancing for my (empty) purse.

Contrary to the previous ten minutes, I immediately became filled with the most intense anger that I had ever experienced. I raised my fist, and displayed the keys to my potential attacker. Surprised that I was armed, he jumped back. I shook my head fiercely, and told him to stay away from me. We paused together in a stare down, until I began to lower my fist. At this, he came for my purse again, which made me even madder. When I looked him in the eye, I detected mostly surprise, but maybe a little fear and awe, as well. Although my emotions were running high, I prayed silently not to have to actually hit him. I was certain my bark was bigger than my bite.

Finally, the teen hoodlum decided he no longer wanted anything to do with me. "Vaya! Vaya! Sigue!" he yelled, as he shooed me away. Go! Go! Continue! At that, I gave a triumphant humph and walked away as fast as my legs could go without running. Every couple of steps, I turned to send a glare that said, "Don't even think about messing with me again." I wasn't sure whether to cry or to laugh with my overwhelming euphoria when I safely entered my domain.

I'm sure you are supposing I was eternally grateful and forever learned my lesson, but I'm afraid, dear reader, I'm not as wise as you are. Instead of crediting God or luck or grace or some other quiet force, I tallied on a victory for myself. I will say, though, I blame it on that same traveling adrenaline I was

telling you about earlier. You know, the one that makes you believe you have supernatural powers. Exhilarated beyond belief, I continued to walk on the wild side (pun intended). A few weeks later, I took my risk-taking to a new level – hitchhiking.

The night began when I went out dancing with my two friends, Mary Luisa and Pola. We were far away from home and our feet were nearly bleeding, so we wandered into a greasy 24-hour restaurant at about 4:30 in the morning. Unable to keep up with Dominican dancing, which can last well into the morning, we were ready to find a way back home. We sat and grumbled for a while about how much a taxi would cost from where we were and at that hour. As we headed out onto the street, I thought aloud, “You know, we could probably find someone to give us a ride...”

“You mean hitchhike?” Pola wondered.

“Yeah!” The idea was sounding more and more appealing.

“Well, that would be nice if we found a ride,” said Mary Luisa a little cautiously. I could tell they both were at least amused with my scheme, but weren’t actually planning on doing it. Just then, a car rolled up to the stoplight by which we were waiting. Over their thumping music, three young guys shouted cheap flattery at us out the window. My eyes lit up.

“What about them?”

My two friends shrugged and nervously giggled. “Okay!” They both replied in unison. We had barely just asked for a ride, and the guys were already opening the doors for us to climb in. With four in the back, it was a tight fit. One guy in the front showered compliments at Pola and begged for her number, which she finally exchanged with him. Meanwhile, the guy I was practically sitting on was apparently busy stealing my wallet out of my purse. Of course, I was too high on life to notice. We dropped off Pola first, and because Mary Luisa and I lived in the same apartment complex, we got out together. I thanked our new friends again and again as I walked away with a purse that was much lighter.

About 10 minutes later, Pola called and was very concerned. “Those guys keep calling and telling me you left your wallet in their car. I was afraid they were just trying to give me a reason to come outside by myself. They said they have been driving around, because they forgot where you live. Did you lose your wallet? I don’t know what to do!”

After checking my purse and seeing that my wallet was, in fact, missing, I picked up the phone again to inform Pola of this, only to hear silence. Her cell phone had died, and coincidentally, she had left her charger at my apartment. Not knowing her home phone number or what to do, I sought out Mary Luisa, and we anxiously paced back and forth together. About a half an hour later, someone was buzzing my apartment. I rushed to answer and found a young man’s voice at the other end of the line. He was shouting at me in almost indecipherable Spanish about a “dropped wallet...drove around forever...wasted gas...Pola.” Frantically, I apologized and thanked him as much as I could, even though I knew something wasn’t right.

When I met them at their car to retrieve my wallet, I picked out the same jumbled-sounding words as before, but this time there were three of them yelling. I continued my thanking and apologizing while my shaking hand held my wallet. “Look! Look inside! We didn’t steal anything! Check your wallet,” they barked at me all at once. Frenzied, I flipped through my wallet and saw that everything seemed to be intact.

“Yes, yes! I see that everything is here. Here...take this money for gas. And thanks again!” With that, I rushed off.

After telling her the details of my strange transaction with the three guys, Mary Luisa let me know that Pola had found a way to contact her and was all right. It was close to 7:00 a.m. when I finally laid down in my bed, still very unsettled. And it was not until three days later at an

ATM that I found out that \$250 had been charged on my debit card at an all-night liquor store. Somewhere there were three very drunk scoundrels laughing their heads off at three very stupid Americans.

I didn’t go down easily, but I did go down. I called my bank, who had no sympathy. I called the thieves, who had changed their number. I even stormed into the liquor store to demand my money back from

the manager on duty. My desperate, muddled Spanish was enough to draw a small crowd. At first, the manager seemed to pity me, and he actually did seem slightly worried when I bluffed about “bringing in my [nonexistent] lawyer.” I ended up leaving a little humiliated and a little broke. All I could do was shake my head, curse myself, tack on a tally mark for the loss category, and move on.

After a few more mishaps and close calls, I began to smarten up. However, it wasn’t until I returned to the States and reflected on my trip that I thought about how terrible certain events could have turned. Yes, I made it out of the Dominican Republic alive and happier than when I arrived, but my choices could have very well led me the polar opposite end result.

Going abroad is a wonderful opportunity to renew your soul and to step into the shoes of the person you have always dreamt of becoming. I certainly urge you to do just that. Set yourself free. With that said, I incidentally must warn you. In a foreign place, your common sense should be sharpened, not loosened. That’s not to say you can’t do things you wouldn’t normally do; by all means, go nuts! What I mean is always listen to your instincts. Whether they are muffled or blaring in your ear, they are usually dead on. I don’t presume that all or even most travelers are reckless as I was. But based on my experience, I feel compelled to give you one bit of advice for traveling abroad: Safely have the time of your life!

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Fiction

The Pension

by Michelle Anne Cope

Eight years and seven days before he died, Thomas Cavanaugh quit milking cows, growing corn, and raising chickens.

The day he took the job at the mine was the same day he signed over the farmland, minus two acres for the house, a garden, and a tool shed. Margaret didn't see Thomas cry as he crated the last hen; she saw him later smiling, leaning on the fence telling the surveyor that he'd reckoned there were too many farmers now days and that the mines were more dependable, they didn't need rain. Then there was the pension. Thomas told the surveyor about the pension.

So, Thomas traded his pitchfork for a pickaxe and everyday he left at dawn, his lunch pail heavy with corn bread, tomatoes, and rhubarb pie. Everyday, he came home hours after dusk, lunch pail as empty as his eyes, face smudged black and pockets full of broken coal pieces. Saturday nights, try as he might, the soot under his nails just couldn't be scrubbed out in time for Sunday morning service.

Margaret worried that Thomas was discontent, no longer able to work in the sun, untangle corn vines, coax milk from an udder or wipe the sweat from a late fall harvest onto his overalls. Thomas assured Margaret that he was quiet because he was tired. He didn't miss the overturned milk buckets, dirty chicken coops, or corn stealing crows. Thomas was happy he would be able to give his kids more than his father ever gave him. "See, Margaret," he would say, "My father got no pension, all he got was his dad's farm."

Margaret didn't quit worrying and Thomas continued to talk about the pension; the children would go to college, Margaret could have a new stove, and he could buy back some land and farm a small field or two. When spring brought their third child and first daughter, Thomas said the pension could pay for her wedding.

Other than Thanksgiving morning and Christmas Day, six out of seven weekly dawns other men like Thomas went to work in the dank and dusty man-made caves. Like Margaret, the others wives knew about the pension from their husbands who also wore inner layers of the earth on their overalls and swung their hard hats on dark walks home.

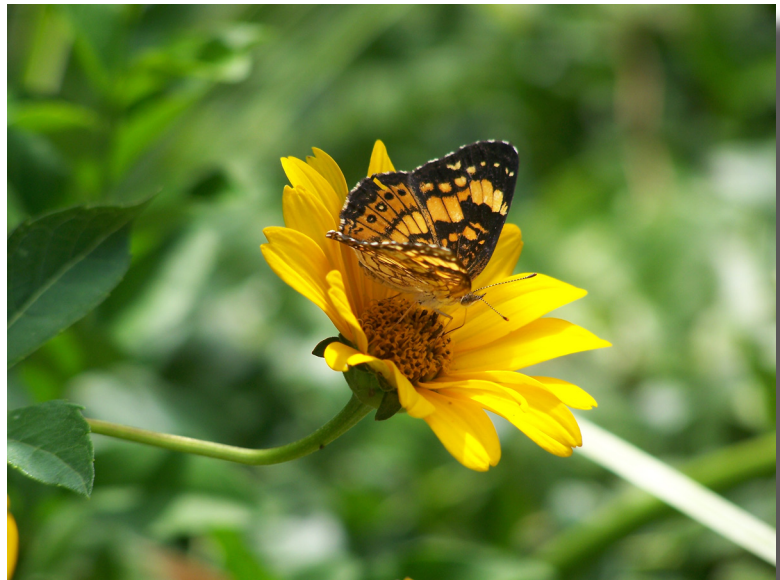
"Ten years work and you got yourself a pension," is what Mr. Jack Beasley told all the new hires. Thomas Cavanaugh was close to the prize, a guaranteed monthly check to live on after

he left the mines or "God forbid", as Margaret would say, even a monthly check if something awful would happen.

Then one day, God forbade, and something awful did happen.

One year, three hundred fifty-eight days before Thomas was eligible for the pension, Peabody Mine 17 on Cooper Mill Road exploded when a wayward spark found a pocket of natural gas. Three weeks and seven county rescue crews later, the Peabody Mining Company sealed the still burning mine making it an instant and eternal tomb for forty-two men.

Margaret Cavanaugh, like the other wives, told her children that their father was dead. She didn't tell the children about the pension, they wouldn't understand. Now without Thomas, Margaret wasn't sure she ever understood about the pension.



Butterfly with Flower, Digital Photography by Kim Kenney

SUBMISSIONS

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They Do Not Spin

by Jane Lebak

The temp enters my office just as I hang up the phone.

"You had two calls while you were on the other line." Her mousy eyes flicker from me to the slips of paper in her hand. "Mary Haggerty needs the settlement express mailed to her today."

"She doesn't, but she's an important client, so send it anyhow. You know where the forms are for that." Charlotte wouldn't have asked me for something this minor, but Charlotte's on yet another maternity leave. Temps always feel they need to get permission from their bosses on every detail. The ones I keep eventually realize which questions they can answer by themselves and what their position empowers them to do. The

need the gas money he offered, Warren could keep a conversation running the entire length of I-91.

"That's it," I whisper. "Brian Eckert." At our fifteen-year reunion, Warren had mentioned an acquaintance of his just graduating law school and needing to network. A new partner in my firm, I had mentioned a few people he could talk to about possible jobs, so I offered to have the young man give me a call. I'd handed Warren a business card, but Brian Eckert hadn't phoned.

Two years, and now a call? I look again at the number. Traveling. Probably I'm wasting my time, but a new lawyer may be worth contacting. He might have landed a plum job before calling me, and anyone that hot could be an asset.

The temp hasn't found the Palmetto papers yet, nor the pens,

A whistle, and the recorded voice tells me, "The number you have reached..."
He must be the only student on earth with no cell phone.

ones I toss back can't pick it up. This temp's still iffy. She may make the leap, but she shows signs of falling flat. "The other call?"

"Uh--Brian Eckert."

Charlotte would have known to give more information. "Did he say what he wants?"

"He said he was a friend of Warren Roden's, and that you might not remember his name, but you told Warren Roden to have him call you."

"I haven't spoken to Warren in years." The temp stands uselessly by the door. "Give them to me. You just get the papers on the Palmetto case. And some pens. You do remember where the stock room is, don't you?"

The temp slinks out, leaving me with two crinkly message slips. Her round handwriting reads a little easier than Charlotte's, although she takes messages in pencil. Maybe she ran out of pens in her own office as well. As I dial Mary, I glance at the other message.

Brian Eckert. Two phone numbers are on the paper, and underneath them: "Traveling." Presumably if he wasn't at the first number, a New Hampshire number, he'd be at the Brooklyn one a few hours later. The first has the same area code and exchange as one of my phone numbers from Dartmouth. Another graduating student prowling for a job.

Remembering Dartmouth brings back the name Warren Roden, a student who lived in my dorm. We drove together every Thanksgiving and Spring break. I had a roomy car compared to the ubiquitous compacts, and although I didn't

so I dial the Dartmouth number.

A whistle, and the recorded voice tells me, "The number you have reached..." Brian has, apparently, called and then cancelled service. He must be the only student on earth with no cell phone. The other number is in Brooklyn, and he'll still have several hours to get there, but I dial anyway, planning a message for his voice mail.

I sit up when an older woman answers the phone, her voice thin and tired.

"This is Michael Oster from Oster, Lawrence and Glitterson," I say. "I'm trying to reach Brian Eckert."

Silence.

"Is this the right number?"

After a hesitation, the woman says, "Yes. But you're a little late."

"Brian called earlier this morning," I say, "and I'm returning his call."

"Is this a joke?" She's irritated. "Brian is dead. He's been dead for a while."

I huff. Yet another reason to get a new temp. "I probably do have the wrong number. I was trying to reach a Brian Eckert who had graduated law school and wanted to talk to me about a job. My secretary is on her first day. She probably took the number wrong."

Fiction

"Wait!" There's a moment on the other end as the mother collects her thoughts. "My son went to Dartmouth, and he was going to become a lawyer. But he died in a crash on the way home from his last semester. Someone's playing a joke on you."

The temp has come into the office again, sorting this morning's mail in my various in boxes. "Hold on," I say into the phone, and then look up. The temp has been watching me, so I don't need to flag her attention. "This call from Brian Eckert, did it sound like a prank?"

"No, sir." The temp steps back and clasps her hands behind her. "He said he had been referred by a friend of yours, and that he'd be traveling."

The woman on the phone hasn't stopped talking. "I found his diploma in the attic this morning," she says in my one ear. "It arrived from the framers a week after the crash, and we never unsealed the box. Today I opened it and hung it in his old room."

"He said he'd just graduated," the temp says to my other ear. "I think he was looking for a job."

I nod at the temp to dismiss her, but she stays at attention even though Charlotte would have known better. Hitting the mute button, I murmur. "You can go."

I talk into the phone again. "I'm sorry I've bothered you."

Brian's mother sounds shaken. "I don't know what to think."

"I'll take care of it. If whomever it was tries again, I'll make sure to talk to him myself."

I summon the temp back to my office after I hang up. "The next time you get someone claiming to be Brian Eckert, you put him through to me."

No one from beyond the grave phones before I have lunch with one of the partners. Just as I return, though, a call comes in. The temp answers before the second ring and puts the caller on hold.

"It's Mrs. Eckert, the woman whose son called you this morning."

"If you'd use the speaker phone," I inform the temp as I head toward my office, "I would know that without your telling me."

I never gave her my number. Intriguing.

I put Mrs. Eckert on the speaker phone



Broken Window, Digital Photography by Michelle Anne Cope

and greet her by saying my name.

"Mr. Oster," she says, "I think it really was my son who called you."

Having followed me into my office, the temp puts the Palmetto papers on my desk. I flip through to the signature page. "Do you?"

"Remember I told you about his diploma? I'd left it in his briefcase. I looked inside just now, and I found a business card with your name and phone number."

I can't dispute her, since she obviously called the number on the card to reach me. On the other hand, I've worked with the law long enough to know human nature. I continue talking as I walk around

my desk to get the pen I left on the credenza. "You aren't very convincing with your ghost story."

"I am not joking. You called me. I have your business card here, and I have my son's diploma, and I have a dead son."

"Granted," I say. "But what do you want me to do about it?"

"If he calls back," the woman says, "send him to Greenwood."

"Greenwood?"

The temp is searching for a criminal file in the civil folders. I gesture at the other file drawer, but she isn't looking, just fingering through the files with a very deliberate slowness.

"It's the cemetery. Tell him to go there, to the the hill, and follow the road halfway. He's buried near the poplar."

"Are you suggesting," I say, settling myself into my leather chair, "that your two-year-dead son is looking for a job?" No response.

"The job market isn't that tight," I tell her. "I'm sure they're not saturated with lawyers in the afterworld."

I hang up. The temp looks lost, so I escort the temp to the proper filing cabinets. The afternoon passes. It's about time for the temp to leave, although I'm going to stay late again tonight. I might keep this temp after all: she managed to find the stock room and bring me some pens, and she finally comprehends the difference between civil and criminal.

The phone rings, and she answers using the speaker phone. One more point in her favor.

"It's the best place for you for right now," the temp says. "There are lilies in the field, and they're beautiful."

"Be like the lilies," the temp whispers.

"This is Brian Eckert," says the caller.

She stiffens and faces me, her mousy eyes round.

"Hang up on him," I say. "I don't have time for games. Get Mary Haggerty on the phone."

She looks at me, about to speak, but when she sees my face, she punches two buttons, then dials the number for Mary. I walk into my office to take the call only to see two lights on the phone.

That temp put Brian Eckert on hold.

I stride back to the temp's desk, my face hot. Direct disobedience from a temp? The agency has a whole holding pen full of other, competent, dutiful temps, and she knows it. I step up behind her, but with her back to me, she's already speaking. "Mr. Oster can't talk to you right now," she says. "But he left you a message."

The speaker phone has a slight hum, as though the caller has a very bad

connection. "What did he say?" The voice is young, not much older than the temp. There's a confusion about the way he

sounds, as though he's just finished a very long drive.

"He said you might try Greenwood," the temp says. "On the hill. Go halfway down the road. It's near the poplar."

The voice hesitates. "On the hill?"

Watching the temp from behind, I fold my arms. She's leaning over her desk like she's swaddling a baby, and she's speaking slowly, clearly. "Go halfway

down the road."

"Thank you." The voice softens, like a sleepy child's yawn. "I just found his card today, and I remembered I had to call him for a job. Warren Roden told me."

"Mr. Oster wants you to go to Greenwood," the temp says.

"I need a job. I need to work." I hear how the voice has gone softer, the hum on the phone more static than sound. "Are you sure that's a good place for me?"

"It's the best place for you for right now," the temp says. "There are lilies in the field, and they're beautiful."

"Then I'll try there." The voice wavers just before the static swallows it. "Thank you."

"Be like the lilies," the temp whispers.

She hangs up the phone. She doesn't turn around. She must know I'm here.

I consider.

Then without a word, I step backward into my office.

Mumbai Baby

by Heather Goodman

"Date of your last period." I smile at the medical history sheet in Dr. Gupta's office. Some women dread the change. I missed my last period and had a spotty one at best before that. Free at last. Sure, there'd be hot flashes, but I get to throw away all my tampons and pads. A month ago, I felt old. Only old women go through menopause. But this is our adventure, Dan keeps telling me, our empty-nest adventure. I chalk up the change to the adventure. Maybe I'm buying into the ancient Indian belief about age. Older is better.

I hand the receptionist my completed paperwork and flip through fashion magazines until the nurse calls my name.

"You're pregnant."

I refrain from giggling, not wanting to shame the doctor. "I'm Ruth, Ruth Sharp. You must have picked up someone else's paperwork." Silly mistake.

"Yes, I know who you are. You are pregnant," Dr. Gupta repeats in his Indian accent.

"But this is a routine check-up because, well, because I just started going through menopause."

"No, you are pregnant." No smile. He looks serious.

Fire alarms reel in my head. I want to pull over to let the truck pass. Dr. Gupta keeps talking, but his words are far away, like I am listening under water while he yells at me from the surface. I force myself to focus on what he is saying.

"You have two children?" He flips through my chart.

I nod.

"You are a high-risk pregnancy."

No kidding. I'm forty-seven years old. Of course I'm high risk. He hands me

two prescriptions. "You will need to take these." After closing my chart, he strides out of the room in two steps. On to the next patient. The medication names on the two pieces of paper he gave me don't look familiar. Probably for high blood pressure or something. I wish these doctors had more time to talk.

The fire truck follows me home, finagling between the businessmen and buses and beggars, blaring its siren at the goats and cows. I sit at the kitchen table and stare at a mark on the floor. I dropped a plate a couple of months ago, and a jaded corner of the plate had chipped the tile.

My mom died last year. How can I have a baby without my mom there? I don't care how old you are. Sometimes you need your mother. She's always been there before.

And what about us? I already have two kids; we had them at a young age, and they're out of the house. We're supposed to be empty nesters. We moved to India after getting Josh, our youngest, settled in college, and who wouldn't love our chosen destination? The smell of sandalwood lingering in the air, new foods to try (which sometimes my stomach doesn't love as much as my tongue does), silk saris and shawls with delicate patterns draping in the marketplace, and the vacations. Oh, the vacations in Ooty with the monkeys swinging through the trees. We wanted to live, not wallow in the all-of-the-sudden too-big house. We're supposed to be on our mid-life adventure, not second parenthood. We had kids early on purpose, not so that we could be strapped to another stroller in our forties. Forties? I'll be fifty in three years. Fifty! Who has a toddler in their fifties?

I get up to make coffee—I could use the caffeine—except I can't have caffeine. Another strict diet, no caffeine, no alcohol, especially this late in the game. Oh, and the cravings. I lost the weight easily enough in my twenties, but now? The ice cream will plump my frame for good. Pregnant in the land of spice, I'll have solid heartburn for the duration. Swollen ankles, sore back, sore everything. I sit back in the chair and find the broken tile again.

But with all of these questions and what-ifs and supposed to's, something somewhere in the corner of my heart smiles, something pink and soft like a fluffy cotton blanket with butterflies. A baby. I hope it's a girl.

I stare at that chipped tile for an hour and a half before my husband comes home.

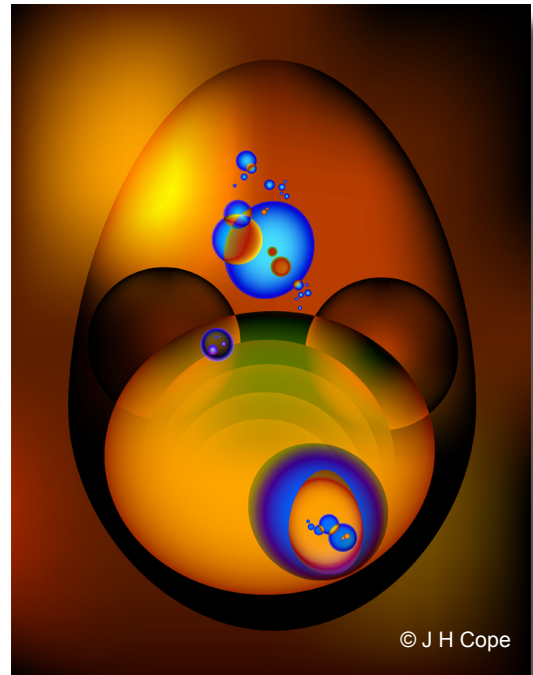
Dan walks in the door and puts down his briefcase. Through the open doorways, I can see him lean on the wall and take his shoes off. He's whistling "I'll have a blue Christmas without you" even though it's September. When he comes into the kitchen, he tears a paper towel off the roll and swipes it across his forehead and cheeks.

"I will never get used to this Mumbai pollution," he says. Dirt from his face covers the paper towel. "You okay?"

I nod, which seems to be all I can do these days. Then I shake my head. Then I nod again.

"Working on those Indian head shakes? They need to be a little looser, like this." He demonstrates.

"I'm pregnant." It just comes out like I've said it a thousand times before. I have said these words to my husband exactly two times previous to today. The first time, with Sherry, I lit candles and dressed in a black negligee and made his favorite dinner. The second time, we were watching Sherry sleep, cozied with her favorite bear and her Strawberry Shortcake comforter. We lost that baby a month later. With Josh, Dan came with me to the doctor's office. We both saw the stick I peed on but were too afraid to say the words until we heard the doctor say them. Even after we saw baby Josh swimming in the sonic image, the words were too fragile to be able to handle the open sunlight.



Spawn, Digital Art by Jeffrey Howard Cope

I never expected to say these words again.

Dan gapes at me like the woman at the street market the first time I tried to buy fruit. Armed with my Hindi-English dictionary I pointed to my selection, and she put them in a bag. Communicating about money was impossible. I handed her a handful and hoped she could be trusted to give me back the change. Stupid American.

He looks just as dumfounded.

"I'm pregnant."

"How? I mean, I know how, but aren't you, I mean, aren't we..." The smog buries the rest of his thought.

"Apparently we're not too old. Apparently those missed periods were not because of menopause. I should've realized that it might be too early." From bra-burning freedom back to guerilla warfare in suburbia.

Then again, I will be needed again, not just spending my day at this luncheon

or that high tea like some society lady. Nothing against society ladies, of course. I loved every stage of motherhood. I loved watching this person develop, someone that came out of my womb. And their personalities—you could see their personalities in the first month. In some ways, they haven't changed a bit. I love my kids. They're interesting people. I get to do this all over again.

The noises of Mumbai flood my ears. A prayer chant blasts over the speakers, mixing with the car horns and the goat bleats and cowbells. I want Dan to be excited because I want to be excited. I want him to let me know that this is okay.

"Yeah, because being in the second half of life won't be challenging enough." Dan scratches my back, barely touching my skin. My skin goosebumps at his fingertips. "There goes the retirement fund."

"I guess we weren't meant to have a midlife crisis. Sorry, no bright yellow convertible for you. Back to the minivan." It feels good to joke about this, to laugh about the baby.

Dan unravels his arms and goes under the sheet to kiss my belly. "Hello, baby," he says.

"aren't you too old for this?" looks. "Trying to cut down on the caffeine."

Elizabeth shows me the brown cashmere wrap she bought at the flea market. I wonder if I can get a crib made of sandalwood with elephants carved on the legs and sides. Wouldn't that be pretty? I could do a whole jungle theme in the baby's room.

The right corner of Dan's mouth curves up in an impish half-smile when he comes home from work.

The right corner of Dan's mouth curves up in an impish half-smile when he comes home from work.

"I guess I should get dinner ready."

He covers my hand with his before I get up. "I love you."

In bed that night, I lay my head on Dan's chest and loop my leg over his. He pulls me closer with his arms. I need his comfort. There are no other words for it. I'm scared.

"We're having a baby," he whispers and kisses my forehead. I look up at him, and he kisses me like we're honeymooners. "We're having a baby."

"Maybe we can do this. Maybe it will be fun." I paste an optimistic façade together with rosy cheeks and one of those bright red clown noses in hopes that I'll believe it.

"Should we stay in Mumbai?"

"Why not? You love teaching here. We're in an advanced technological city. It's not like we're in the middle of a jungle. We know the drill. We've done this before. And plus, we've already raised two kids in the States. Maybe we need an extra challenge."

I pick up my prescriptions and dutifully start the new regime. How high is high risk? Should I be concerned? Dr. Gupta didn't seem too worried. Then again, I can't read anything on his stoic face even when I'm not in shock. Still, he's confident in these medications, so I should be too. I put the bottles next to my Women's One-a-Day vitamins on my nightstand. One of each every morning.

When Elizabeth comes over for our afternoon tea, I select an herbal tea for myself and Earl Grey for her. Our husbands both teach at the University of Mumbai. Dan teaches English literature. Mark teaches calculus. Elizabeth and I adopted the Indian afternoon tea and became instant friends. It's my favorite custom, even on sticky September afternoons. I learned to make chai properly for special occasions, boiling the milk with cinnamon sticks and cloves and tea leaves. Today should be a special occasion, a celebration of new life, but I'm too tired for anything more than boiling water.

"Herbal tea?" she asks.

I shrug my shoulders. I'm not ready to talk about this yet. I need to get used to the idea before warding off those curious

"What?" I ask. Flowers peek out from behind his back.

He brandishes the bouquet with a flourish and a shallow bow. His right hand stays behind his back. I push my nose in the petals, filling my lungs with the lily scent, and then I give my husband a peck on the cheek and turn to get a vase from under the kitchen sink. Lilies. Like Easter.

"Wait." He brings his right hand out, which holds a small bag with cartoon toys scattered on it.

"Pretty soon our living room floor will look like this again," I say. Inside the bag is Winnie-the-Pooh with his red shirt and a stuffed honey jar sewn to his hand.

Dan and I were going to wait to tell friends about the pregnancy for another month or so, but while the herbal tea was easy enough to explain, foregoing wine at dinner a couple nights later was harder to pass off. And I need a female sympathizer. I don't have my mom this time around, and Sherry is less than excited at the news. She didn't say much, but I know this is hard for her. She wants to have her mom coo over her relationship with her boyfriend and her new job and the possibility of marriage,

not hang up on her to go throw up. Maybe she still needs me. I want to be that mom for her. I would venture to think that this whole pregnancy thing was a bad idea except that it wasn't my idea at all.

Josh took it as he takes everything.

The red numbers on the digital clock are frozen in time, unmoving, unchanging. 2:57. Finally, another minute passed. The cramping does not. I get up and find the Tylenol in our medicine cabinet, then crawl back into bed. I pull my knees higher as if the smaller I become the more diminished the cramps will be. My knees

I'm pregnant. I'm pregnant, and it's not up to the doctor to keep my baby safe. I'm the mommy. No alcohol, no caffeine, vitamins, plenty of sleep, a walk everyday, but how to keep the pollution out? A calendar of appointments and what to expect. Two medicine bottles from the doctor. What are they for? I type

I don't tell Dan. He's so excited about the baby. A son or daughter we don't know, but I don't say a word.

"Cool. Weird, but, well, congrats, Mom," and then he got off the phone to shoot some hoops with his dorm buddies.

So now Elizabeth and Mark know, and Elizabeth bustles around me like my mom did, even though she's ten years younger than me. Elizabeth and Mark never had children of their own, so I think Elizabeth sees this as her surrogate pregnancy. Last week, she started coming over to do my laundry or to help me clean.

"I was in the neighborhood."

"You're always in the neighborhood. You live two doors down."

She shrugs and keeps dusting. "Cleaning is fun when you're with people."

"So I'm coming over later to help you clean your house?"

"That's okay. I cleaned this morning."

"I had forgotten how tired I get when I'm pregnant," I tell Elizabeth. That suspicion that I'm actually old tiptoes into the room again. Do I have the energy to do this? "I'm definitely more tired this time."

She fusses and brings me pregnancy magazines and keeps my feet propped on the ottoman, and I love every minute of it.

I curl up in a ball and press my hands against my stomach. I didn't cramp like this with Sherry or Josh, did I? Dan snores next to me. I reach over to wake him but stop myself. He'll want to take me to the hospital. Just wait another minute.

almost touch my forehead. A little relief, only a little. Then a little more. Now the red numbers flash too quickly. I want to be asleep in a world where cramps don't exist. A little less pain. 3:43. Smaller and smaller, the pain diminishes.

The cramping subsides. I have a check-up with Dr. Gupta scheduled in the morning. With the cramps gone, this can wait until morning.

"That's perfectly normal," Dr. Gupta responds, "Especially for a woman your age."

Last night felt anything but normal, but what do I know about being pregnant in your late forties? My body was fit as a fiddle the last time I did this.

He scribbles in my chart before sticking his stethoscope on my stomach. I tense at the cold metal, that and the phrase, "your age."

"Can I hear my baby's heartbeat?"

"The insurance won't cover a sonogram every visit."

Twenty-three years ago, I never had a sonogram with Sherry. Because of my miscarriage after Sherry, the insurance allowed more leeway with Josh. I don't know how things work in India or anywhere these days, for that matter.

"Everything's going well," he assures and leaves the room.

"Mifepristone" in the Google homepage and click on the FDA link.

There, glaring on the screen, bleeding on the page, are the words "medical abortion."

High risk pregnancy, the doctor told me.

The medicine bottles for my high risk pregnancy judge me from my nightstand, reminding me to take one every morning. I chunk one across the room, leaving a dimple on the sheetrock.

"Can you feel the baby kicking?" Elizabeth asks. But it's so early.

We start to hear stories, a story of a missionary couple in Ooty. He's Indian, and she's Caucasian. They have three boys, and the doctor decided that was enough. They didn't get a vote. A story of an Indian couple in the mountains who already had one daughter, but we couldn't figure out if the couple knew, if they had asked the doctor in that case.

Mostly daughters are aborted, we learn. The heavy dowry, the orphanages spilling out little girls like Annie.

I don't tell Dan. He's so excited about the baby. A son or daughter we don't know, but I don't say a word.

Two days later, spots of blood appear on my panties. I had spotted with Sherry and Josh. Nothing to panic about, I tell myself and put on a panty liner. An hour later, the

blood leaks over the sides of the liner and the cramps return. I sit on the toilet as it drips in heavy globs. I pull my cell out of the pocket of my chinos, which slouch around my ankles.

"Come on, come on, answer," I say into the phone.

The department secretary answers in Hindi.

"I need to speak with Dan Sharp, please." I will my voice to remain steady, but it squeaks and huffs.

She switches to English. "He's in class right now. May I take a message?"

"This is his wife, and this is an emergency. Please interrupt his class!" The hemorrhaging gets worse. I'm at full-panic now.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hurry." The hold message is already playing.

"What's wrong?" Dan asks.

"I'm bleeding."

"A lot?"

I want to scream into the phone. No, I just wanted to call and let you know that I might have seen a small spot of blood. "More than a regular period."

"I'm coming to pick you up."

"No, meet me at the hospital." I stuff a tampon up my vagina and layer two pads in my underwear before getting in the car.

Dan stands at the ER door waiting for me. "I've signed you in," he says. "And I asked if they could page Dr. Gupta." Bent over, I lean on his arm like a walker. He lowers me onto a chair, and then begins pacing. The last person I want to see right now is Dr. Gupta.

No one recognizes that we're here and waiting. The nurses or receptionists, whoever they are, are too busy with other

patients or filing their nails or something. "My wife is bleeding!" he yells at the desk.

A woman asks for my insurance card.

Finally, finally, a nurse leads us to a bed and pulls a curtain around me. She checks my vitals.

"Change into this," she commands, handing me a paper gown. The gown is barely tugged closed around my back when she comes back in and hoists my feet into stir-ups. My blood pours onto the floor.

"What's going on?" Dan asks.

The nurse doesn't answer. Dan holds my hand. I don't know who squeezes tighter, him or me. Dr. Gupta walks in the room and sits between my legs.

"What is going on!?" Dan demands.

"Your wife is going into labor." He stares between my legs.

The blood drains from Dan's face like it drains from my uterus.

"My baby." My voice sounds like I've contracted laryngitis. Nothing works right. The nurses and other patients move in slow motion and fast forward at the same time, some sort of time-lapse that makes me timeless.

The doctor pulls out the pieces of my pregnancy, the leftovers of my baby in a dead placenta, and the nurse pushes morphine through the IV into my arm. Dan scrapes a chair across the linoleum floor to sit next to me. After Dr. Gupta and the nurse leave, we cry. Our baby is gone. No Winnie-the-Pooh's or jungle-themed rooms or soft, fluffy blankets.

Maybe our joy of the past weeks was a stolen joy, taken from a young couple strong and energetic and just starting their adult life. We had our turn.

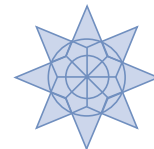
I spend the next days in bed popping Vicodin and trying to tuck my pain under the sheets. Dan lies next to me the

first day flipping channels and rubbing my back, and Elizabeth brings me Chamomile tea, scrambled eggs and Ginger Ale. I can't cry anymore. I stare at the TV, at the sheets, at the dimple in the sheetrock.

Why do I mourn for an unwanted child? Perhaps the doctor knew better. But the thought lingers only a moment. That was my child.

I get up, make the bed, and pass my fingers over the dimple in the sheetrock, barely noticeable, unseen by anyone but me. Then I go make dinner for Dan and me.

After all, this is our empty-nest adventure.



Remember, Hetty?

by Kristen Houghton

"Look, oh Hetty, look! Isn't that sweet-she looks so sweet! A fairy princess waiting for her prince to come! Oh! Can you see her, Hetty?"

"Yes, yes, Deirdre, I can see her."

The two elderly women were standing near the open gate watching the "trick-or-treaters" make their way along the street. In a little while it would be dark, but right now the sky was lit with the orange and pink glow of a sun that was just starting to set. The cool, dry air, with a small breeze, seemed to invigorate the children, the little ones skipping along, holding tightly to adult hands, the older ones running boldly ahead. All were laughing and calling to each other.

"Hetty, remember how we used to make those perfect pumpkin cookies with Mother supervising? We'd have all our little friends over for an autumn party, everyone dressed in costumes. We always made so many we had to give them to all our neighbors! Oh, (sigh), I remember it so well."

"I know, Deirdre, I remember, too."

"And, oh, Hetty, 'member that one party we had where we were dunking for apples and that ridiculous little boy, what was his name, you know, he had a big space between his teeth, his father was a dentist, but his own son wouldn't let him touch his teeth, imagine! oh, what was his name?"

"Peter, his name was Peter Schuyler, and his uncle was a dentist, not his father."

"Yes! Peter Schuyler. He dunked my entire head into the bucket just to be mean. Then when I cried, he tried to kiss me! And his costume was awful! He was supposed to be dressed up as a pirate but he looked more like a banker with an eye-patch because he was wearing his father's old suit coat. Yes, his father was a banker, not a dentist. I forgot that. You remember everything, Hetty!"

The sunset was starting to fade and the parents were telling the children that this was the last block. They had enough goodies; it was time to head back home soon. Some of the children protested. It was still early! One little girl had heard that the bakery on the next block was handing out pumpkin and apple muffins. Please, oh please, just a little longer.



Saguaro and Sky, Digital Photography
by Jill Florio

"Why, listen to them, Hetty. Pumpkin and apple muffins! I should have made muffins this year! Oh, Hetty!"

"Deirdre, you can't bake any more, you know that."

"Well, with a little help I could! Remember when Doctor Hamilton first told me that I had arthritis? I was maybe fifty years old, but I could still bake! It was hard to grip the pans but I managed. I still could if I really wanted to. Don't tell me I can't!"

"All right, Deirdre, all right. Don't excite yourself. Come inside now."

But Deirdre didn't move. Something else had caught Deirdre's attention. A little girl with wispy blonde hair, no more than three and dressed as a pumpkin, sat

down on the sidewalk, crying, and refused to budge. She told her mother she was too "pooped" to walk any more. Her father picked her up and, to stop her tears, swooped her up and down like a swing making her giggle with delight. The father put her up on his shoulders with her legs dangling around his neck.

"Daddy, daddy, I can see everything up here! I can see everybody!"

Deirdre smiled and waved at the little girl.

"Look Hetty, that sweet child is waving at me. 'Member when my Emma was her age? Remember, Hetty? Emma had blonde hair, too but hers was in curls. Beautiful curls. You do remember, don't you, Hetty? My Emma?"

"Of course I remember Emma at that age. My own niece! How could I forget?"

"I must stop by her place soon. Maybe tomorrow. What do you think, Hetty? The days seem to go by and I forget to go. You'll remember, you'll remind me to go, won't you?"

"Whatever you think is best, Deirdre. I'll remind you. Come inside with me now. Close the gate."

The little girl with the blonde hair, no longer tired, had asked her father to put her down so she could run with her older brother. She ran towards the curb saying she wanted to go across the street, maybe there were more treats over there.

"No street for you, Pumpkin-girl" said her mother, laughing as her father again swung her up to his shoulders. "There are plenty of houses on this side and plenty of treats. You know the street is dangerous."

The little girl's attention was quickly diverted by the next house where a man and woman were making a big fuss over all the costumes and giving out fancy bags of homemade cookies.

"Do you know Hetty, that I believe this is the nicest Autumn in the longest

time? Only thing is that it seems a lot colder now than when we were children. 'Member the beautiful October days when the whole family had finished raking all the front and back yards and Father would light a bon-fire to burn the old leaves? How delightful it smelled! The smoke rose so high and Mother had hot apple cider for all of us to drink while we sat outside watching the fire. We always got as close to it as Mother allowed just to keep warm. You do remember, don't you, Hetty?"

"Deirdre I remember everything you do. You are my sister after all. But everything was so long ago. Deirdre, come in now,

magnificent shades of pastel and deeper colors of amber and gold. The small breeze of a late October afternoon was turning into a chilly wind that swirled the leaves overhead like elegant dancers.

"Deirdre, come inside now, close the gate. It is getting so cold. The children will all be going to their own warm houses. Come inside."

But Deirdre was paying no attention to Hetty. She was smiling and waving to all the children, a look of happiness on her face.

"The costumes are so nice this year. And

"Deirdre, Deirdre, No, now calm yourself, Deirdre! Look at me, dear, please look at me. It isn't....."

But Deirdre was standing at the very edge of the gate and staring.

"Hetty, look, Hetty! It is....is it? Robert? Robert! Robert!"

Hetty stood close by Deirdre and gently put one hand on her shoulder. She too looked at the boy, who, from a distance, looked older than he was. He did look something like Robert, fair hair and slim build, but as he came closer, a more careful look showed him to be about

Hetty was silent for a moment remembering the sweetness of youth . . .

close the gate. It is almost dark."

"No, I don't want to, I want to watch the children. They're having so much fun. I guess they don't really feel the cold, Hetty."

"They feel it Deirdre. After all they are....."

"Hetty, Hetty, look! There's a bride! How lovely! Oh, Hetty, what poem did Mother always quote at weddings? Do you remember? Oh, yes, yes she said:

'Lovely bride, do not hide,
Show your face, soft with grace,
Lift your veil at altar rail,
O' blessed life! You are his wife!'

"I don't know who wrote it but Mother always recited it whenever there was a wedding. Do you remember it Hetty? Hetty?"

Hetty was standing a few steps away from the gate, behind Deirdre. She was looking at her sister with an expression of mild concern. Hallowe'en always did this to Deirdre. She began to reminisce about the past. Hetty had listened to her for years now. She supposed she would have to listen to her forever. She looked at the sun which was into its last phase of setting. The sky was streaked with

so creative! 'Member when we made our costumes, Hetty? You always wanted to be a queen and I, I wanted to be a ballerina. Do you remember?"

"Yes, Deirdre. I told you I remember everything, didn't I? Now come inside the gate. Come inside."

"Hetty! Look!"

"Deirdre, I've seen enough children in costume. Close the gate and come....."

A cry escaped from Deirdre, she had one hand up to her mouth and was pointing with the other. Her sister turned at the cry.

Hetty stopped what she was saying and looked down the street to where her sister was pointing. Several teenage boys, too old really to be trick or treating, were walking towards the gate. Disdaining costumes, they were none the less creative in what they were wearing. White bandages, oozing fake blood, were wrapped around arms, legs, and their heads. Their clothes were ripped and one boy, the tallest of them, carried a long forked branch which he used as a make-shift crutch. It was at this gangly boy that Deirdre was pointing.

"Oh, Hetty! Oh, my dear God!"

fifteen, not yet a man at all and certainly not Robert.

"Deirdre, he isn't Robert, dear. I'm sorry. He is only a boy and he is not Robert."

Deirdre looked hard as the boys crossed the street, laughing and pushing each other. The fair-haired boy had dropped his "crutch" and was running with the others. A horn honked loudly as the boys cavorted in the street stopping the few cars that were trying to pass. Startled, they all stopped and gave the driver the finger before running off laughing. No, it wasn't Robert. Deirdre sighed and hung her head.

"He went away, do you remember Hetty? He went away to the war and never came back. He was twenty-two. He left me and Emma to go to that horrible war. He never came back, Hetty."

"I know. War is terrible Deirdre. So many young men never came back. Hugh, well my Hugh, you know...."

Deirdre looked up at her sister in sympathy.

"Hugh? Oh, yes, Hugh, dear Hugh. You were so in love. Would you have married him, do you think, Hetty?"

Fiction

Hetty was silent for a moment remembering the sweetness of youth, of holding Hugh's strong warm hands, of his kisses and caresses that had excited such deep passion in her that, after him, she knew there could never be another man. That was why she had remained a spinster, an old maid they used to call it. Why she had helped Deirdre raise Emma and taken care of their parents when they became old and sickly. What else could she do, where else could she go? They all needed her and she had taken care of them all of her life. All of her life. Even now, she still took care of Deirdre. Dependable Hetty, caring daughter, sister, aunt.....lonely spinster. Spinster, a woman

"Remember Hetty, all the beautiful flowers there were in Mother's garden? Emma loved them. I must visit her place, maybe tomorrow. 'Member how she loves those marigolds, Hetty? 'Member Hetty?"

with no life of her own. Yes, she thought without answering Deirdre, I would have married him. Oh yes!

The wind was kicking up the leaves and the branches of the trees were bowing and swaying. There were only a few children passing by now, most of them gone to the local fast food place with their parents or home to eat. The little blonde "Pumpkin" girl was being carried by her father, her head snuggled into his shoulder, almost asleep.

"Lady waved to me, Mommy. Across the street."

"Where Cady?"

"There. 'Cross the street." Her mother turned to look.

"She's really zonked out, Mommy, in dreamland," said her father.

"Let's take her home and order ourselves a pizza, okay?" He gestured towards their daughter and smiled.

"Okay."

She smiled back and brushed the wispy hair on the child's forehead. They started towards home.

"Deirdre, there's no one left to see. It's dark and we should go inside now. Close the gate. Tomorrow will be busy."

Deirdre took another look down the street. It was practically deserted except for a few cars passing by. Hetty was right. It was time to go inside. Tomorrow would be busy. That was the day when all the pretty flowers arrived. She sighed and closed the gate.

"Remember Hetty, all the beautiful flowers

there were in Mother's garden? Emma loved them. I must visit her place, maybe tomorrow. 'Member how she loves those marigolds, Hetty? 'Member Hetty?"

"Yes, Deirdre. I remember everything."

The two women walked towards the low bushes bordering their property. Deirdre suddenly turned and kissed her sister.

"What was that for?" Hetty asked.

"For remembering with me, Hetty. You're the only one who remembers."

Deirdre smiled at her astonished sister and went on ahead. Hetty paused for a bit glancing up at the sky. The wind had settled down and was once again just a breeze. She looked towards the gate to make sure it was closed. Everything was peaceful. Hetty sighed a deep, ragged sigh. The night was sweet with a half moon shining through scattered clouds. She remembered a sweet night like this with Hugh long ago. If she could just stand here for awhile and remember only for herself.

"Hetty?" Deirdre was calling her. "One of the flower pots is overturned. There's dirt all over everything!"

Her reverie was broken. Deirdre needed her. She smiled sadly and walked towards her sister.

"I'll take care of it, dear. You go on. It won't take me but a few minutes."

"All right. Hetty? You'll remember about tomorrow and Emma's, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll remember. I always do. Go on now."

Hetty bent and picked up the overturned pot. Probably a rabbit or a cat had upset it while running through the night. With her hands she swept the dirt away from the stones that read:

HENRIETTA "HETTY" MAITLAND

1845-1918

Beloved Sister, Always Remembered in Our Hearts

DEIRDRE MAITLAND DOWNEY

1847-1920

Beloved Wife and Mother

Tomorrow, Hetty thought, we'll go to Emma's grave across the way.

I'll remember. I always do.



The Seed

by Darling Poor

Pulling aside the curtain, I looked out on the back yard below. Disgusted, I let the musty fabric flop back to the middle, closing the gap between myself and the vision outside. Flip-flops slapping against wooden stairs, I trounced downstairs to let Momma know.

"Gramma's sitting outside again, over the grave."

Momma was washing dishes, standing on one leg, which was always a marvel to me. Barefoot, she had her right foot

Momma gave me a direct stare that would take no rejection, so I slumped outside, letting the screen door bang my objection behind me.

Crossing a threadbare lawn, quilted with grassy patches in various states of death, my feet startled dragonflies who took off in front of me like little helicopters of summer. Gramma was sitting in an old metal chair in front of the grave, a three-by-two-foot scar in the earth.

"Gramma, what are you doing?" My tone was nasty and I knew it, but something about the way she had been sitting there since the burial bothered me.

Suki was Gramma's dog and constant companion, never more than a foot or so away. But ever since we'd brought the dog home from the visit to the doctor that put a peaceful end to her life, Gramma had refused to leave her companion's grave for more than a few hours to sleep or eat.

"Here, Momma wanted me to give you these," I lied.

Gramma looked at the crumpled paper packages in my palm. "Suki's not hungry." She resumed staring over the top of the grave. "What she is, is cold. It's cold down there, you know."

Time passed easily out there in the back garden. We sat silent, an hour ticking away in the midst of life going on as usual.

braced against the shin of her left leg, making a T-shape that seemed hard to balance on. But Momma was able to balance that way. She was strong, like the farmers from whose stock she came.

Momma sighed and shut off the water. She dried her hands and handed me three packets of seed from the kitchen drawer. "Bring her these."

I stared down at the small paper packages. One said "Asters" and had colorful pictures of wild flowers arching in every direction on the front. The second was a pack of marigold seeds and the third said Queen Anne's Lace.

"What are these for?"

"I want you to take them to her."

"But we buried Suki a week ago; you don't expect her to plant these?"

"No, Mary, I expect you to plant them for her."

Before I could object, she had shoved two leather gloves in my hand. "You'll only have to push them down half inch or so. Do it for her, it'll give her something to care for."

I wanted to put it behind me, forget about Suki's emaciated body, the way her head lolled after the doctor had emptied the syringe; forget about how limp she was and how her eyes no longer held life within their gelatinous lanterns; forget about rolling her body into the grave and topping it with dirt. But Gramma was sitting there, holding vigil, and it kept refreshing it for me, ripping open a wound that struggled for closure.

"I'm keeping Suki company," she said, not turning my way.

I pulled another lawn chair next to hers and sank into it. My flip-flopped feet kicked at the edge of the grave where grass parched from the sun was sucking onto any moisture it could find to stay alive. A few shards of green stood up here and there, defying the odds of the summer drought. "Suki's dead."

"Suki's right here," she insisted. "She likes me being near, it makes her feel better."

A harsh breath emerged from my lips. Suki had been sick for months. It had been Momma's decision to put her down and it had taken weeks to convince the old woman that it was the right thing to do.

I missed the dog too, didn't she realize that? "We're gonna plant them over her, it'll make a blanket of flowers to keep her warm." I'd say anything to make Gramma come inside, to stop prolonging this, even humor her in her delusion that Suki was still alive.

My hands slipped into the leather gloves and I kneeled on the edge of the grave. The packets were already open, so I cast the seeds wide over the soft dirt, letting wind and fate take them where they would go. Once they had fallen, I set to pushing them under the soil and patting the dirt over, just like Momma had taught me seasons ago. Momma was an expert gardener. Me, not very much. But still, something about seeds did appeal to me. They were flower eggs.

I walked the fifty feet or so to the spigot, scaring up more dragonflies, in order to fill a battered metal watering can. Returning to the grave, I sprinkled the cool water of life over my tucked in flower eggs.

"Not too much; Suki didn't drink too much water."

I ignored the way her voice trembled between agony and grief and set the can down to survey my work. It looked good and rich and nourishing. Everything

pushed under, covered and watered. I plopped in the chair next to Gramma and brushed dirt off my knees.

In the distance, blackbirds were swooping out of a tree and returning to a branch to snap at something between their feet. I watched three birds perform these cartwheels before I realized they were catching bugs in mid-air. I'd never noticed that before. Were they eating my little helicopters of summer, too? I saw a beak snap over the thick body of a dragonfly and realized that they were. I had scared them up out of their hiding place and now they were bird food. It made me feel bad, but I forced my thoughts onto baby birds

My eyes met Gramma's and I realized then that she knew Suki was gone, knew the dog had to be put to sleep out of kindness, knew why her precious pet wasn't any longer by her side.

and felt a little better. Life was sad, always changing.

Time passed easily out there in the back garden. We sat silent, an hour ticking away in the midst of life going on as usual. Although I was motionless, motion was all around me. It felt good to be still and let life pass me by. The sun slipped lower and it grew cold.

"I'm going in," I said at last.

"I'm going to stay a little while longer. Keep Suki company," she said.

I figured she would bring herself in.

It wasn't until thunder cracked overhead in the middle of the night that I sat up in bed, wide awake, wondering if she had indeed come in. I raced to the curtain and pulled it aside. There was a dark shadow in the chair and rain pelted mercilessly all around.

Throwing on clothes and sneakers, I ran outside. "Gramma!" She appeared not to hear. "You've got to come inside," I shouted over the water streaming down

on both of us. I lifted her forcibly by the arm and brought her inside.

"Suki is afraid of thunder," she said. Not in the mood for an argument, I removed Gramma's wet clothes and fed her arms and head through a nightgown. "Go to bed now," I scolded, closing the door to her room.

The next morning, I followed muddy tracks from the screen door to Suki's grave. Again she sat, staring in front of her at the lawn still moist from last night's thunderstorm.

"Suki's not here," I stated.

Gramma's gaze swung round on me. "Of course she is. I was here when you buried her."

"Yes," I said, hugging myself to keep from trembling, "but that was just her body. A shell. She's gone now, to heaven."

"Do you believe that?" she asked.

My tongue stopped at my teeth, tripping over an answer that would not be a lie.

"Next time you tell someone something," she said, rising out of the chair like a geyser, "you'd better believe it yourself."

My eyes met Gramma's and I realized then that she knew Suki was gone, knew the dog had to be put to sleep out of kindness, knew why her precious pet wasn't any longer by her side. All this time, I thought she had just lost her mind and needed humoring.

"I'm sorry," I faltered. "I want to believe it, but I'm not sure I do. Maybe this life is all there is."

"To me," Gramma said, "it doesn't matter. What matters is that I do something to honor her, so I sit here. I need somewhere to direct my love, so I sit here. I need somehow to say I'm sorry she's not by my side any more. Me being here is all these things. What else can I do?" She burst into tears.

I pulled her close and our anguish mingled together, moistening our faces with salty, warm water. As she held me, all the pain and grief and confusion about death seeped from me. I had been holding on to my sadness for so long that when the facade burst it left me feeling wrenched and drained. But also better.

"Sit with me," Gramma said. "Suki's spirit is happy; she likes what you have done."

And so I sat with her, for hours at a time. Within one week, small sprouts emerged from our well-tended garden. By two weeks time, the grave was studded with little green champions, healthy seedlings who soaked up water, cracked open their shells and reached out to the world again. Stretching their luminous arms upward, they searched for sun and light. Though anchored in darkness, their true nature was displayed in the fresh emptiness of each new day, adding purple and yellow to the blue of the sky.

The success of Suki's garden made me want to garden all the time and I began stripping areas of the lawn bare for new rounds of seeds. I tended them all like a mother, removing weeds and making sure to keep them wet, giving them every chance to live.

Not long after, Gramma developed a cough that led to deep, racking wheezes and eventually pneumonia. She could no longer join me outside. "Remember Suki," she asked, and I promised to keep Suki's garden alive.

One cold morning, Momma woke me to say Gramma had been taken to the hospital in the middle of the night. I slipped out of bed. Part of me wanted to part the curtain and look outside. Surely she was there. Surely she would be there again, when the doctors cured her.

Instead, Momma handled me a scribbled note and shook her head.

In blue ink scrawled on hospital paper it read, "Believe."

The next day I planted a willow tree whose branches arched over Suki's garden like arms that hugged. All around it, flowers transformed dark earth into fluorescent buttons of hope. In only a few weeks time, every part of the parched wasteland had become radiant with color, with life. I hadn't realized how much I had done until I planted the tree. It seemed to anchor the garden with a vertical path, a striving toward the sky; toward light; toward heaven.

I sat in a lawn chair and admired the kaleidoscope. The sun warmed my head and breezes tickled my nose. I felt something else too. I could feel them watching me. I didn't just believe it; I knew.

Birds' Nest Soup

Leni Hester

Call me Medusa. When I stopped combing my hair, both friends and family exiled me to a ruinous castle on a deserted island. You look dirty that way, they said. They preferred the curls cut back before they acquired a life and form of their own. But I wouldn't do it. And they refused to look upon me resembling the mad, the homeless, the Rastafarian, so I sailed away across the sunlit sea with my lover, to the island.

The island was full of creatures that reveled in what I had allowed to follow its course. My dreadlocks caught the pollen from the air. Bees followed me, lured by the scent, hunting frustrated for the juicy infrared tongue leading to nectar. They spun around my head. The noise was deafening.

My hair became one huge knot, smaller knots orbiting closely. As I bathed beneath the waterfall twigs and leaves were washed from it.

Your hair scratches me when we sleep, my lover whined. It's full of pine needles and thorns. So I began to wrap my head in linen.

This soon proved unnecessary. One morning, he was gone. I searched the whole island, but he was nowhere, not in the groves, or the forest, or the rocky dry meadows. He was not in the palace, or down by the lagoon. I went to the pier, now nearly fallen into the bay. The boat was still moored. I had learned to read the track of any creature that traveled over, on or under the sea--a subtle trick of my mother's family--and he had not left the island.

Returning to the palace, I noticed a slab of alabaster in the corner of my bedroom. I knew it had not been there before. It was highly polished and not much carved. I embraced it and heard his heart beating in the stone. But by then a nest of birds moved into my hair and I couldn't hear too well, over their noise.

I abandoned the bed and slept upright, hunched over an altar of cushions. I did not want to roll over in my sleep and crush the baby birds. I listened to their songs all day and thought that the stone might be a message from my lover. Perhaps I had ignored him in order to better hear the sounds of my island. I had spoken very little since arriving--there was no need for it. When I did speak, my voice was rusty from disuse. I could only hiss like a snake. The birds fled.

That was just as well, because soon snakes really began to enter my window, wide open to catch the breeze and much more accessible than the weaver birds' limb. They moved into my hair and whispered into my ears, attracted by the gold hoops that were suspended there. I never saw them unless I looked in the mirror: we were tenants in a segregated building. There was little visual contact between floors.

It is now that visitors came to shatter my peace. My mother and sisters, my aunts and both grandmas, cousins, old girlfriends. Even nieces grown up in my absence, now women. Seeing them I was



Precious Metal, Digital Art by Diane Cipollo

forced to realize how long I had been there. It was longer than I thought.

When they came, I heard the clicks of their expensive and purposeful shoes on the marble floor of the atrium. I tried to identify them by scent but they all reeked of cologne and I could not name them. Their perfume was heavy, made me dizzy from a distance.

Once they had navigated the forest of pillars surrounding the atrium and actually found my chambers, they would beg. They wanted, they insisted, that I come home. I was promised silk suits and leather pumps, trips to the salon and

my mind. Was I happy? I no longer had to ask that question. On the island joy was redundant. There was no emotional inventory to take. I gathered my food, I watched birds migrate, I saw storms move in and pass by my dry bright home in the sizzling sea.

And I had come to love my snakes that I could only see in the mirror, their momentary tongues with ancient stories never repeated, their dark eyes glittering with every secret. Other creatures lived up there now, I could hear their clicks and chirps. My visitors asked if I was lonely. I was never alone. I was at the center of this tiny forest. It grew from within and

green lizards, mice and shrews, little brown spiders, the crickets that had sung me to sleep, all panicking as they spilled into the basin and try to climb out. Blossoms and grasses fell out, spider webs and tiny nests. But I saw no snakes: none. They were long gone, fled from the python before I even woke up. I sobbed as I lathered my head with cassia soap and brought the blade in closer. Soon I was bald as an egg.

I went down to the pier, pointed my leaky boat across the smooth sea, back to where I had come from. I was defeated. I had no idea that the way I looked would suddenly be in fashion when I returned. I didn't know that paparazzi would soon follow me, photographing my bald head, much as the bees on the island had spun around me before. All I knew was that I was defeated. I rigged up a black sail and left exile, sobbing, even while dormice were carrying off locks of my abandoned hair to line their nests, in some cranny between slabs of palace marble, where the snakes couldn't reach them.

The lines on her face were the same as mine. Small ones around the eyes when she smiled. A few creases near the corner of her mouth. Still, there was an obvious difference.

Cancun, a job, a husband. Just comb your hair and come with me. By now my hair was beginning to support its own little ecosystem. I hid in the shadows and refused gently to step out, knowing the sight of me and the snakes would send them screaming back to their boat. And those snakes were never more than little garter snakes, thin as a rat tail, gentle, more like gardeners than hunters. But when I stepped forward, my visitor had disappeared leaving only a slab of stone and a scent of disinfectant falling like a toxic mist where they had stood.

Green marble, black marble, soapstone. Over time I collected a bunch of these stones and set them up in the courtyard, and would sit in the evening and watch the sunset set these stones on fires. Obsidian, agate, malachite. It was only when lit by the dying sun that I could see who they had been, when that fierce golden light would seem to illuminate them from within, and their faces would be revealed, melted in that light.

These visitors had all asked if I was happy, actually happy with what I was doing, and the question remained on

spread its embrace outward. It loved my flesh without demand or criticism. Its living music included my heartbeat, its forest noise included my breath.

One morning that noise was stilled. I awoke and felt a heaviness on my head. I looked in the mirror. A tree python, six feet of electric green phallic predator was sitting on my head, hunting in my hair. It was so brazen and blatant, I found myself afraid. This was something very different. I had been part of the scenery, a singing tree, the benevolent environment. Now I felt like a host, exploited and unloved; there was no symbiosis, no reciprocity. Once it devoured my companions it would fill its life with my own.

I began to sharpen a razor.

This unaccustomed sound, like the violent whispers of distant storms, put the rest of my companions into a panic. The python fled first, luckily, but even then there was still a stranger in the forest. Me. The razor. Suddenly, we're civilized again. The exodus began. I leaned over a basin and put the razor to my hairline. Vines of hair began to fall, blue tailed salamanders,



Shades of Bleu

Janie Emaus

The woman I was supposed to have become approached me the other evening. I suspected her arrival, the day I found wheat germ in my pantry. But I hadn't expected her so soon.

She walked out of my bathroom dressed in a terry cloth robe, smelling from bubble bath and musk.

"Hi Maxie girl," she said.

I cringed.

"You still don't like that name?"

For the past twenty years I've been calling myself Max. Or Maxine, if the situation warranted a more formal name or clarification of my sex.

"It's better than Maxie pad," I said, remembering how hard it was to shed my high school nickname. "But not much."

"It's only a name," the woman answered. "You can call me Bleu."

Maxine Bleu Weingart. That's my full name. After high school I enrolled in college as Bleu M. Weingart. I'd had enough of the Maxi jokes. BMW. Perhaps I had cursed myself with those initials.

"You are looking well," Bleu said. Her lips turned up slightly at the edges, as she spoke the words I was thinking.

She did look well, better than that. She looked fantastic.

The lines on her face were the same as mine. Small ones around the eyes when she smiled. A few creases near the corner of her mouth. Still, there was an obvious difference. Something I didn't possess. Contentment, perhaps. Fulfillment. Anticipation.

Yes, that's what I would have to call it. Unlike me she still looked at everything's potential, seeing things as they were and at the same time, as they could be. Seeing not only the shape of things, but what lay beyond.

As Bleu's eyes fell on the menorah caked with old wax, I knew she was wondering what kept the owner too busy to scrap away last year's drippings. Seeing the pile of papers threatening to topple onto the floor, Bleu would ask herself how long would they sit there? And was that dried red rose in the empty vase left there on

Thanksgiving up north. With Neal's new wife Maya and most likely her crazy family. Did he want to start a new tradition? Change everything just because his grandparents, my parents were gone.

purpose? Or was the owner too afraid or perhaps too depressed to throw it away?

And she was definitely studying the lighting. The right lighting was as important to Bleu as the right words. It brought you into the heart and soul of things, carried you into what was important.

I remember that- that search for the perfect light. I remember following lines and shapes until I became the object I was looking at. Be it a beach ball, a partially shaded kitchen table, or windshield wipers working at high speed to clear the window of the falling snow.

Now, I saw only flatness.

My husband says I'm changing.

"You've been expecting me," Bleu said. "I found this in the refrigerator." She held up the bottle of Boones farm Apple Wine. "Care to join me?"

My husband says I'm becoming forgetful. He didn't buy the Boonesfarm Apple wine. So I must have.

How can I make him understand that it wasn't me? At least not the "me" I am today.

God forbid, I should drink apple wine. I'd wake up with a hangover longer than the city block I walk to work everyday.

You've become so distracted, he says. What are you thinking about?

How can I tell him, I'm thinking about her?

"That stuff will give me a headache," I said.

As Blue sipped her wine, I tasted its sweetness against my tongue. It carried me away from this four bedroom house, and south toward Mission Beach, settling me inside the small living room with the cracked front window. I felt the creases of the Indian Print rug underneath my legs while Knights in White Satin played on the stereo. Moody Blues. Everyone's favorite.

What the hell. I poured myself a glass. Bleu smiled. "It'll probably give me a headache, too," she said. "I drink red wine now. Usually a cabernet."

"Me, too," I said, holding my glass for a toast.

That first night she stayed less than an hour. We didn't talk much. We watched each other think. After she left, I dumped the rest of the wine and made myself a martini. Ketel One Vodka, two olives, one onion, extra dry.

A few minutes later, I found myself in my studio. I hadn't painted anything in over a year. Anything meaty, that is. I'd dabbled in oils. Painted a few watercolors for birthday and Hanukah gifts. Simple sunsets. Seagulls and waves. What everyone expects in a beach scene. But nothing much. Nothing of myself.

I was staring at an unfinished sunset, (when had I started this?) at the red streak above the too blue sea, when the phone rang.

"Hi Mom." It was my son. "I have a proposition."

What happened to - How are you?
What've you been doing? How's Dad?

"Mom?"

"I'm here. Go on."

Red. Red was good for motion. Red wagon. Red train. Red whistle. When I was trying to illustrate children's book, I used a lot of red. Neal always loved my red drawings.

"It's hard," I said. "First holidays are always hard. First everything's are hard. Sometimes getting up is hard."

"I know, Mom. That's why I think you should come up here."

I told him I'd think about it. We talked about the weather for a few minutes. About Jessie's part time job at the newspaper. And Eleanor's sprained ankle. As usual, Neal argued that Ellie needed to be more careful. And that Jessie needed to stop changing her major and graduate already.

with. There wasn't much else between us and so I didn't feel bad about calling him at the last minute when a girl I knew from work asked me if I wanted to go to this great party at the beach.

Her husband had been killed in a freak accident at work and she was finally ready to get out of the house.

I didn't know her that well. I hadn't known her husband at all. And I didn't really know anything about what she must have been going through during the past year. I only knew she needed a friend on this

I took a sip. The liquid went down smoothly,
all the way to that place were yesterdays are kept.

"So, what do you think?"

"What? I'm sorry, honey."

"Dad's right," Neal said. "There is something wrong with you, isn't there?"

I turned my back on the watercolors. "No, and what did your father say?"

"Nothing. Listen, I think it would be a good idea if we had Thanksgiving here. You can all drive up on Wednesday. We have plenty of space. Jessie and Ellie can have the den. You and dad can have our room."

Thanksgiving up north. With Neal's new wife Maya and most likely her crazy family. Did he want to start a new tradition? Change everything just because his grandparents, my parents were gone.

"Tell me what your father said."

"Nothing, really."

"Neal." He was never good with secrets.

I could hear him take a sip of something.

"He just thinks you're drifting a lot, you know, not always with it."

I half listened, as I always do when Neal starts in, told him I loved him and would think about Thanksgiving.

But I'd already made up my mind.

Somewhere in this messy studio should be a clean canvas. Whatever size.

I didn't quite know what I was going to paint. But I could feel an image taking shape, beneath my thoughts, beneath logical thinking, faraway from the kids and their problems, my parents, my husband. Deep inside me where there are no words, only feelings, shapes, colors, lines, shadings.

I picked up the first book I had ever illustrated. "Promising show of colors... child's way of seeing the world."

An illustrator at a children's conference had written that about my work. During our half hour time together, she had encouraged me.

The fifty rejections that followed had nearly destroyed me before bringing me to my husband.

We met at a party twenty-five years ago where neither of us really belonged. I had canceled a date with a guy I was sleeping

particular Friday night. I was that friend.

Michael lived next door to the party in a house dwarfed by the three story, six bedroom, five bathroom mansion where I learned parties were held every weekend.

The minute I walked into the crowded, smoky living room I wanted to turn around and leave. My friend seemed comfortable with the stewardesses flitting around the place like fireflies and the pilots trying to catch them.

I kept thinking of that talk the attendants, as they are now called, give about where to put your mask, how to lower it to your face and which exit to use. I found myself wandering around the room when I spotted Michael. He was completely out of place.

He had a beard and longish hair. He carried a beer instead of a cocktail glass. And he looked utterly bored. Either that or so totally in awe of the gorgeous girls passing back and forth that his eyes had glazed over and his mind had followed.

To cure my boredom, I followed and cornered him.

Now it's a standing joke between us. He says I kept him from meeting the "blonde" of his life.

I used to think he had saved me from myself. Now I'm not so sure.

The second time - Bleu appeared at the kitchen table while I was making an energy drink with bananas, strawberries, raw eggs and wheat germ.

"Make me one too," she said, placing her hands on the table. I noticed the unevenness of her nails, and the dryness around her knuckles. Tinges of yellow and blue paint on the pads below her thumbs. An astrologer once told me the puffier the pad, the hornier the person.

I studied my own hands. Nails a faint pink, rounded and smooth. I wanted to hide them behind my back as soon as I poured the frothy drinks from the blender.

"Remember these?" I held up my pale pink drink.

"How could I forget?"

We used to make energy boosters while we studied for finals. Of course, we often added mind altering drugs to the mixture. Which was probably the active factor in our staying awake all night. Not the wheat grass.

Bleu raised her drink. "To you, Maxie girl."

I took a sip. The liquid went down smoothly, all the way to that place where yesterdays are kept.

I heard splashing and laughing and I saw the sun bouncing off the raft that drifted aimlessly across the pool.

"What are you thinking?" Bleu asked.

"I was swimming with the kids. Swimming and laying around with the pool with them."

"How are they, your children?"

"Neal is married. Happy, I suppose. He graduated from UCLA. He's an accountant."

Bleu nodded. Numbers and columns were things she never liked. Never understood them the way I had.

"Jessie's still at UCSB. She keeps changing her major. This year it's journalism. And Eleanor will graduate next year and who knows what she'll do. She's an artist, you know."

"I know."

"She's good," I said.

There's nothing as frightening and yet as exciting as an empty canvas. That's how I used to feel. Right now, I felt neither.

"I'm not surprised."

"Have you decided about Thanksgiving?" my husband asked as I cleared away the dirty dishes.

We hadn't talked much during dinner. It's easier for him to talk to me while I'm in motion, doing something, some menial task that keeps my hands busy.

"I don't want to go." I hung a wet dish towel over the bar on the stove.

"The kids will be disappointed." My husband came up behind me and placed his hands on my shoulders.

"Not the girls. They want to stay here. This is where we always are."

"You're wrong, Max."

I crumbled. "I know. We're usually at my parents."

My tears soaked his shirt and left me dehydrated. I opened the fridge thinking that I was going to pour a glass of orange juice, but instead I took out a bottle of water and carried it into the living room.

Michael followed me. "We have to talk about this. It's good to talk."

"Later," I said. I got up from the couch and went into my studio.

There's nothing as frightening and yet as exciting as an empty canvas. That's how I used to feel. Right now, I felt neither. Just this horrible ache for my parents, for the way things were last year and the fifty ones before that. It seemed so unfair that both my mother and father had died within months of each other.

If I could only hear my mother's voice or

my father's uneven snoring. If only I could feel my mother's soft lips on my cheek. If only I could touch my father's bumpy thumb nail. If only I could smell...

If only I could...

If only...

If...

"Hey there Maxie girl." Bleu stood off to the side of the room. She wore a long peasant skirt and white blouse.

"Hi." I wiped the tears off my face.

"I like it," she said, nodding to my canvas.

"What?"

And that's when I noticed what I had painted. The kitchen where I had grown up, void of people, yet full of movement. You could see that the ketchup bottle on the counter had just been set there. And that the black phone on the desk was about to ring.

If you looked away, the apron hanging on the back of the kitchen chair would slip to the floor. The history book opened to page twenty-five would flip to page twenty-six.

"My God!" My hand flew to my mouth. "I don't even remember doing this."

"I know."

"Have you just been standing there? Watching me?" I asked, running my fingers over the bottom of the painting, over the tiled floor stained with coffee.

Bleu didn't answer.

"I really don't remember," I said.

I couldn't take my eyes off the painting. My legs wobbled slightly and I used the back of a chair to steady myself. But even that wouldn't hold me up. I slumped to the floor.

Bleu sat cross-legged next to me.

Certainly the woman who woke up this morning, handed her teenager lunch money, walked to work, balanced books, cooked a pasta dinner, was not the same person who painted this picture.

"Why did I give this all up?" I asked.

"You didn't give it up. You put it aside, that's all," Bleu massaged my shoulders. "And I'll let you in on a little secret. You wouldn't have been able to paint that," she pointed her thumb toward my kitchen scene, "if not for the life you've had."

"Maybe."

"There's no maybe about it. I've been an artist all my life, but I haven't really progressed that much. There's a lot I can't bring to the canvas. Those things that haven't touched my heart."

I wanted to say something, but my eyelids grew heavy. While Bleu kept on talking about our college days and freedom and the family she never had, I curled up on the carpet and closed my eyes.

Michael woke me at 3:30 in the morning. His hand was on my shoulder, shaking gently.

"Have you been up here all night?" he asked. A waft of bourbon fell across my face.

"I guess so," I said. "Have you been drinking all night?"

"Of course not. I fell asleep on the couch and you didn't wake me up to get ready for bed, so that's where I've been."

The thought of him, passed out on the sofa and me on the floor, made me smile. We've fallen into patterns and when one of us breaks the routine, the other becomes lost. And it wasn't such a bad thing.

"Maxine?" Michael glanced over to the canvas.

"What?" I said, forcing myself to sit up.

"Did you do all that tonight?" He walked up to the painting and then back about ten feet. "It's awesome."

"Awesome?"

Michael raised his shoulders. "Isn't that what the girls would say?"

"I suppose."

We stood side by side, studying what I had been possessed to create. There really wasn't any other word for it. I had morphed into someone else, someone had taken control of my senses and created this work of art.

Certainly the woman who woke up this morning, handed her teenager lunch money, walked to work, balanced books, cooked a pasta dinner, was not the same person who painted this picture.

"It's fantastic, really, honey. I mean...I'm shocked."

"That I can paint?"

"No, that all this came out of you last night."

"Me too," I said. "I think it was her."

"Who?"

"No one." I took my husband's hand. "Let's go to bed."

The last time Bleu came to visit I was soaking in a tub full of lavender oils. Candles lined the window sill. A glass of champagne waited for me on the rim.

"You know what my son asked me?" I said.

Bleu sat on the toilet seat, watching me. "I can only guess."

"He wants to know if I'm taking anything for what's bothering me. What's making me feel different. He wants to make sure I'm okay when we come up there."

"Kids." Bleu smiled.

I slipped my paint-stained fingers into the warm bathwater. Then I closed my eyes, leaned my head against the edge and slipped under the water up to my neck.



Contributors



Heather A. Goodman

Heather is a writer and speaker with a secret desire to be a Broadway star. She has a habit of randomly breaking into song and dance. She lives with her husband and three fish. Well, until the three fish died. You can find her at www.heatheragoodman.com.



Alessandra Diridoni Grigsby

Prize winning author, Alessandra Diridoni Grigsby works for a large software manufacturer and writes contracts for a living. She spends her spare time writing short stories and poetry. Diridoni Grigsby has traveled well beyond her California home, pressing into memory people, places and sights along her journeys so that they might be enjoyed again and again in her writing. No event is without its merit and value as a great point to the story or a wonderful description in Diridoni Grigsby's cache of material. She and her husband enjoy their large family, including children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. She is a life-long resident of the San Francisco Bay Area.



Kristen Houghton

Kristen Houghton is an author, satirist, and Relationship Writer whose work appears in numerous online and print magazines and newspapers. She holds a M.F.A. in writing and a doctorate in linguistics. Kristen invites you to visit her professional writer's site, "Life and Other Fearless Adventures!" at: <http://www.kristenhoughton.com>.



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Kim Kenney is the author of three books with Arcadia Publishing, *Canton: A Journey Through Time*, *Canton's West Lawn Cemetery*, and *Canton's Pioneers in Flight*. She has also published an exhibition review in *The Public Historian*, the journal of the National Council for Public History. She serves as editor of the Museums website at BellaOnline.com, where she has authored several ebooks. The Association of Gravestone Studies recently awarded her the Oakley Certificate of Merit for her interpretive projects at West Lawn Cemetery.



Jane Lebak

Jane Lebak is a freelance writer and novelist. Her second novel, "Seven Archangels: Annihilation" will be serialized in *Mindflights Magazine* during 2008 and available for sale beginning in January. For more information, visit <http://archangels.janelebak.com>.

Contributors



Deb Bonam

I work mostly in acrylics and some mixed media. I often use paintings to express deep emotions that I cannot express verbally.



Jeffrey Howard Cope

Jeff Cope is an artist and member of the Ohio Art League.



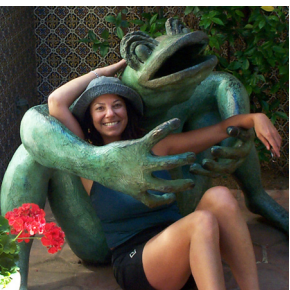
Michelle Anne Cope

Michelle Cope is a freelance writer and illustrator. She is also the Pop Music and Children's Writing editor for BellaOnline.com.



Diane Cipollo

Diane Cipollo started as a traditional pen and ink artist in the greeting card industry and won third place in the Decorative Artist's Workbook 1998 Holiday Card Contest. She has always been fascinated by animated movies such as Disney's Fantasia and turned in her traditional pen and ink for digital pixels several years ago when digital art and animation software arrived on the scene. She has been with BellaOnline since 2003 as editor for the HTML, PHP, Flash and Digital Art and Design sections.



Jill Florio

Jill Florio is frequently found wandering the desert with her digital camera, a bottle of water and a big sun hat. She also enjoys environmental portraiture. Her nature and journalistic prints were published in the Prescott Daily Courier, The Prescott Valley Tribune, Sweat Magazine, Flagstaff Live, Mountain Living Magazine, the Big Bug News and Chino Valley Reporter.

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Sheila Marie Sproule

Sheila Sproule grew up and was educated in Dublin, Ireland. She has recently retired from her administrative career to pursue her ambition of becoming a writer. She lives in London, Ontario, Canada with her husband and two wonderful daughters.



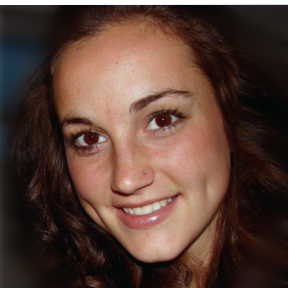
Randa Talley

I work as a Flight Attendant for a major airline. I enjoy traveling all over the world. My passion is writing poetry and song lyrics. I play guitar and love to dabble in watercolor painting. I co-write with musicians in the US and Europe. I'm currently working with a team writing contemporary worship music. I live the solo artist life, residing near Music Row in Nashville, TN. I'm thankful to have successfully raised two talented musicians, my son and daughter. I network with other musicians/writers/friends via www.myspace.com/goodsongwriter and would love to have you stop by and say hello.



Kimberly Tilghman

Kimberly Tilghman lives in Eden, Maryland near on the Eastern Shore. She has two beautiful children and a loving husband who she shares her life with. Writing has always been her passion and it lends her strength of spirit and a venue to sort out life's challenges. She thanks you for the opportunity to share a piece of her world with you.



Bethany E. Zick

Bethany Zick currently resides in Colorado. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Kentucky in 2007, where she had a double major in Physical Geography & Spanish. She also spent a semester in Santiago, Dominican Republic. She enjoys traveling, the outdoors, exploring, rugby, art, and anything that keeps her active. Also, she is currently taking on snowboarding and rock climbing for the first time and loving both very much.

Contributors



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Wolf LittleBear is the author of the poem entitled Solstice which was featured in this issue of Mused, the BellaOnline Literary Review.



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Darling Poor, née Beatrice Graulau, is ¼ Huichol Indian and ¾ Puerto-Rican. She has an honors degree in English from San Diego State University and has loved and ridden horses since she was 11. She is author of the children's novel, Song of the Wind Spirit, due for publication in 2007, and is editor of the horses site at BellaOnline, the second largest women's site on the web. Her hobbies include the study of natural horsemanship, horseback riding, non-fiction reading and writing, history, and children's literature.



Jeanette Stingley

Jeanette Stingley found encouragement to write through her sophomore English teacher in high school when her teacher insisted she be the editor of the high school newspaper. Since then Jeanette can't put her pen down. Jeanette is a freelance writer and aspiring novelist. She joined BellaOnline.com in November of 2004 and is currently the editor of the Domestic Violence and Buddhism sections.



Renee Wolf

Renee Wolf is the author of the non-fiction piece entitled A Tribute to Rita which was featured in this issue of Mused, the BellaOnline Literary Review.

Masthead



Lisa Shea, Publisher

Lisa Shea has been writing epic stories, creating poetry (especially haiku), snapping photos and drawing landscapes since she was very young. She feels very strongly that there is a creative energy within each and every one of us and is thrilled to have found a way to help promote the works of talented individuals around the world. In addition to owning BellaOnline, she is the editor for BellaOnline's low carb site.



Jill Florio, Editor in Chief

Jill Florio was the Art Editor for Flagstaff Live, op/ed columnist for the Prescott Valley Tribune, contributed to the Prescott Art Rag and is currently the Community Manager at BellaOnline.com. She wants to paint surrealist landscapes for a living when she reaches her golden years. Jill plans to run a orphanage for abandoned cats and dogs from her projected massive painting profits.



Diane Cipollo, Art Director

Diane Cipollo started as a traditional pen and ink artist in the greeting card industry and won third place in the Decorative Artist's Workbook 1998 Holiday Card Contest. She has always been fascinated by animated movies such as Disney's Fantasia and turned in her traditional pen and ink for digital pixels several years ago when digital art and animation software arrived on the scene. She has been with BellaOnline since 2003 as editor for the HTML, PHP, Flash and Digital Art and Design sections.



Victoria Abreo, Senior Non-Fiction Editor

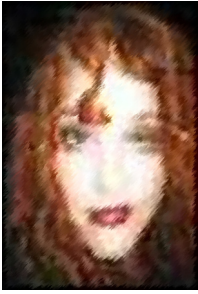
Victoria Abreo is the editor of the Alternative Medicine BellaOnline site. Her self-help articles have appeared in national health magazine and books. She has also interviewed leading experts in the field of medicine for her self-help articles. She joined the BellaOnline team in 2005. Victoria is dyslexic and refused to believe she could never be a writer.



Kristen Houghton, Senior Fiction Editor

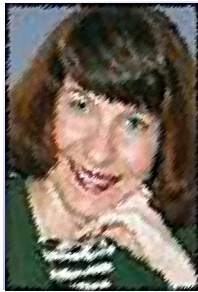
Kristen Houghton is a writer and humorist whose work appears in numerous online and print magazines. She is the Marriage Editor for BellaOnline and the featured relationship writer for Family. Kristen was "born writing." A graduate of USC Annenberg School of Communications with an M.A., Kristen also holds a M.F.A in writing from San Francisco University School of Journalism and is the author of the following books, "...And Then I'll Be Happy" and "Life With a Husband!"

Masthead



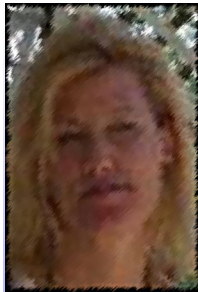
Lisbeth Cheever-Gessaman, Senior Poetry Editor

Lisbeth Cheever-Gessaman is a poet, activist and general cosmic inkslinger who sublimates her danger through poetry and the written word. Her publication credits include *Kimera*, *Zuzu's Petals*, *Writers Digest* and *Venusian Magazine*. She currently serves as the Human Rights Editor for *BellaOnline* and as a Contributing Writer on Suite 101. She collects sea glass, the discarded notes of strangers and secretly covets wings.



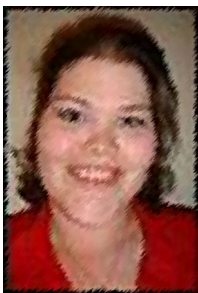
Melissa Knoblett-Aman

Melissa Knoblett-Aman is a freelance writer who holds a degree in English with a concentration in Writing and Editing from Western Carolina University. She has loved all forms of writing, be it fiction, poetry or non-fiction, ever since she can remember. In addition to serving as *BellaOnline's* editor for Catholicism and Cats, Melissa is a lensmaster at *Squidoo.com* and has been published in a variety of print media. She also enjoys digital photography, playing with her cats and traveling.



Karen Elleise

Karen Elleise is part of the Art and Photography team for *Mused*, the *BellaOnline* Literary Review and the Clairvoyance editor at *BellaOnline.com*.



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Wendy Lee is an avid reader, writer and photographer. On top of taking many random pictures of her dogs, she enjoys landscapes and nature in general. In addition to digital art and floral design, she has also been a contributor to several literary magazines, both online and in print and was frequently told by professors that her talent for satire far surpassed many others. She is also the editor of the Houseplants Site at *BellaOnline.com*.



Cynthia Parker

Cynthia Parker is the editor of the Single Parents column on *BellaOnline*. She writes poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction. In addition to being a single mom and aspiring writer, she works and attends a local university where she is working on her writing intensive English degree.

Masthead



Michelle Pendergrass

Michelle is a thirty-something wife and mother living in the cornfields of Indiana. She and her husband, Phil, enjoy country living and home schooling their son, Zane. Michelle maintains her eclectic blog: Just A Minute and her love for the odd shines bright here. Michelle is a rabid storyteller in the horror genre and is editor for BellaOnline's Baptist site. (She never said she was normal and she tends to get nervous referring to herself in third person.)



Darling Poor

Nothing tantalizes Darling Poor's imagination more than creative prose and the subtle, daring use of language. After writing and illustrating her first book at age five, she grew up to pen her way to an honors Bachelor's degree in English Literature at San Diego State University. Darling was a finalist in City Beat magazine's flash fiction contest in 2006 and received the Non InHouse Author Award from Medallion Press in 2007. She has published both fiction and non-fiction pieces in print and online, and is the author of the mid-grade children's novel, Song of the Wind Spirit. Darling joined BellaOnline in 2005 as editor of its Horses site.



Vannie Ryanes

Vannie Ryanes recently retired as senior contract assistant in the law department of a large health sciences university to expand her business. She is a writer and home business coach. Additionally she is a book reviewer; she was a final manuscript reader for "Chicken Soup for the African American Soul". Vannie joined BellaOnline in 2004 and is the editor of two BellaOnline sites, Work & Family and Hot and Spicy [foods].



Jeanette Stingley

Jeanette Stingley found encouragement to write through her sophomore English teacher in high school when her teacher insisted she be the editor of the high school newspaper. Since then Jeanette can't put her pen down. Jeanette is a freelance writer and aspiring novelist. She joined BellaOnline.com in November of 2004 and is currently the editor of the Domestic Violence and Buddhism sections.