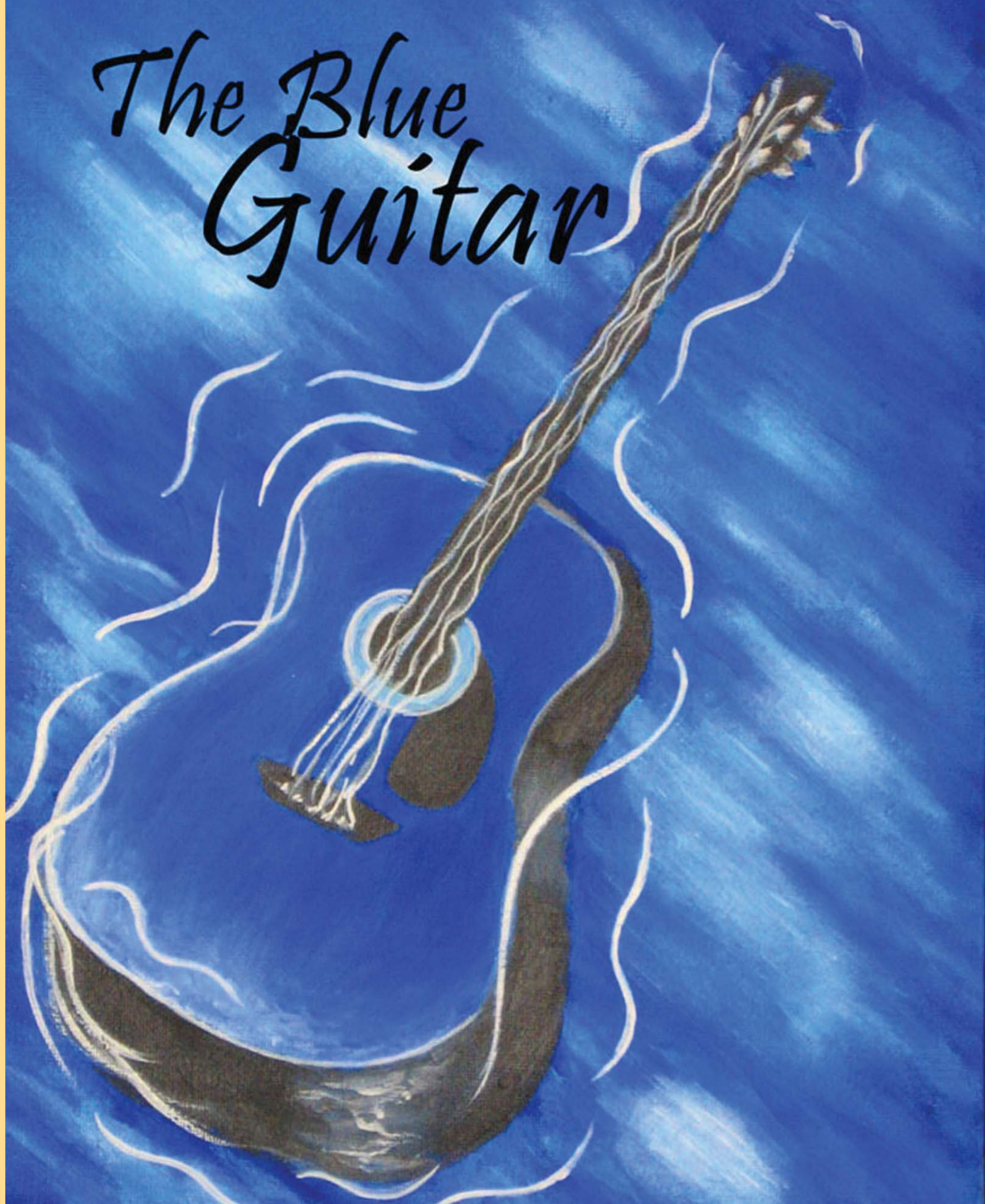


The Blue Guitar



Three Poems By Jeannine Savard

Grove

© 2010

I decide to walk deep
into the woods. A bird knocks
as light ascends my spine.
Words drop-off like leaves.
Red pine needles shed from old growth
catch inside my sandal. I slip
closer to brook's edge, a whole drawer of dirt,
dead letters—sliding away.

Zooms and glisks
a dragonfly queries by humming.
Double-winged, it draws a lucent ring
of heat around my head, lowers itself,
pulls back, pulls in: brow to brow—
one throb. One listening.

The Room

© 2010

One I haven't seen before
flashes between the mailbox and the pygmy willow
loaded with its red and white cones.

It is a tangle of leaf shadow,
cubes of grass and weeds
catching a neighbor's jazz on the fly.

Breakfast there is amber accented.
I might be a guest.
I might be a painter, an Agnes or a Georgia,
holding open a drawer with linen-wrapped brushes.

If I hesitate much longer,
the diminishing light won't let me enter.
I also have bones and colored minerals to carry.
The eggs can wait.

Summer Glimpses

© 2010

In the swimming pool
a cricket floats on its back;
the lawn mower groans off.

Some weird bugs invade
the vegetable garden—
lunch: leftover squash.

Chasing its own tail
the cat spins grey-white taffy—
stretches afterward.

Ripe olives roll down
the drive, band of squeaky pearls
cars crush entirely.

A Woodpecker flies
straight for the hole in the palm—
Crow, fit-to-be-tied.

Desert Marigolds
knock heads with wrinkled lizards—
mod wizards look spiff.

Snake skin cellophane
shed over blue granite deck—
Man-friend, nine months gone.

Sugared strawberries,
clouds hang low at the horse track—
Rose wins by a nose.

Turtles mount on logs,
Totems, green and bean-yellow—
Count: two three zero.



Jeannine Savard is an Associate Professor of English at Arizona State University and teaches poetry workshops at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Her new volume of poems, entitled "Accounted For," will be published by Red Hen Press in Spring 2011. Contact Jeannine at jsavard@asu.edu.

Five Poems By Ellen Sullins

Impasse

© 2010

Bedroom door ajar.

Gray cat stands looking out at
tortoise shell cat looking in.

Avoiding eyes, each pretends
not to want to be
where the other one is.

Tortoise shell sits down. Mulls
memories of fine Egyptian mice.

Gray assumes Chinese Cat Contemplating Bug
pose.

Years from now, in this very spot
there could be two perfect skeletons.
One looking out, one looking in.

Jeans

© 2010

blue jeans
new jeans
everything i do jeans
tight jeans
right jeans
isn't that a sight jeans!
worn jeans
torn jeans
feelin so forlorn jeans
bleached jeans
streaked jeans
runnin on the beach jeans
blue jeans
true jeans
livin like i do jeans

My Mother's Hands

© 2010

Thinned skin wrinkles
blue veiny maps brown marks the spot
boney structure knuckles starting to knob
nails growing ridges all this sprouting
from my own startled wrists.



Ellen Sullins lives in Tucson with her husband and their two cats. She is the author of "Elsewhere," winner of the 2007 Plan B Press Chapbook contest, and is a recipient of The New Millennium Writings Poetry Award. Her work has appeared in South Carolina Review, Nimrod International, descant, Calyx, and Concho River Review, among others. She can be reached at esullins@cox.net.

Stray Cat

© 2010

after Bishop

I found a stray cat napping
amid morning papers
forgotten on the porch swing.
Moving to shoo her away
I noticed her bag-lady mittens,
gray with white tips poking through
with one claw extended,
peeling a translucent layer like mica.
Her fox face lay at an angle
on forelegs she hadn't cleaned.
Her nose a nub of charcoal eraser,
and whiskers grew
like filament quills
on each side of that nose.
Around her eyes were rings
of paler gray as if she'd worn glasses
to work all day in the sun.
Then she opened those eyes:
orbs clear as new glass,
pupils quite round in the shade,
irises the green of sea glass -
milky and worn. They noted me
then fell closed again,
though her left ear twitched sideways
and the terminal inch of her tail
flicked twice before
she laid it along her back leg
where the hip's tender curve
exposed her undercoat,
like a slip grown pale in the wash.
And the fur on her side
was the gray of a lake at moonrise,
the swells of her breath made ripples
of pewter, pearl, graphite, ash.
Then she sighed, perhaps dreaming
of birds or mice that got away,
litters she'd nursed, dogs outrun.
And I drew back my hand and left her
to find some rest.

Stone

© 2010

I am no pawn of time and water and wind, as most
Would have you believe - those who scurry like mice,
Too busy or scared to comprehend my powers.
For I am the most patient seductress and time my closest ally.

I spent millennia courting the wind, training the nuance
Of his touch, whispering how to caress my curves just so,
Until my form was pleasing to me. Then I grew bored
And sent him on his way. Perhaps you heard his lament in the pines.

But now the river has risen, drawn close by my throaty hum,
And he will spend the next eon enthralled with me,
Probing each cleft and crevice that summons, pounding
New hollows where I choose to yield, until my shape

Is pleasing to me, or I grow bored and direct my song
To the human world for a quick tryst with one
Who will think it is he who coaxes belly and breasts
From the blueprint I reveal as it pleases me.

That paramour will vanish, as a raindrop into the sea,
But my sculpted form will survive long after I tumble
From the pedestal, bored, and beckon old lovers again
– the water, the wind, and sweet persuasive time.

Four Poems by Cathy Capozzoli

These are from a series of Ghazals I'm working on. Ghazals are 8-line poems following a tradition begun in ancient Persia.

— Cathy Capozzoli

Voices

© 2010

What is lost between packing for travel to a hot place
and the language that erases images from my mind?

A grocery list—authored by one with only two titles
who crumples no paper—is burning. So many pens.

Thin voices call names through the dark,
An infestation of words in the way—

Of hurricanes and freight trains that otherwise
Tear through the night on what tracks.

Kauai Shade

© 2010

This cliff rises almost to those clouds, which shade
the sunlight in a way that is strange to my eyes.

I am seated on a bed of salty vines; thin, crisp
stalks hold lush-chalky leaves, fragrant.

The bent pine above is stunted by near-constant
wind also known by these two ears.

Seasons are the work of the heron's wings on clouds.
How sad for this one to no longer have the sky.

August After Dark

© 2010

Today's sun has filled the air with unburnt sage.
My breath is not enough to move a branch.

Only the night has flowers that bloom, way up there next
to the bird's nest in the prickly arms of the old saguaro.

That cat is feathered feet rising silently over the sand.
Inside, I turn the window blinds from open,

revealing the light and dark of the stars. My eyelids
will stay until dawn then blink those lesser colors.

Clouds and Music

© 2010

Last night gave rain to the Sonoran desert—
strange hands of water prayed on glass.

That tall cactus didn't budge in the wind.
A furred cabaret singer chanted to the thrum.

The last spatter was hours ago. Water still stands.
I understand not knowing where to go.

This morning's sun carries that same tone
for the dark dead beetle in the hallway.



Cathy Capozzoli is a playwright and poet who has lived in an urban locale in Pennsylvania, the foothills of the Colorado Rockies, atop a hillside in Honolulu, in a remote dwelling on the island of Kauai, and in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. She holds an MFA from Naropa, a Buddhist university in Colorado. She was guest editor of "Many Mountains Moving: The Literature of Spirituality," a collection of creative works from 88 writers and artists from six countries and many spiritual traditions. Her work has been published widely on the Internet and in print, including *Ginosko*, *Blue Guitar*, *Tin Fish*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Karamu*, *Mudfish*, *Meridian Anthology*, and *Hawaii Review*. Four of Cathy's poems have been nominated for Pushcarts.

Southern Discomfort

By Marcia Gold

© 2010

There are things we are dead sure about: the ironclad gate of certainty grudgingly creaks open, just a sliver at a time.

Until now I had succeeded in avoiding this part of the country. Only this occasion could have brought me here: to attend the dedication of a Civil Rights Center in Alabama, surely an oasis in the local political climate. My sweetheart had planned this trip. His education had only progressed beyond the 8th grade because he was willing to make the hard choice of leaving his family. His community's high school did not include him.

Our appearances are quite a contrast, well beyond color. His lank 6 foot-plus body next to mine, just under 5 feet and well-marked by my Slavic ancestors, would be hard to miss. Perhaps our coupling was partly attributed to my own background. My kind had experienced persecution and exile, even genocide, dating from antiquity. The recent history of the Holocaust had born witness to the durability of hate. Could this piece of the world have been able to spit out the bitter seeds of intolerance?

Here we were, approaching a city that had witnessed some of the most violent incidents of the '60s. I girded myself for what might come, finally giving voice to my fears. I was assured, with a nod and a smile that trouble did not lay ahead. The media of that era still haunted me with terrible images of Billy clubs and smashed heads, punctuated with the rush of water from high pressure hoses, pinning people to walls. The anguished cries of the parents whose four little girls had died when their church was bombed still rang in my ears. Somehow, the specter of Jim Crow even hovered over our hasty supper at a Wendy's. Beyond that lay the unknown and darkness.

The anxiety lingered as a progression of broken-

down neighborhoods unfolded. It was clear to me who the residents were. When the landscape yielded to more comfortable dwellings, I easily envisioned who lived there. Finally, we arrived at an area of unmistakable opulence. Doubtless, persons of advantage inhabited these affluent homes, most flanked by lush lawns and three-car garages.

Had the disenfranchised been awarded tokens while the ruling elements continued in elite comfort?

Unfortunately, meanwhile, we had passed beyond town, missed our destination, and were quite lost. My partner decided to knock on a door for directions. I pleaded with him to go back to a business to ask for help; somehow, that seemed more "neutral." He laughed, shrugging off my fears. I cowered in the car as he walked toward a lovely home, imagining the worst. Would there be an insulting order to leave or even a more degrading reaction? I envisioned the occupant to be a tall patrician type, with a shock of silver hair and steeped in tradition.

An elegant and diminutive black man answered my sweetheart's knock. I was certain he was a servant. He made a welcoming gesture and the door closed behind the two men for what seemed like an eternity. When they finally emerged, our host introduced himself: He was a cardiologist and a founding member of the community. The evening ended as we followed him, in his Lexus, to our hotel.

Blindness is impartial to no human group. I was as narrow as I had determined this community was. Fear had resulted in convictions that precluded reality. The only antidote for irrational fear is to confront its roots and be willing to accept one's relation to them. I had anticipated an emotional odyssey, not a geographical one.

– *Dedicated to Al Armstrong, 1918-2008*



This initial venture as a writer marks Marcia Gold's approach to a 4th career. During her several years as a Social Worker, she was also classically trained as a singer, later performing and coaching to the present. The photography bug bit her in the 80s: She teaches this skill for PCC and Oasis, occasionally working professionally. The mother of 5 children, she has lived in Tucson for 36 years.

Signs

By Allison Alexandra

© 2010

Holding a bic pen and digging my toes into the tacky green carpeting, I intuitively poured out a foreboding poem entitled “The Destructive Whirlpool” on college-ruled paper. This impromptu piece was the darkest poem about destruction that had ever come through me. An unhappy high school senior, I was the only child of three still inhabiting my parents’ house in the affluent hills. Most people assumed we had the perfect family. Tears cycled down my pale teenage cheeks. Was this poem a prophecy?

Ravaged by high blood pressure and a host of angry ills, my father seemed to have an invisible dark cloud above his head. My family made sure the exterior of the large house was crisply manicured for the neighbors. To my innocent mind, life could have been a giant hoax. I didn’t know whom I could trust.

Two days after my poem foreshadowed danger, I was there when the phone sounded a shrill ring at 7:05 am PST early May.

I heard the loud click as my father replaced the lemon yellow hand piece on its cradle.

“Randy’s dead,” my father said succinctly.

A clerk in Italy recently found Randy deceased in his rented hotel room for the night. My father’s voice hollowed. I remember the morning dew on the daisies and the Jacaranda tree out in front of the empty house.

I lost my brother.

I had been asked to give a Valedictorian speech in a few weeks to over 400 graduating seniors, faculty, and related families inspiring them to victory. But I was speechless.

It was just two weeks shy of Randy’s 21st birthday.

It looked like Randy could run a marathon. He had been on a solitary backpacking trip through Europe. Did he fall ill? Did he become prey somehow to others or himself? How would anyone know? I felt like a soggy Raggedy Ann Doll, shaky from vulnerability and questions.

My dark brown eyes were half open. I had been preoccupied with a bowl of rice krispie’s and milk, sitting by the wood veneer table with chrome legs. There were 30 minutes before I

needed to drive my silver hatch-backed Toyota down Exposition Blvd. to get to school on time.

In less than a month, I would be walking away with my honors diploma, under my blue cap and tassel. I expected to be free from a distressing high school, swimming in racial riots. I wanted to be free from an imprisonment in a dark house where plants were deprived of enough light to grow.

In a dim hallway by the bedrooms lined with ragged off-white carpeting, there were hung three porcelain birth plates circled by a thin blue tempera kind of paint. It described the details of all three of our births.

Ironically, Randy’s had fallen and broken years ago, leaving a noticeable dark jagged crack across his name and birth date. No one had assigned this much meaning at the time. Now, I think it was one of the signs.

My mother got up in her flannel pajamas and professionally made arrangements for a local funeral. She, herself, was struggling having been diagnosed with a bizarre terminal illness. Her skin was slowly hardening, like a reptile. We expected that she might not be alive in three years, not Randy to be the casualty. It was all very unexpected.

A wave of grief seemed to abscond with everyone’s heart.

We had an older brother, Roger, who heard the brutal news while sitting next to the relatives on the white striped L-shaped couch, under the wall of mounted photos. Randy’s death robbed me of understanding and energy.

I lost my brother.

It was as if time stopped. There was a frustrating time delay waiting for interactions with the Italians.

“Cerebral hemorrhage,” the European coroner came up with after the autopsy, during which they didn’t know where to start searching. Randy looked fine to them, too. They came to believe that an artery burst in his head instantaneously. They think he might have been born with this weakness. I did not know what to believe.

I lost my brother.

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Editor’s note: Names have been changed



A native Californian, Allison Alexandra is a talented high honors graduate from the University of California at Berkeley where she earned a B.A. in Psychology. She also holds an M.F.A. degree in Fine Art with an emphasis on Portrait Painting from the Academy of Art University, San Francisco, and several certificates in Holistic Health. She is now developing her writing repertoire with this memoir of the unexpected early passing of her late brother. In the past, Allison has written short stories, poetry, and how-to instructional pieces. Currently residing in Southern Arizona, Allison is an Adjunct Professor with the Art Institute and can be reached at allisonalexandra@msn.com.

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I cried out loud like a deer hit by a car that came out of nowhere. I did not know if time would advance.

We sat on the long L-shaped couch. I retained a 4" x 6" Kodak photo of the mourning scene that was dominated by a sick, yellowish cast.

My Aunt Ellen said it would get easier over time, and it did. She told me that she had lost everyone in her family. She helped me live through Randy's passing.

My uncle Joe showed me a thin paperback book.

This small book had a photo of an overcast olive sunset and shadowy silhouette on the cover. Inside the book, there were beautiful poems.

It spoke of having the wisdom to live after someone dies. They cannot be separated, life and death.

I loved creativity. The words took me by the hand and gave me hope. The pages are now worn and the binding peeling, but I still cherish the book today.

Randy loved photography.

Roger and I were the ones to make the dreadful voyage from our pampered neighborhood to the International Airport to pick up Randy's surviving items. My little hatchback had escorted us by merging with a predictable stream of traffic that afternoon.

Exhaust and fuel smells pervaded the surrounding air. I observed an ugly brown haze of smog invade the semblance of a blue sky, blocking out some of the sun. It reminded me of the somber home I grew up in where wood fences and tall pines shielded all of the windows from natural light.

Bellowing vibrations from the huge airliners shook us as I pulled the lever to open the heavy car door. It was something like entering a gaping black hole.

I recall leaving and then coming back to the car. We ended up retrieving a 25 lb. backpack instead of our family member.

The Italians sent his full yellow-tagged packs to my family as with the remaining body for the grassy funeral home. One of us must have grabbed his luggage from the mechanical dark grey conveyor belt.

While approaching the car, I found Randy's hand-written journal hiding within his cumbersome, black backpack. It was terrible.

I lost my brother.

And I shivered.

His grey cloth-covered diary was chock full of his travel entries from many weeks of his European trip. It was standard in our family to make such a trek at that age.

Mustering the courage to find his last entries, I read that he was suffering from a bad cold. My heart fell to its knees. It also read that he felt harassed by Italian strangers who were trying to steal his expensive camera equipment. He felt unsafe there. My blood ran thin. I wondered if he had been murdered. The visible entries terminated, leaving the rest of the pages blatantly blank. I

do not know if any pages had been removed.

For the first six months, I would see images of Randy in my dreams. At first, everything went well. Then I would have to remind him that he was dead. I found myself with an empty, cavernous pit posing as a stomach. One day, I awoke and vomited for one and a half hours. It got better, though. We were the youngest ones in our family. We were both quiet artists, of sorts. There wasn't a lot of light in that home to see clearly.

Three years later, I traveled through the same area as Randy while living as an exchange student in the Southwest of France.

Would I outlive my brother's twenty years on earth? I could not count the number of nights that I lied there sweating and fearing I would be found dead, like Randy, in Europe. We were close in age. However, if Randy became "lost" in Europe, I became "found" eventually. Away from everything that was familiar, I managed to find my early childhood passion for art that had been so dominated by a rational scientific dogma.

Time helped to heal.

Many years later around the holidays, I saw Randy again at the airport in one of my dreams. I had never seen him look better. Witnessing a smile from ear to ear, I felt uplifted by cheery buoyancy that I did not know was possible. The details didn't matter.

Eight years later, our father passed away also from his host of angry ills. Our mother's leathery terminal illness went into remission and softened. My oldest brother Roger inherited this house that he used to say reminded him of a concentration camp. He did a complete makeover down to physically relocating the black asphalt of the driveway and the mailbox. The old dark house is not really recognizable now. Large bay windows and life-giving skylights were added.

My idea of death altered. It seemed no longer like a sickening cast iron door shutting on me. It began to appear to be an invisible shift to another level of living. Death looked like a mysterious trip by car, but no one really knew how to prepare one's belongings. My brother Randy and I both graduated that May in different ways.

Randy moved on early. The time has not yet come for me.

I have been lovingly told.

I lost my brother as a teenager. It wasn't easy. His award-winning photographic creations now belong to a memorial fund set up under his name at a place of worship so that others may benefit from his artistry.

I am learning to live and trust each day more fully. I never know if someone walking out the door is ever coming back again. Anything could happen. At some level, I grew to see the hearts of humanity beat together as if belonging to a giant interconnected web. Signs appear, and my intuition beckons. I am learning to honor this.

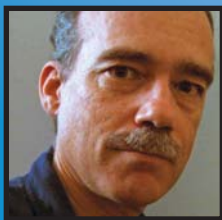
I made a colored pencil drawing of him at rest in a reclining chair and placed it tenderly into a walnut frame. I am still learning.

Charles Harker

Phoenix Artist



“Desert” 2010, Adobe Illustrator



Charles Harker grew up in Arizona and lived in San Francisco and New York City for many years, where he worked in graphic arts. He now splits his time between Phoenix and Mexico City. Many of his images are available for licensing through www.gettyimages.com. Met Life of New York is a recent client. In April of 2010, Harker released “Imaginary Landscapes” (\$24.95, Sunbury Press), a 100-page book featuring 40 Southwest-inspired images. It is available through Amazon.com. See more about him at www.charlesharker.com.

Charles Harker

Phoenix Artist



“Bakersfield” 2010 Adobe Illustrator

Charles Harker

Phoenix Artist



“Berkeley” 2010 Adobe Illustrator

Charles Harker

Phoenix Artist



“The Nude Taco” 2010 Adobe Illustrator

Charles Harker

Phoenix Artist



“Pinacate” 2010 Adobe Illustrator

I'm inspired by fine, commercial and craft art. When creating imaginary landscapes I associate memories to the evolving composition. That's the emotional part. The technical part is mixing pattern, shape, layer, perspective and color for the most perfect balance possible. A recent quote I liked (attributed to Fairfield Porter), "Find the figurative in the abstract and vice versus."

– Charles Harker

Binoculars

By Ruth R. Davis

© 2010

She couldn't breathe. Maybe it was the altitude – she was born by the ocean, didn't like heights and now, at 6500 feet under tall, dry ponderosa pines, her breathing was tight, short, labored. She could hear it inside her but it wasn't audible to the man next to her, sitting behind expensive, high powered binoculars that were aimed at a cavity in a dead tree in the west. He might sit like that for hours if she didn't interrupt with a thought or a question about lunch. It was barely nine, they'd been up for hours, with the sun, with the first birds, with the craving for robust coffee, dripped slowly through a filter, into a thermos, poured into their designated traveling cups. His blue, hers green, same as it ever was. But it wasn't the same. She couldn't connect with the landscape, the blue sky with fleeting white puffs of summer clouds, not even the breeze that blew around her, coating her in chills and isolation.

Had she always felt like this, separate from the earth, the sky, the man? Or was it only since she quit that habit, the one that took her inside, where she could connect her own dots to the wind, the trees. With drugs, the trees breathed and she could name a dozen color variations in their bark – not just brown, but sepia and rust and burnt sienna that turned to black where the curve of the trunk met the angle of morning sun. But today, there seemed to be no colors, just dryness from the three year drought in the forest and in their relationship.

So why had she agreed to come, knowing he would sit under his man hat, binoculars closer to his face than hers had been in months. Maybe if she stopped trying so hard. Or maybe she already had. She'd read an article in Cosmo once, while waiting for her perm solution to take at the noisy salon, Mexican music blaring on the radio and the hairdressers and other clients chatting it up in their foreign tongue and she could catch a word here and there but they talked so fast, she couldn't follow. So instead she let the sing-song of their conversations float around the cotton on her forehead, let their high pitched laughter fill the room as she mentally answered the questions in the magazine to see how much she really loved her man. She remembered thinking then that they should have a quiz to see how much you really loved yourself.

She turns to him. "What do you see?" She is making an effort, like the magazine suggested. "On that dead tree," he says, "a third of the way up, see it, bright red? It's the male summer tanager." He offers her the binoculars but she shakes her head, no. She is too far away and she doesn't want to get up. She sees the flash of red on the bare branch and remembers the first time out with him when the binoculars were new. They were at the river on a clear spring afternoon, everything green and moist and she had sat next to him on the edge of the river bank, watching for movement in the trees to point out to him. She remembers adoring him then, his knowledge of the birds, how he could sit for hours watching them, studying them, how he described their colors to her as she sat there, eyes full open to the sky. He had shown her how to find the bird with her eyes, then hold the binoculars up to her face to bring it into closer view. They had sat there for hours as the sky changed from day to dusk and when she got cold he had wrapped his flannel shirted arms around her shoulders and pulled her in close. That night when they made love he had called her his winged beauty.

She had learned the names of the birds, could tell the difference between the downy and the snowy woodpeckers, even identify the distinct chatters and chits of common songbirds. She wrote stories of their bird adventures and had won second place in a local writing contest. When they moved in together she painted the living room a summer sky blue and they scavenged the thrift stores for bird paintings to hang on the walls. They even planned their vacations to coincide with migrating birds.

But identifying birds in the wild was frustrating to her. She could never see what he saw, could not distinguish colors so far away, not even through his lenses. And she didn't like to sit still and quiet for so long. But she liked where the birds took them – to lakes and forests and especially the coast where she could watch the waves roll in and out while he studied the shore-birds. He sat for hours in his beach chair, with his bird identifying book in his lap and an apple in his pocket. She walked on the long beach, barefoot, her sneakers tied to her belt-loops.

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As the Founder and Creative Director of Spark The Heart, Ruth Davis encourages people to reawaken their passions and dreams and connect more authentically in the world. Ruth leads workshops and retreats that combine practical coaching techniques with creativity and play, giving people an opportunity to explore who they really are and how they want to create richer, deeper, more joyful lives. To learn more, visit Ruth's website at www.sparktheheart.com
Ruth is also the owner of Mac to School, providing one-on-one Macintosh computer training to home users and small business owners. Check out her Mac training website at www.mac2school.com

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She chased the sandpipers and willets at the water's edge and stopped to watch crabs bubble into the sand. She dragged her toes in the sand, drawing a big heart with smaller hearts around it, wondering if they would be there when she returned, or if the tide would have washed them away. Often she would turn around to see if he was watching her but his binoculars were always focused in another direction. She wished he would study her with that same intensity and passion, wished he would describe her colors, her patterns with that same affection that he had for his birds.

They hadn't been to the beach in over a year. Too far, he said, and she knew the long drive would be silent, and not the good kind. She had filled those silences with her drugs and her own voices, buzzing in her head, stories of other people, the words tumbling out onto paper, or, more often, just circling around her mind, where she could pretend that they were her own stories, her own happy life.

She thought she was happy. She had a man, a house, IRAs for their future. They didn't fight. They shared the household

chores. They liked the same TV shows. Wasn't that enough? Didn't all couples drift apart after all these years together?

She looks at him. He has turned his chair to face a low bush teeming with sparrows. His binoculars rest against his chest as he scans the brush with his eyes. How can this be enough for him? Why isn't it enough for her? She wishes for her habit, a slow draw of marijuana to fill her lungs with sweet distraction, easy separation, to take her away from these thoughts, his silence and the whipping of the cold wind.

But she has quit. Twenty four days ago, cold turkey, after finding a poem she had written two years before, about winter trees, a fallen nest, and a woman hiding in her own dimmed light. She had read it as if for the first time, feeling the loss, the distance, the self-inflicted isolation. Maybe only she had left the relationship and he is really still there. Maybe he did still love her. Maybe this really was enough.

"I'm so cold," she whispers. "Here," he says, offering her his jacket, the khaki one with the big pockets that she had bought him for their tenth anniversary. She takes a deep breath and reaches toward him.

A big thank-you from the Arizona Consortium for the Arts

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al-Shaitan

By Shaun Al-Shatti

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Open my eyes.
This place... I do not understand. I am trapped in a windless cell no larger than a bathroom. Three white walls surround me; chalky, worn surfaces. This world is bleached. A waxen curtain is drawn. It is sickly in nature; hardly strong enough to survive a summer breeze. A fan hums in the distance; manipulating the thin screen; pressing and pulling it to its whims; mocking me; everything is so far off. A tray lies beside me, a crinkled paper cup thrown clumsily along its borders. A pool of water has begun to form along the base. The water follows the cracks and crevices of the tray; floating through a weaving reservoir of the gods; a glimpse of life in this cold, dead arena.

The paper clothes that I am forced to wear do not provide an ounce of warmth. The freezing air snaps at my skin; I resist the urge to let the numbing cold carve through my body. I must stand for something. Now, even the tiniest victory can drive my spirit. I hear the soft familiar beep in the background. Still alive.

The needle in my forearm shifts. I do not feel it. I do not feel much these days.

The gentle melody of the fan seems to be beckoning me back into my sleep. This incendiary combination of mass amounts of narcotics and the pale, washed out ambiance is forging into a symphony, begging my eyes to close.

Suddenly, a shriek pierces out through the night and rattles me out of my drift. There she is again. That woman. Who is she and why won't she stop this torture? I have heard her wailing for seventy-two increasingly brutal hours and yet it always strikes me. I wish that somebody would take her; move her to another level; anything. I hate the sounds she makes. Her shriek carries throughout the hall and penetrates through my flesh like a gunshot, wrenching through the coal and the ice and into the crux of my heart. I can see that endless abyss. The black eyed angels mock me. I will not end up like that. I must believe. I must hope. Without hope there is nothing.

*** **

Open my eyes.
Rays of light streak through the wooden blinds. Sunbeams bounce off of the golden walls and peek from side to side like a mischievous child. The warmth of the morning radiates throughout the room. The glow is palpable. The last fleeting days of the summer truly are glorious. What did mankind do so right to deserve to bask in this glory?

A shrill sound echoes from the background. I fumble around blindly, unwilling to acknowledge what I secretly already know to be true. Just five more minutes.

I convinced myself. Sometimes, it isn't that hard. A simple protest is all the conflict the body needs. Anything to justify itself.

Oh, those were a glorious four minutes and fifty-five seconds. The blaring, metallic cry from the alarm disturbs me from my utopia once again. The alarm is brazen; it does not relent. It implores me to give in. Finally, I submit. The battle is over and that damn plastic buzzer won yet again. With subtle annoyance, I groggily stumble to the bathroom. After an impatient shower and a quick breakfast of eggs and toast, I depart for work.

Routine is such an interesting concept. It has such a negative connotation applied to it, yet it may be one of the most vital belongings that we possess. Nobody likes to admit that they have a routine. No one openly chooses the beaten path. People want adventure; people want excitement; something new and fresh. Despite that, or perhaps *because* of that, the ordinary is what sustains us. Familiarity is our lifeblood.

I am still half asleep as the immense fluorescent sign defiantly stares at me over the horizon: Prime One Mortgage. As I get out of my car I gaze up at the leviathan of a building that I am about to enter. Monstrous. Yet, the white walls seem almost transparent. Age has not been kind. The old bricks have cracks and chips strewn about. There are visible hints of a pale golden mold growing on the dingy corners. Flourishing in such a preposterous manner; well done.

As I open the glass doors a familiar sound hits my ears. A cacophony of dissonant chatter, jangling phones, and various

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clicks and clacks that create a wall of white noise and hit like a Tyson haymaker. Ahhhhh... the life of office work.

I walk past the customary oddly attractive receptionist and squeeze my way into my home away from home. My prison. There truly is nothing like cubicle life. What a ridiculously tragic concept. A penitentiary, a reformatory, and a mental institution all rolled into one. A modern day Bastille. I am convinced that the cubicle is the direct evolutionary result of the medieval dungeon.

I look down at my cubicle's miserable excuse for a desk. A combination of time and the games that endless boredom brings have turned this once majestic, polished piece into a shell of its former self. The once amber wood has faded into grey, the life sucked from it. Flecks of primer and wood have chipped off giving it a fragile appearance, as if it could give at any moment. On the desk there sits two objects. In the center, there is a large dark phone with a headset attached to it. Directly adjacent, there sits the stack of flash cards that have already been prearranged for me. Each flash card is empty except for three snippets of information haphazardly written in a bold, black typeface. Name. Address. Phone number. Demons these cards are – always mocking me.

Telemarketing is such a unique experience. It is truly absurd to feel such dislike emanate from others. Rage can manifest itself in a much easier fashion when it is directed at a stranger. Countless times a day I encounter these people. Their hatred just oozes through the phone. Chaos in an unblinking world. Once, a man became so angry that I had the nerve to call his house that he proceeded to look up the address of our building and promise me that he would come down here with a shotgun. Incredible.

But, hell, can you blame them? If these people knew that this "Senior Marketing Analyst" advising them to refinance their house, and likely put them into debt, was really just some sixteen year old punk who, in all reality, was completely full of shit, they would be appalled. I, for one, never fault the angry ones. Life is unfair. I would rather them take their fury out on me, a faceless nobody, than take it out someone who is likely far less deserving of it. Shit, at least it makes the day more interesting.

I reach into my desk and find an unopened pack of Reese's Pieces that I had forgotten the night before. I lazily rip it open and pour them onto the desk. Bits of orange and brown scatter about. I begin to sort them into two separate, color-coordinated groups as I grab the first note card.

*** **

I open my eyes.
I am lying down on my stomach. I am on a table.
There are people around me. I hazily try to turn my head.

No such luck.

My world erupts. A bullet rips through my back. My spine explodes with a white hot fury. The black eyed angels dance in my eyes. Unable to see what has happened, I panic. I gasp for breathe and attempt to yell for help. Someone; anyone. What comes out cannot be fathomed as words. Primal, guttural sounds. No syllables are strung together, only a jumble of letters that seemingly trip over each other one by one in an elaborate prank.

I try to move my arm... if only I could fight... my limbs won't listen.

My spine erupts once more. I crank my neck and force my eyes to roll into the back of my head until I catch a glimpse. The pain is unbearable. A large needle has been plunged deep into my vertebrae. A strange luminescent liquid is being extracted from my spinal column.

"Enough," A deep voice says. "We have enough."

"You may take him back to his room now," another voice commands from across the room.

The needle is removed. A shuffling of several feet is heard and my table begins to move. The wheels squeak and squirm their way out of the room. The door is still swinging back and forth when I hear one man clearly tell another, "I have never seen anything like this."

*** **

The doctors tell me I may be paralyzed. They tell me I may never walk again. They tell me I may never speak correctly again.

Worst of all, they tell me that they don't know why this has happened, and they don't know how to fix it.

How does a perfectly healthy sixteen year old lose all motor and speech skills in the blink of an eye?

They are calling it a stroke. Numbness is to become my life. There is no explanation. This is what I am now? A medical anomaly. Just another lost page in a medical journal. They say it must be God's will.

God's will? God's will?!?

I hear whispers that a devil has taken hold of my heart. A curse has been placed upon me. What seemed unfathomable a mere week ago is now a reality. In the Arabic language the word demon is represented with the characters **ن ا ط ي ش ل ا**, or al-Shaitan. These days they say that the al-Shaitan lives within me. Every day my father prays for the al-Shaitan to leave; but he refuses to release me. His unrelenting grip clasps onto my core, and tears at my soul. He rips away the flesh and gnaws at my humanity.

This room is suffocating. These bleached walls mock my inabilities. What have I become?

There is no point. I must not reach that dreaded moment

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when hope becomes hopeless.

*** **

Open my eyes.

I am attempting to convince 476-984-9970, Mr. Parker B. Anthony at 4432 W. Adams Lane to refinance his home. He has a deep baritone of a voice, but yet it holds a certain frailty to it. He has a 4.5% fixed 15 year loan. I lie and tell him that I can top that. We move through the classic steps; the dance of deception across the phone lines. He gives me a refusal; I give him perfect, unqualified hyperbole. His voice quivers. Like a shark ripping through the crystal ocean, I smell the blood, and in the back of his mind, he senses it.

“Well I don’t know, I may need to talk to my wife about this matter.”

“Sir, with all due respect, the longer you wait, the less likely we are able to help you. This is a matter of urgency. This is a matter of preserving your future; your legacy. When I say this is life changing, I mean it.”

“I just don’t understand how you could give me a lower rate...”

“Well sir, it is allal a maaan-nn-ner of fin-nn-nn-aac. Yoou k-k-kont van to...”

My voice stutters as the connection between my mind and my mouth is seemingly broken. I regroup and try again.

Ssoor-or-y I dd-don-nt-t-t nout-tas nat-at-at...”

What the hell is happening?

“Are you drunk son? Ain’t no way I’m doing business with a drunk!”

The click of the phone shakes me like an earthquake. What the fuck just happened?? I try to stand up. My legs don’t seem to understand. I collapse underneath my own weight like a newborn. Gripping the chair, I pull myself up from the world. My limbs are shaking. My mind is racing. I take two precarious, teetering steps; one foot after the other I try to command myself.

For the first time in my life, I can actually feel my brain. Napalm echoes throughout my head, short circuiting the wiring; the cogs are rusting; spasms comes in bursts; torrents of convulsions; the sounds of cannon fire ring throughout my head. I crumple to the floor, unable to withstand the onslaught.

*** **

I am in the passenger seat. My mother is frantic. The Saturn furiously weaves through traffic as if Death himself were pursuing us. The astral cars race past us like stars through the sky. I am confused. I try to open my mouth; I try to understand. No real words come out. This seems to only increase the already skyrocketing level of urgency within her. Her thin frame has never looked stronger.

I feel my eyes roll to the back of my skull. My mind collapses upon itself and the images dance in my head. My future and my past collide. It’s not time yet. I look over the edge of the canyon and see the river. Panic enters my heart as the black eyed angel breaks through. The rowboat flows toward the edge as I sense the darkness pulsating behind me. It can’t end like this. I want to go back. The blackened water rushes below me; the cascade of silence is deafening. I feel the hands of al-Shaitan grip my shoulder. This can’t happen. The force of the push obliterates my being.

I am afraid.

*** **

Open my eyes.

My vision is blurry, but I have no need to see. It is dark, yet, I know where I am.

The persistent beating of the fan still hums in the distance; these three empty, white walls that have become my home. My abandoned empire. My sanctuary. My prison.

I wish no more than to stand from this bed and remove myself from this place. If only my body were whole again. If only it would listen. I have been betrayed by the closest person I know. Myself. I have never felt so alone. Each day I awaken from this endless nightmare, hoping that it is finally over; hoping that it was all a joke. Each day, I am disappointed. Every sunrise comes and goes and my spirit is pulled deeper into the charred waters. A vicious cycle with no end in sight.

I cannot have peace. My body is at war with itself. Even my dreams do not go undisturbed. Whether it is a result of the countless drugs I now depend on, my increasingly detached grip on reality, or perhaps a combination of, the beast haunts my thoughts.

The music of the night is intoxicating. The weights on my eyes are becoming heavier. I cannot resist. My body loses consciousness and my mind drifts.

*** **

I see nothing. This world is empty. A void in the abyss. Deep in the distance I can faintly hear the ring of a phone. It sounds so lonely. I hear a whisper to my left. I turn to look. Nothing. Another mumble echoes behind me; I whip around. Only the black. The ringing grows louder. A soft, fragile chatter murmurs on my right. The whisper’s echo becomes more focused.

“Never seen anything like this.”

A static hum starts to reverberate throughout my head. The ringing grows louder. The whispers are replaced by burning voices. Punishing me. Doubting me. Pitying me. The ringing grows even louder. Deafening. A metallic beep gouges through the world.

Still alive, I tell myself.

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The beep resonates with the static; dissonance and harmony linked together as one. The ringing has become thunderous. A shriek rips through my skull.

I am surrounded.

The world is spinning. I can barely breathe. The natural order is imploding. I crouch with my hands over my head as everything I know crumbles.

An ear piercing eruption rocks my foundation. The flash blinds me. Yet still I can see them. The empty, soulless, sunken eyes.

A dark force hurls itself into my heart. The al-Shaitan is here. The rapture has come. My life explodes with the embers of chaos. It wants me and I can do nothing.

The Pandemonium twists around me, writhing at its feet. My will is on fire. My body is breaking. Everything that I have ever known will cease to exist.

I cannot stop it. The darkness is enveloping my heart, filling it with the coals of hatred and abandonment.

I must hope. I must fight. The roaring will not relent. The flurry of the storm tears my skin apart at the seams. Ripping my will. Splitting my mind. The black-eyed angels gash through the abyss; slashing madly through the flames. I pour every ounce

of my soul and my heart into this world. I want to live a normal life again. This resolution, this purpose; it must mean something. This all must stand for something. I cannot lose to the demon.

A barrage of thunder ruptures through, annihilating the universe around me. Everything except those eyes. Those burning, vengeful eyes. The al-Shaitan will not claim me today.

Without hope there is nothing.

*** **

My eyes burst open. Sweat is pouring down my body. My heart is pounding. From one nightmare into another. I hear the soft familiar beep in the background. Still alive. The gentle hums of the fan radiate throughout the room. Calming.

I look past the paper-thin curtain into the hall. Nurses are bustling about, performing their daily rounds. Hope is everything, I remind myself.

A young nurse delicately slides the waxen curtain to the side and walks towards me. She reaches into her medical pouch and grabs a small silver pin. She gently picks up my arm to perform the same routine test that I have failed for months. Dejectedly expecting the same numbness that has come the countless times before, she carefully pricks me on the fingertip.

It twitches.

Reflections on “al-Shaitan”

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It all happened so fast. Even now, four years later, it feels like a distant nightmare. In a way, the thought that it was once a reality still seems ridiculously far fetched. It is strange. It has become a moment in time that is forever etched within my mind, but yet, I barely remember it. Subconsciously, I think I try to distance myself from it.

The only thing is, I’m still not quite sure what happened. That is what scares me. It was haphazardly called a stroke, but that was more of a formality; a label to explain an unexplainable event. The truth is, there was never a definitive declaration that it was actually a stroke. Besides, that just wouldn’t make sense. A reasonably healthy sixteen year old doesn’t just have an unprovoked stroke, and lose all motor function for months, right? Hell, half a year after the initial shock I was still walking around as if I was drunk; stumbling over words and unable to walk a straight line.

It was a dark time in my life. I was robbed of every selfish thing that I held dear. Having everything taken away from you at such a young age is a frightening thing. But still, in retrospect, I did not handle it well. I cast myself into self-exile. I alienated myself from friends, my family, and those that cared most about me. I still do not know why. I guess I didn’t want anyone to see me so weak. Within my mind, I became bitter.

My teenage angst caused me to say “fuck the world”. Following my recovery I fell hard into a murky chapter of my life of which I am not proud.

In reality though, these things happen. Now I am so far removed from it that memory barely exists anymore. I had not thought about the incident in years until my professor, Julie Amparano, requested that we write a short story as a final assignment in her class. I had never written creatively before, and to be honest, I was quite intimidated. As the days went on, and the story ideas failed to come to fruition, I began to realize that this may be my chance to come to terms with the event that changed my life. The process of writing al-Shaitan became a slow and painful revisitation to a period in time that I had so willingly forgotten.

It became a truly cathartic experience. Only now, as the story is finished, and I am allowed some sort of reflection, do I understand that this experience of loss may have been a blessing. It changed me. It forced me to look upon the world in a different fashion. Without wanting to sound too cliché, it revealed to me the fragility of life and the importance of maximizing the small amount of time that you have on this world. Most of all, it made me realize how blessed I am. It is still hard for me to understand that, but it is a lesson that I must always remember.

– *Shaun Al-Shatti*

Eight Poems By Lauren Dixon

Absence-Seeing What's There and What's Missing

© 2010

I look at my courtyard
after five months of absence,
the potato vine's vibrant
tendrils have taken over,
the electricity meter has
disappeared. They curl,
reaching for their next victim.
Last year this same vine
new to the neighborhood,
burned in the sun,
needing an umbrella's protection
from summer's bully.
The hummingbird feeder isn't
swinging from its perch,
but the small wind chimes
are still singing their song.
The pots left empty are still empty.
The pots left with brave remnants
striving for a season not theirs,
thinking they could make it in the shade-
Eaten by rabbits,
A clutch of hatched quail eggs,
Hidden between pot and wall,
A birth that enjoyed the quiet,
The fountain devoid of water
once gurgled "hello",
its bubbles spoke for the rest,
"Someone lives here, someone cares."
Now courtyard containers begging,
Fill me! Plant me! Make me whole!
I will I say, as I get the hose ready
to clean away the dirt of neglect,
I will.

Swinging Gate

© 2010

There is nothing so lonely
as a swinging gate.
Softly squeaking back and forth
with a breeze, seemingly helpless, or
Banging with a stiff wind,
trying to get attention.
The ancient latch still works, but
it must be done with two hands now,
not an option when arms are full.
Laundry and garbage are the reasons
we go through the gate,
chores always done with a sigh.
Garbage, always dirty,
now someone else's problem.
Laundry smelling of
sweat from working out,
sweat from insecurity,
sweat from sex.
Wiped away by the wash and wear cycle,
Fluffed by the hot bin of purity. Warm and clean.
Done with our duty, we close the gate
relieved of the mundane for awhile,
If left open, a reminder,
we are never, ever done.



Lauren Dixon was born in San Francisco where she attended Lowell High School, then Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. Married for 22 years, she lives in Sausalito, California and Scottsdale, Arizona where she writes and makes jewelry for her business Waterdragon Beadesign. Contact her at redhedlor@yahoo.com.

Maybe No One Taught Them

© 2010

I don't know how a human
can go through an entire day
without being touched.
How can they not have that need,
that connection, that
soft electric wire to the heart?
The wire that brings
life affirming messages,
unspoken compliments,
unsung praises heard by hands,
hands that quell tears,
and disappointment.
Arms that envelope the
body protecting against
what the ears heard-
neutralizing negative
clouds of words,
kicked up by stormy mouths.
We think it's inherent in our makeup.
Lip to lip conversations
numbing the mind,
and firing up the physical.
A cheek kiss goodbye,
the same for hello,
When prompted,
a hug given like
they missed that lesson,
I think if they knew how
precious it was to find
someone who loves them,
in this world-wholly loves them,
the touch would come easier,
They just don't know how,
and it's too late to teach them now.

Rite of Passage

© 2010

She came to visit
on a plane,
She's brave
beyond her age,
Her birthday gone
a week ago,
At seven
turned a page,

I asked her what
she's wanting,
Her glance was
somewhat daunting,
She looked at me,
I looked at her,
Those eyes were
somewhat haunting,

"Your ears pierced!"
Words spilled out a blur,
I said, "That's cool,
I'll ask your mom
if it's alright with her,"
It was. We went.
Pink stones were picked,
She sat real still,
The guns were clicked,

"You're done," I cried,
Big deal I teased,
She beamed such watts,
Her self so pleased.
Mission accomplished,
Carpe Diem seized,
A big girl rite,
Her want appeased.

The honor was mine,
A gift so rare,
Granddaughters grow
Too fast--not fair.
She'll never forget,
When her ears were notched,
A redheaded grandmother,
Championed, and watched.

Mums, Then Geraniums, Then Poppies

© 2010

She was always good with flowers,
Painting like you could pick them,
Geraniums red as indignation,
Mums spiky petals throwing yellow,
Orange poppies,
translucent in the light,
You could almost smell
their stain on your hands,
My rewards came unexpectedly,
I received the Mums for my divorce,
Her validation my decision was sound,
The Geraniums for moving near by,
Her thankfulness,
The Poppies for marrying well a second time,
Her relief I'd be cared for.
She up and left one day but,
I see her everywhere,
She left me bouquets of herself.

Become a Crane

© 2010

Some people are the cranes,
Some are the bulldozers,
Crane people lift you up,
attaching beams of self worth,
building blocks of esteem,
empathy, and compassion,
Bulldozers tear you down,
ripping away all of the above,
so nothing is left
but your foundation,
hopefully it is made of
something strong,
impermeable,
you can always start over,
when another crane person
shows up on the doorstep,
The best idea however, is
to become a crane person yourself,
Then no wrecking ball can touch you.

One Wire Away From Dead Silence

© 2010

Our bond had diminished,
winding down like a clock
with old batteries, like water
circling the drain, stories
were the same tug of war,
those of the daughter,
seventeen, those of the father,
seventeen plus twenty-six,
each stuck in idiosyncratic goo,
a small connection kept alive
by years of my cards, letters,
and phone calls.
He never calls,
He never writes,
He always apologizes,
for his inability to do either,
I always forgive him,
He is thankful.
Our secondhand kinship,
renewed by intermittent visits
across the Suisun sloughs,
the old issues,
sinking into the murk,
letting our new found selves
revive in only the good remembered,
nothing less.

Time Lines

© 2010

Time is etched in fine lines,
smiles leave them near eyes,
frowns leave them near mouths,
lines named after birds, and puppets,
Some are straight, some curved,
deep or shallow, not always
candidates for erasure,
The pretty ones,
have the toughest time
throwing in the towel,
They do their make-up
under 10x magnification,
thicker foundation, extra eye-shadow,
more lip gloss, plucking,
exfoliating, moisturizing,
like more means younger,
Every wrinkle looks like
the Grand Canyon,
Every zit Mount Everest,
Hair grows on upper lips like grass,
The crows have moved in
to roost indefinitely,
I need a mower
and a shotgun.