



Aurora
Spring 2009

Literary
Arts
Magazine



urora

Literary Arts Magazine
Spring 2009

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Aurora provides a forum for original literature and creative arts. Submissions remain anonymous until a staff of readers complete the review process. The editor maintains responsibility for final selections in preparation of works for publication. Please address all correspondence and submissions to the editors. Submission guidelines and dates available upon request.

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Editor's note

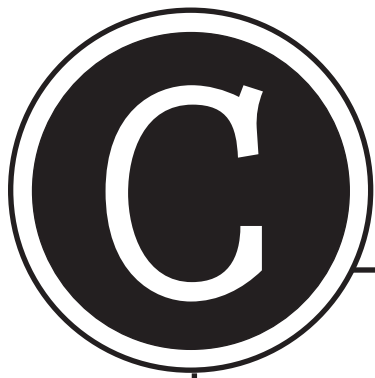
I wrote a few really bad poems last week. I have a story due in a class tomorrow that I haven't started yet. It isn't going to write itself I know, but all I have are bits and pieces of things. My writing right now is not whole. I begin things on napkins, receipts from the grocery store, the Gap, or from the library- libraries do that now you know, they print out receipts to remind you that you checked out books and that they are due back in two weeks. I am the worst at getting library books back on time.

What I'm trying to say is that I honor those of you who have submitted your work to Aurora. I am also happy to know that our campus has been writing. I know this because we received an abundance of submissions this year and I thank you for that.

I know from experience that the writer's deepest fears can be the blank page, inadequacy, or even ourselves. I am not a professional editor, an author, or a graduate of The Iowa Writer's Workshop; however, I do have a piece of advice, advice I should adhere to myself... keep writing. Get it all out on the page no matter what it is. You never know, it could be your next great sentence, poem, or story.

Miranda Silotto

Miranda Silotto, *Editor*



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They Got Married

By Nona Beardsley

The room smelled like an old man's sweater,
musty warm, as burnt umber shag carpeting
gnawed at the door, announcing arrivals.

A window unit rumbled to action every few minutes,
exaggerating its claim of cooling the office,
providing the only conversation.

A dress, white polka dots on navy polyester, blue
sandal foot pantyhose, three rose wrist corsage
hastily accepted from hands too young.

A young man's brown loafers and saggy tan leisure
suit, almost new, a bachelor buttons boutonnière
pinned with best wishes and a pearl headed needle.

Polaroid boxes stacked like tchatchkes on the table.

Best man and maid of honor missing
the judge's phone off the hook, as he
wheezes and wait, unexpectedly, their parents stand in.

Only thirty seven years between them, no
wonder hush reigns and smiles less
still. The cake, three layers, is traditionally cut.

Both hold the knife, and take a slice, as
secular vows and community properties promise,
as the judge wheezes and the window unit chuckles.

Photophobia

By Daniel Mitchell

You cloak yourself in shadows and sinister shades of
grey,
Trying your best to keep all traces of light far, far away.
Once your daunting enemy, the darkness is now your
friend,
Dimness is your ally, and dusk fervently defends.
The glow of the filament is your greatest fear,
Glaring evil into the air, until in the mist it disappears.
The streetlights of the city act as spotlights at the gate,
Seperating the obscure alleys from their shadowy mates.
Gloom is all you've know since you caught this awful
fright,
Photophobia they call it, or simply fear of light.



Jacqueline Waltermire, *Fog Through The Mind's Eye*, Photograph

Undercover Chocolate Lover

By Lynette Ringis

I love to eat chocolate, especially at night
I hide from the world with my trusty flashlight
Under the cover, behind the closed door
I eat and I eat, till there's not any more.
I love to eat chocolate, no matter what kind
I'll take what I get, whatever I find.
My favorite is milk chocolate, so sweet
When it's wrapped around peanuts, a favorite treat.
I love to eat chocolate, I have to confess
Sometimes when it melts it makes quite a mess
Whether it's mousse or Grasshopper Pie
Without them I think sometimes I might die.
So if you want to find me at night you now know
Exactly where I and my chocolate go
Behind the door and under the cover
Now you all know, I'm a chocolate lover.

because

By Amy Watkins

forget what you've known. eat your soup with a fork to
filter out all impurities. only the most gourmet of bullshit
for you.

curse your beautiful eyes and the golden rim around your
pupil that catches the light.

time is what's broken. i spend my day chasing the white
rabbit knowing full well that when i catch him i'll strangle
him to the tick tock of his own time piece.

in the summer. lightning bugs stain my skin yellow green.
you can find me in the flicker of their lust. waiting for the
light of love to not burn out.

you burned out. you burned me. but the scotch marks are
fading.

Novelty

By Amy Watkins

I'm the book that you buy despite the fact that you know you'll probably never read it. So, you'll place me upon a shelf and there I will sit gathering grime and cobwebs. Days, possibly years, later after many generations of arachnids have hatched from the crevices of my spine you'll find me pushed behind the more prominent volumes of your personal library.

What an odd little book, you'll think as you try placing my origin.

My tiny frame will fit neatly into the folds of your fingers. As my pages fall open, dust will float into the air filling your nostrils with that lovingly familiar scent of old, musty paper.

I imagine you sitting there in the softly fading light of the day quietly turning my pages. You'll read my happiness, my anger, my sorrow, my solitude, my hopes, my dreams. I am in those pages, tired and emotionally naked. You'll read me and your mind will curl up into the lines of the unfolding tale.

My story is short. My pages are yellowed. My words small and simple.

I'll eventually find my way back to the shelf and returned to my cozy little spot behind your set of suspense and romance novels. The only hint of exposure will be the subtle bends in my brittle pages and your fingerprints left in the dust on the cover.

It's okay. If you ever need a friend, just pull me off the shelf.



Taylor Swaim, *Untitled*, Photograph

The SMWC Life

By Danya Long

Studying

As we are all gathered around the table at the end of the hall, Laura is working on her legal research homework. “This is so stupid!” At the passing of every person, she begs them to do her homework, knowing that no one would dare attempt it unless they want to be admitted to a mental institution. Amy reads her human sexuality textbook and treats us to the random and sometimes disturbing facts she learns. “Did you guys know that a kleptomaniac gets sexual pleasure from stealing things?” I’m sitting at my computer, staring at a blank Word document attempting to rack my brain and crank out yet another essay. “Why is this so hard right now?”

On this particular night of our studying ritual, Becca and Adrienne come struggling down the hallway while carrying a loveseat from 3 Center. I have to ask. “What the hell are you guys doing?” “It’s cool. We just wanna chill. It’ll be down at the end of 2 North if you guys wanna use it.” After the puzzled looks are exchanged, we resume our studying. “This penis has gonorrhea and it looks like whiteheads...”

Eating

The dining hall has many nicknames. O’Shag, O’Shagnasty, O’Shitessy, and much more. The names have been adopted by students from every class. Entering the dining hall, the acrid aroma of our dinner hits our nostrils. We wander up to the line only to encounter burnt pizza, overcooked pasta, and a big pile of nasty in the form of turkey pot pie. After attempting to force down a few bites of the pasta and pot pie, I couldn’t stand it anymore. “Are we sure this is real food? It looks like they nuked a bunch of Alpo,” I say. Amy, my wonderful chef, came through once again. “Do you want me to make you a grilled cheese so you don’t have to eat that...food?” I eagerly accept the offer, and wait for 15 minutes for the gourmet meal I have gotten so used to consuming. When it took longer than usual for her to return, I ask Laura what could be taking so long. I glance up toward the electric griddle at the front of the dining hall.

My eyes meet a line of 10 people, waiting for their gourmet grilled cheese sandwiches to finish crisping to that delicious golden brown. The independence of college life has set in; even cooking is left up to us...

Learning

I’m sitting in my computer class for what seems like the hundredth time this semester. The persistent humming of the 18 computers all working at once is enough to put me to sleep this early in the morning. The professor has this special computer monitor that shows what each computer has pulled up on the screen. It put a damper on my boredom control for a few classes, until I finally got the hang of it. I came in early so I could pull up MySpace and Facebook. Stalking has always been a favorite pastime of mine. I was about three slides ahead on this PowerPoint presentation we were recreating, so I pulled up my Facebook to see if there was anything interesting going on.

I had a new notification, which basically meant something to do. Lexee, who was sitting two computers away from me, had written on my wall. “This class is so boring. At least we’ve got something to do for an hour...so what’s up?”

Celebrating

I was sitting at our normal studying area with Laura and Amy. The presidential election results were being streamed through on my computer while Laura and I half-ass watched them. I’m reading my biology textbook, something about the different types of birth control, when I hear screaming. It was a sound I’d heard all night, mainly every time Obama won another state but this time it was worse. I refresh the page on my computer and there it was: the results were in and Barack Obama had been declared the new president-elect. A group of girls ran into the hallway near us, screaming and hugging each other. They were jumping up and down as more and more girls joined the party. The screaming went on for almost 15 minutes until almost everyone was out of their room to see what the noise was. Laura, being the dutiful RA she is, yells at them to shut up because it’s supposed to be quiet hours.

As a few of them go galloping down the hall, Becca replies, “Why should we be quiet? This isn’t exactly a quiet moment in history...”

Recycling

Amy ordered two pairs of rain boots from Target and the huge box was sitting in the middle of my floor. I was trying to maneuver around my room to get some last minute things ready to pack before we headed to Georgia for the weekend. As I stumbled around looking for my charger for my camera, my mind was concentrating more on the box than on my lack of detective skills. I tripped over that box about five times, and screamed at it every time. “Stupid, annoying box; I really need to get rid of you.”

I found the charger and was getting ready to lock up my room when I saw the box again. I grabbed it and brought it out into the hallway. I was going to help “green the campus” so I walked over to the recycling area. There was no place to put cardboard except down in the basement. “Damn it. Why don’t they have cardboard recycling up here?”

I went back to my stuff and was ready to take the box downstairs when I gave up. “Forget it. One box won’t make a difference...”

Dangerous Liasions

By Lynette Ringis

The kids had been in bed for at least two hours, a miracle for a Friday night. Dorie had uncharacteristically checked on them twice to be sure. Sarah, the oldest, snored loudly while the headphones she was wearing fed rap music into her subconscious mind. Micah, younger by only fourteen months but taller by a head, was curled up in the corner of his bed in a modified fetal position, and two-year-old baby Lacey smiled like an angel in her sleep. Dorie loved her children and lived solely for them. Her marriage was nothing short of a disaster. Hank's love of poker, sleazy women and Jack Daniels had made for a less than perfect life. God only knew where Hank was at this very moment; Hank probably didn't even know. Hank usually left for work on Friday morning and didn't return home until lunch time on Sunday with what little was left of his pay check.

Dorie peered anxiously out her bedroom window, watching the dark and lonely country road that stretched past the farm. Pitch darkness except for the two small security lights on neighboring properties visible from where she stood. Then she saw a set of headlights moving east along the bumpy road. She caught her breath and watched. Suddenly the lights disappeared; a split second later they reappeared. Three times the lights blinked off and on again. Dorie felt sweat surfacing on her palms as her heart began to race. Tiny butterflies dance around in her stomach. She swallowed hard and turned to lock her bedroom door.

Dorie pressed the play button on the small cassette player next to her bed and flipped the light off. She tiptoed toward the window and carefully slid the heavy glass as high as it would go, then she slid the screen up as well. The high whistle of an artificial bird called out to her. She made a crackling, but convincing meow sound and Brian stepped out from behind the robust Colorado blue spruce. Dorie smiled.

Brian stepped to the window, placing one foot on the air conditioning unit and lifted himself to meet Dorie face to face. He kissed her lips softly. "Can I come in?" She backed up, allowing him room to crawl through the large window. Brian got to his feet and returned the screen to its lowered position. Dorie lit a single candle on her dresser and pulled her wedding band off, dropping it into a small glass dish. For a moment she caught her reflection in the mirror. Guilt clouded her eyes briefly but then Brian wrapped his arms around her waist from behind her and nestled his face in her hair, kissing her neck through the long dark curls. The guilt vanished quickly as passion flooded over her body and she turned to kiss Brian firmly on the mouth.

Brian led her to the bed where they sat, side by side and looked pensively into each other's eyes. Brian read her like a book.

"What's wrong with my baby?"

Dorie took a deep breath.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

"It's ok sweetie. Don't be afraid. I love you. You know what we are doing is right." He ran his hand up her thigh pressing his mouth to hers once more. Dorie stiffened. She had wanted this for so long, but now the whole thing terrified her.

"Come on baby, you're gonna have to relax." Brian pulled away from her and frowned.

"Let's run down to the liquor store and grab a bottle of wine. That'll take the edge off." He pulled Dorie to her feet.

Dorie resisted at first, but figured it wasn't worth the effort. Brian had a way of making her do crazy things that she never dreamed of. She grabbed her sandals and followed Brian who was already out the window and standing on the air conditioner. He reached a hand in to help her. Once she had both feet on the ground she leaned

over and slipped the sandals on. Her frayed denim shorts and snug white tank top were favorites of Brian's. He was a sucker for a Daisy Duke look-alike.

He led her along the line of trees, where a fat tabby cat darted across their path, causing Brian to curse. They ducked through the garden and out the back gate of the badly weathered privacy fence. Brian's black Chevy S10 was parked behind the fence. Pressing the clutch, Brian allowed the truck to roll as far as it was willing before he turned the key; by that point they were a far enough from the house that no one would hear the sputtering engine. He didn't turn the lights on until they were passed the neighbors barn and out of sight. It would be a mad dash to town and back because Brian wanted nothing more than to take full advantage of this lonely farm wife.

The fat tabby cat found its way to the back of the house where it moaned loudly; the call of a virile male, seeking his next conquest. Then a curtain blowing in the breeze caught the ornery cat's attention. He crouched, waiting for the curtain to tease him once more. As the curtain helplessly followed the warm night breeze, the fat tabby cat attacked from his perch atop the air conditioner and bounded through the open window, knocking the flimsy aluminum curtain rod off the small nails where it rested. The nearly silent commotion took only a second but scared the cat who flew effortlessly to the top of the dresser, sending one solitary candle crashing to the floor on top of the now lifeless curtain. Sensing the danger, the fat cat bounded out the window and disappeared into the darkness.

They sped north along Route 9 for no more than four minutes, four of the longest minutes of Dorie's life as she argued virtues with herself in silence. Brian left her sitting in the truck parked next to the smelly dumpster behind the liquor store while he quickly darted inside. Returning with a non-descript brown bag tucked under his arm, Brian glanced over his shoulder to be sure no one was watching him. He peeled back the bag and twisted the cap off the cold, clear glass bottle. He took a long swig and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand,

passing the bottle to Dorie.

"Strawberry," was all he said to her.

Dorie lifted the bottle and swallowed several times, letting the cool wine wash away the guilt that threatened to consume her. Within minutes she felt her grip on reality starting to slide as Brian pulled the truck back onto the highway.

The phone rang at the dilapidated police station. The solitary officer on duty, a grotesquely overweight fifty-something-year-old navy retiree was jolted upright in his squeaky chair. Rubbing his eyes and remembering where he was, the officer grabbed the receiver, sending cold coffee flowing over the empty desk creating a river of coffee over the edge and onto the floor.

"Shit!" he jumped up to keep from soiling his too-tight-fighting uniform.

"Warren Township," he barked into the phone.

"This is the State Police; we have a report of a single-car accident at mile marker seventy-three on Route 9. Apparently the vehicle was traveling south on Route 9 at a high rate of speed when it left the roadway and flipped a couple of times. Problem is, it's in your jurisdiction. You'll need to respond."

"Ten-four," he snapped to attention. He had waited for this moment for three years; finally a chance to have his name in the paper as a hero of Warren Township. He slammed the phone down and grabbed his hat from the hook on the wall and waddled quickly to his patrol car parked outside.

With sirens blaring, Officer Billingsley rushed to the scene; the badly twisted and tangled frame of an older model Chevy S10 lay upside down in the creek bed twenty-five feet down the wooded hillside. Smoke was rising from the engine compartment. He heard the faint cry of a woman's voice. In his confusion, he seemed to turn in circles wondering what to do first, call for back-up

or try to get down to the woman. He hurried back to the patrol car and grabbed the hand set.

“Uh, this is Officer Billingsley with Warren Township Police. I need the fire department out here right away!”

Hurrying back to the edge of the road where he could see the truck, the now perspiring officer looked for some way to get down to the vehicle. He decided to follow the path of the vehicle, using small trees to brace himself. He was two steps into his descent when a sudden explosion knocked him flat on his ample rear. He watched in horror as the little black truck went up in flames. He was sure there was no way anyone could have survived. He heard the siren of the Warren Township Volunteer Fire Department’s only truck speeding toward him.

Mrs. Thompson was a light sleeper. Her hearing was one thing that age seemed not to effect; even the smallest sounds would wake her from her fitful sleep. The humidity made it impossible to get comfortable. She sat up in her bed, sliding her wrinkled feet into her slippers and scooted toward the kitchen, hoping to feel the gentle breeze that danced with the little wind chime in the window. She peered out the back door into the darkness as she heard Danger crying out to her. She pushed open the door and let the fat tabby cat in. Danger snuggled against the old woman’s leg, his way of thanking her for letting him in.

“Must be a storm comin’ old boy. I can feel it in my bones.”

The old woman often talked to the cat, since he was the only confidant she had now. Something in the darkness caught the old woman’s attention and she pushed the door open again for a better look. Squinting her eyes she began to focus on the bright orange fingers leaping into the dark sky. As she gathered her wits about her and realized what was happening, she reached for the phone hanging on the kitchen wall. The phone shook violently in her trembling hands, suddenly aware of the youngsters that she had seen playing outside on sunny days and the desperate situation they were surely in. Then the sound of a siren screaming

through the night interrupted her thoughts.

“Oh thank God, Danger! Someone must’ve already called the fire department.”

“They’re already on their way,” she comforted herself as she placed the receiver back in its cradle. She tightened her robe around her waist and scooted back to her bedroom to pray.



Taylor Swaim, *Seattle Skyline*, Photograph

Seattle help wanted: Disinformation campaigner

By Ralph Marshall

It's raining today in Seattle. That is not unusual except for one thing. It is the middle of August. We are officially, and anecdotally, smack dab in the center of our dry season. I can't remember the last time that it rained in August. And this is no timid drizzle, no occasional shower here and there. This is a fulsome, serious affair. I needed to be out on the freeway last night and had my wipers on high and still needed to slow down to see the road. That tells you how hard it was coming down because we are used to driving in the rain here in Seattle and take pride in our wet weather commuting skills.

Of course, there is danger in pride. When competency becomes hubris, bad things can happen. Now when we say Seattle we are actually meaning a North-South corridor spanning from Olympia, our state capital, 60 miles south, to Everett 30 miles north. This corridor, 90 miles long, holds close to 3 million people and is fairly narrow, being bounded on the west by the Puget Sound and on the East by the Cascade mountain range—a width of only 20 miles. With only one major freeway (I-5) running the length of this corridor—and one shorter one running parallel to it for a ways, the slightest glitch in the laminar flow of

traffic, the smallest rock dropped into this smooth stream of metal and chaos and gridlock ensue.

As all the rest of America, that powerful tool of the automobile has encouraged us to grow our homes out rather than up. Cheaper land, larger lots, bigger houses entice us farther and farther from the jobs that we rely on for survival. So every morning at 5am our television and radio stations begin their traffic reports. Every ten minutes, graphs and schematics of our road system with little colored cars moving on them appear on our screens. Cameras on overpasses and helicopters roaming up and down the freeways give us up-to-the-minute live video feeds of traffic. Will my commute let me leave at my normal time or should I leave now because of some accident clogging up the freeway is a question that is part of every mornings' ritual.

I know what you were thinking when you finished the first sentence at the top of the paper. You thought "yup, sounds like Seattle". I say Seattle, you think rain. But of the 165 cities with records of annual rainfalls*, Seattle comes in behind 122 others. We are actually in the bottom fourth of North American cities for rainfall. Seattle's 37 inches is lower than the entire Southeast and Gulf states, Lexington's 44, New York's 42 and even Indianapolis's 40. That's right; every where in Indiana gets more rain than we do here in Seattle. So why the unanimous attitude of incorrect assumption? It is actually a very sophisticated

public relations campaign of purposeful disinformation. How else can you explain an entire nation dismissing Seattle as barely part of the country? But it suits us perfectly. For you see, we have a secret, a terrible, terrible secret, one that we hope never gets out.

Seattle is a Shangri-La, it is a valley nestled between two mountain ranges. It is a coastal city with steady air flow off of the Pacific Ocean and no industry upwind for 5000 miles. It has sea level air that is clean and fresh, sweet and a joy to breathe. It has mild winters and warm summers. We have every ecological environment within a two hour drive. We have an actual rain forest with 140 inches of rainfall to the west. We have high desert to the east. We have mountain ranges on both sides of us and a protected inland ocean at our feet. We have, literally, the quietest place in America in that rainforest (60 Minutes did a report on it). The old-growth trees are so close together, the vegetation so abundant, the moss dripping from the trees so verdant that the sound of a hiker's boots crashes like thunder; yet dies within a few meters from the natural sound absorption of the area. There is even legislation aimed at routing jet paths to honor the sacredness of this spot. We abound in parks and trees. We have hundreds of thousands of acres of national forest with trails that go, literally from inside Canada to the Southern Oregon border (that's a straight line of over 800 miles). We are one of the top 3 bicycle friendly cities with the most dedicated bike lanes in the nation. We can sail, fish, camp and ski. We can watch Orcas swim by as we kayak the 600 miles of inner coastline of the Puget Sound. We have an entrepreneurial spirit in business and a strong liberal bent in social issues. We are on the Pacific Rim and because of that; economic downturns that hit the rest of the country hard barely touch us. Much of your clothing and appliances come through our ports as Washington apples, Idaho potatoes and Indiana wheat departs from them to Japan, China and the rest of Asia. We can live in paradise and enjoy beauty and a clean, green healthy environment and do it with all the comforts of civilization but only if we can keep the rest of you people away. It's getting crowded here and we need your help. We need you to be our lobbyist to the rest of the nation. Our disinformation campaign is breaking down, the word is leaking out, somebody's relative has spilled the beans and we need you to help bolster up our defenses.

So when you talk to your friends, please stress the rain. Talk about cloudy skies and gloomy winters. Dwell upon stage coaches and muddy roads, log cabins and Indian raids. Laugh about simple men in plaid shirts and logger boots clomping a square dance around a pot-belly stove. Mention the rain. Deride our opera with its git-fiddles and tuned-up water jugs. Feel sorry for our ballet in their flip-flops and hand-me-down tutus from back east. Did I tell you how much it rains here? Don't mention the blue summer skies and the bluer water. Don't tell anyone about the skiing or the sailing, the scuba-diving or hot-air balloons, the hiking, the biking, the gentle spirit of cooperation and tolerance. Harp on its isolation from the 'real' America and its damned liberals, its traffic jams and grunge rock. And let everyone know that it rains like the dickens here. Be an expert on The Pacific Northwest and say "rain" every time someone says "Seattle". Snort in amusement when someone says that they may visit us. Talk them out of it. Do whatever it takes. Whisper subliminal messages in their ear while they sleep; 'Seaaattle..... raaaiiiin.....'. But then, when everyone settles down and forgets us, slip out and come visit. We'll leave the light on. But bring your jammies, you may want to stay.

* National - Average Monthly Precipitation



Jacqueline Waltermire, *Lost*, Photograph

Ignition

By Amy Watkins

She fumbles with the lighter. Rubbing it between her palms, friction warms the cool purple shell that encases clickable fire. She tries again.

Click. Nothing. Click. Nothing. Click.

Ignition.

She closes her eyes in silent resignation as the nicotine floods her lungs.

Relief.

Eyes cast downward, she recognizes familiarity in yellow shoes and paint stained blue jeans. It's the form inside giving them shape and function that screams foreign.

Puff.

Sometimes she finds herself talking to God. Her unseen confidant knows all her deepest secrets. Eyes always to the ground, she waits for an answer. Eyes always to the ground, she's afraid to be seen.

Puff.

The pressure is building. Her head is full of questions, her mouth is full with smiles.

Puff. Denial. Puff.

Smaller in frame in size, she thought she'd be happier. Run. Lift. Run. Happiness can't thrive in a slave to routine. She craves quiet, she lacks sleep.

Puff.

The song she sings, and the picture she paints tell stories of rehearsed apologies. She searches for where she went wrong. She fades into the puzzle.

Puff. Cough. Filter. Toss.

She looks up. The air is heavy. The wind is cool. All around her is sound and motion. It's so loud. Deafening. Her eyelids fall down. The dark brings a calm.

Click. Nothing. Click Nothing. Click.

Ignition.

She has so many questions that need to be answered, a fresh pack of smokes, and all the time in the world.

Puff.

Exhale.

Smile.

The Green Wave by Georges Lacombe

By Karla Aguirre

The cliffs sit on the edges of the painting, crags and crevices filled with smells of sulfur and salt. It's nearing the end of the day there. Old men along the shores sit and look at the depths of the waves, remembering them as they ebb and flow, ebb and flow.

I can imagine Poseidon's fists pounding on my weathered body, drops of water scratching endlessly down my aging cheeks. I am one terracotta piece in a cemetery of bodies. My joints and insides have rusted into stone. I'm being carved into a soldier, futilely fighting off the ruinous passage of time; I'm sent into battle against wrinkles and memories.

I'm being prepared to join the unliving, every second gets me closer. This ceaseless turmoil seething around me stampedes past, horsemen announcing the apocalypse to everyone and lingering by. I felt their breath tickle my neck when my step grandfather passed away, when he lost his 21 grams; I felt my eyes growing crows' feet, slowly rooting me to the ground.

Surrounded by the smell of talcum powder and age, it's easy to forget that the creaky women I'm visiting in the nursing home were active once. They jitterbugged in their polka-dotted, a-line dresses; they squealed with laughter. They had beaus, they took classes, they knew their lives were ahead of them. Time is now creeping away, most of their life behind them. Like a wave, it lifted them, crescendoed, diminuendoed, and then splashed onto them. Their muscles ache from the blast of the wave.

One of the ladies, a sturdy old oak tree in orthopedic shoes, helped me pick a puzzle to put together, a beautiful sunset with teals and golds and purples and reds, a couple of palm trees over a calm sea. She inched her hands above the pieces, painstakingly separating them into edges and non-edges, different colors and different textures.

"You came to visit last week, didn't you?" she says. She

hesitates before she says, "You look familiar."

"Yes, my name is Karla," I say. I don't tell her I visited yesterday. Pieces in her head don't fit together as nicely as they used to. We talk about where I'm from, where I've lived, and then we do it again. Sections of the picture start making sense, but I secretly intervene every now and then, fix a part that doesn't go.

We went to the beach last year. My great-aunt had been sunbathing for the heck of it- she's a deep, chocolate brown with freckles on her cheeks- but she left her seat on the seashore. She gracefully plowed through the rocking waves to wade alongside me. Her hair is still jet-black, but the grays are starting to show. She sighed as she finally reached me, her limbs relax.

"Honey, enjoy yourself now. Everything goes downhill as soon as you reach forty," she said. She chuckled and rested her arms on the surface of the water. We both looked towards the edge of the ocean, where the sun was finishing its dance across the sky. I was not ready for it to set; I wanted to let the waves keep jostling me gently for a little bit longer.

"Let's head home," she said. I considered pleading for a couple of minutes more in the water. The sunset cast shadows on her face that I didn't want to see, though. I nodded. We turned our back on the sun and headed to the shore.

Barren Courage

By Laurie Jackson

CHARACTERS

SHARON STRONG, 27

ROBERT STRONG, 27, SHARON'S HUSBAND

ISABELLA, 0, SHARON AND ROBERT'S BABY

PREGNANT IRAQI WOMAN, 45

IRAQI WOMAN'S SON, 7

JESSICA WHITMAN, 34

DR. CAMPBELL, 42

LABORATORY TECHNICIAN, 32

DR. CAMPBELL'S MEDICAL ASSISTANT, 23

TIME

The present, late morning

PLACE

A suburban healthcare clinic. There are nearly identical examination rooms with a wall between them which are like mirror images of each other. There is an exam table in the middle of the room and a changing screen behind it. Two chairs and various medical devices line the walls. The rooms are painted white and most of the furniture and fixtures are brown. Posters depicting various labeled human organs and tissues hang on the wall. Tattered magazines spill out of a wooden holder near the door.

A larger laboratory waiting room in the same building consists of a window where patients check in and many chairs arranged around the perimeter and middle of the room.

A small, crude shanty consisting of an entryway and interior. The hut is pieced together with wood and metal and has a canvas roof. The only furnishings in the hut are a wooden table and a colorful woven rug on the floor.

(The lights come up on the examination room on the left. SHARON lies on the examination table, staring up at the ceiling. She is dressed in a hospital gown with a thin sheet draped over her from waist to foot. ROBERT sits in one of the chairs, holding their sleeping baby ISABELLA in his arms. DR. CAMPBELL knocks lightly and then opens the door and comes in, carrying a folder under his arm. He holds out his hand to SHARON)

DR. CAMPBELL: Good morning, Mrs. Strong.

(SHARON shakes his hand firmly from her position on the exam table, saying nothing.

He turns to ROBERT with hand outstretched)

Mr. Strong? *(ROBERT shakes his hand vigorously)*

ROBERT: Hi Doc! Here's Isabella, look at her, sleeping like a baby! Huh! Just like she's supposed to!

(DR. CAMPBELL glances at ISABELLA, then takes the folder from under his arm and opens it. He flips the first and second pages of the folder back and forth, reading, distractedly)

DR. CAMPBELL: Good, good. *(Turns back to SHARON)*

Alright young lady. You're 8 days postpartum and I need to take a peek at your stitches. How are you feeling?

SHARON: Fine, great.

(DR. CAMPBELL lifts the sheet covering Sharon, not visible to the audience, moves aside her gown, looks quickly at her belly, then drops the sheet. He takes a pen out of the breast pocket of his coat and scribbles something in the folder)

DR. CAMPBELL: How's the pain?

SHARON: No pain at all.

DR. CAMPBELL: You're resting, not doing any heavy lifting?

SHARON: Uh huh.

ROBERT: Nothing heavier than Isabella!

DR. CAMPBELL: Regular bowel movements?

SHARON: Pretty much.

DR. CAMPBELL: Good, good. Well let's send the baby to the lab to check on his –

ROBERT: You mean “her”.

DR. CAMPBELL: Right, sorry, *her* bilirubin levels and make sure she's not jaundiced; they were a little high last time we checked. You can go straight down the hall to the lab and do it on your way out.

(DR. CAMPBELL takes a pad of paper out of his waist pocket and scribbles something on it, then tears it off and hands it to SHARON. He backs up and puts his hand on the doorknob)

And I'll see you in two weeks.

ROBERT: Thanks Doc.

(DR. CAMPBELL nods and leaves the room)

SHARON: *(Under her breath)* Quack.

ROBERT: *(Snickers)* Aw, he wasn't that bad.

(SHARON sits up, slowly, clutching her abdomen in obvious pain, and swings her legs over the side of the exam table)

SHARON: Robert, he's a quack. He's exactly the reason I did natural birth with a doula instead of coming to someone like him in the first place. Or, at least, I tried to.

(SHARON hangs her head)

ROBERT: Sweetie, doula or no, everything came out fine. See?

(ROBERT holds his arms out to show her ISABELLA. SHARON ignores him. ROBERT pulls the baby back close to him)

ROBERT: Well, anyway, I wish you'd asked him about something for your mood –

SHARON: Oh dear God, would you pipe down about that already? I'm FINE! Just because I caved and went to the hospital for the birth doesn't mean I'm about to

start popping pills! Jesus, Robert!

ROBERT: No, I didn't mean that. And, honey, you're *not* fine. But, what you are is...normal. It's perfectly normal for a woman who's just given birth to be –

SHARON: Unstable? Unpredictable? An emotional wreck?

ROBERT: Uh-huh. All of the above! Now honey, look: your pregnancy went really smooth, so it doesn't surprise me that you would have some, um, reactions to the birth being so hard. It's normal. They call it the baby blues.

SHARON: I'm a soldier. Blue is not in my vocabulary! I bleed green. When my father died? Who was the strong one, the backbone of the family? *I'm* the one who dealt with the coroner, met with the funeral home, made all the arrangements, took over everything for Mom. Where were my big, bad brothers? Let's see: David was crying in the basement, John was on a two-day bender and Martin wouldn't even come home until the day dad was buried. This isn't a *reaction*. It's not hormones, and it's not the baby blues!

(SHARON waves her arms up in the air and speaks louder.)

It's a catastrophe! An anomaly!

(ISABELLA begins to fuss. ROBERT and SHARON both look over at her. SHARON puts her arms back down at her side, and ROBERT leans down and sniffs ISABELLA, then makes a face)

ROBERT: Uh oh, bombs away.

SHARON: Why don't you –

ROBERT: I'm going to take her to the bathroom and change her.

SHARON: Good idea. Then just go straight to the Lab. I'll meet you there.

(ROBERT stands up and puts the diaper bag on his shoulder. He walks towards the door and opens it, then turns back to SHARON)



Lihting Li, *4th July*, Painting

ROBERT: All I'm saying, honey, is that it's normal to feel the way you do.

(SHARON rolls her eyes. ROBERT exits. SHARON stands up slowly, breathing out through her nostrils as if stifling a moan of pain. She speaks to the door)

SHARON: Like you know how I feel. *(SHARON turns towards the audience)*

I couldn't believe it when the doula told me she was taking me in. "Not pushing hard enough"? *Me?* Not pushing hard enough?...*Me* – who ran further in boot camp than any of the men. I dug ditches deeper at Fort Riley, and walked faster and further carrying more gear in the desert. I'd like to have seen her push for even ten minutes.

(SHARON turns sideways and addresses the door)

I'd like to have seen you push for ten minutes, much less ten hours, Dr. Campbell.

(SHARON turns and walks to the changing screen and steps behind it, with only her head and shoulders visible to the audience. She unties her hospital gown and removes it, draping it over the screen. She picks up the T-shirt draped over the screen and pulls it over her head, then picks up her sweat pants. She bends down out of sight for a moment to put them on. Then she stands upright again, steps from behind the screen, and begins speaking)

How could this have happened? From the moment I knew I was pregnant, I knew how this birth would go. I wanted to be like them, like the women in Iraq.

(A spotlight comes on to the left of the examination room, revealing the shanty. There is a very pregnant WOMAN in long robes pacing the floor and clutching the small of her back and her SON standing by, watching her. SHARON slowly walks towards the entryway to the hut while she speaks, then pauses outside the door as she gazes in at the memory)

They were so brave for their babies! They waddled

around their villages, on unpaved streets, 9, 10 months pregnant, limping in pain. Sometimes in the last hours they even had amniotic fluid running down their legs. They left little trails of it in the dirt behind them!

They huffed and puffed and sweat poured down their faces, until they couldn't walk anymore...and then they sent a child running for the midwife, or a sister, or a sister-in-law.

I'm standing there in my fatigues with my 50 lb. pack on my back and an M16 in my hand, listening to their cries – these women in huts with dirt floors, having their babies by candlelight. Those women were 10 times the woman I was, bearing up under their pain. They were *giving birth*.

(PREGNANT IRAQI WOMAN moans loudly several times, stops walking and bends over in pain. She raises her hand and motions to the boy to go outside quickly)

One time, there was no one to help this woman and her little boy ran out of their hut, looking for someone, anyone.

(IRAQI WOMAN'S SON runs out from the hut and speaks quickly and loudly to SHARON, gesturing for her to go inside with him)

SON: Man ehtiaj be komak dâram! Mi-âyad! Lot fan!

(SHARON hesitates for a moment, then follows him into the hut and runs to the side of the WOMAN, who has taken hold of the table and is squatting in front of it, with her legs apart. SHARON kneels down and supports the WOMAN'S left thigh, blocking her from the audience's view. The WOMAN screams and grunts loudly for 30 seconds)

SHARON: Shh, shh, it will be all right. It's okay, you're doing great. Shh. Shh. That's good. Shh.

(An infant's cry is heard. The WOMAN stands up straight and stretches her hands up towards the ceiling, screaming with joy as the SON jumps up and down)

SON: Motshakeram, dêram barâdar! Motschakeram,
Motschakeram! Dâram barâdar!

(SHARON watches them. Then the hut goes dark. The spotlight follows SHARON as she stands up and walks out of the hut and back into the examination room, then the spotlight is extinguished. SHARON faces the audience)

It was crazy beautiful, what that woman endured to have her baby. It was the most courageous act I've ever seen.

Why didn't I do more to prepare myself for my own baby's birth – more exercises, more Lamaze breathing – or, harder! Harder Lamaze breathing!

(SHARON picks up her shoes from the floor in front of the changing screen, clutching her stomach as she does. She walks to one of the chairs, sits down and puts on her right shoe as she speaks)

I was tired – but I've been more tired before. Like on the 3rd straight day of patrol after only a couple of hours of sleep in the foxhole. I just don't understand how I couldn't get my second wind and make it work this time.

(SHARON puts on her left shoe as she continues speaking)

How many times did I dream telling my baby the story of her birth? Tell her how her mommy didn't put any drugs into her body, how much time I spent interviewing doulas until I found just the perfect partner to help bring her into the world. And practicing breathing until I could do it just right.

(SHARON, finished putting on her shoes, sits back in the chair and claps her hands on the top of her thighs)

Now what am I going to tell her? That they wheeled me into an operating room and I was laying on a gurney with oxygen up my nose while they cut me open and pulled her out of me?

(SHARON stands up slowly and then begins speaking)

There was this moment when I looked at the doula and saw fear on her face. She was scared – just for a second I saw it, then she caught herself and changed her expression. She tried to hide it. But I had seen the look on her face. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and my skin tingle. I knew in that second that the baby was in danger.

It was just like that day we had to go door-to-door in that village outside of Baghdad. I knew the insurgents were there, waiting for us. I knew because of those hairs and the tingle on my skin. So I stopped fighting. I let her take me in.

(SHARON shakes her head, then turns and walks to the door, putting her hand on the doorknob as the lights go down.)

The lights come up on the examination room on the right. JESSICA is sitting, fully clothed, on the examination table looking straight ahead with her hands clasped in her lap. DR. CAMPBELL knocks lightly and then opens the door and comes in, carrying a folder under his arm. He holds out his hand to JESSICA)

DR. CAMPBELL: Good morning, Mrs. Whitman.

(JESSICA shakes his hand)

JESSICA: Hello Doctor.

(DR. CAMPBELL takes the folder from under his arm, opens it and flips through the first three pages. He speaks without looking up)

DR. CAMPBELL: Uh, okay: we have your test results from last week and I'm afraid they are just as we thought. The pregnancy hormone count is far too low. They should be doubling but they are actually decreasing since last week. Clearly you're having a spontaneous abortion. Have you noticed any bleeding?

(JESSICA looks down at her hands and speaks in a low voice)

JESSICA: No.

(DR. CAMPBELL takes a pad of paper out of his

waist pocket and scribbles something on it, then tears it off and hands it to JESSICA)

I'm going to have you take this slip to the Lab and do one more blood draw on your way out today. I would expect that within the next five days you will begin to pass tissue.

(DR. CAMPBELL closes the folder and looks up at JESSICA)

Now, last time you were here we discussed your options. I'm not going to beat around the bush: at your age, and having had three consecutive pregnancy losses, the odds are unfortunately against your having a live birth. Given your inability to sustain the pregnancy, in vitro fertilization doesn't appear to be a good option. It's not only the age of your eggs –

(JESSICA looks up)

JESSICA: What exactly are my odds, doctor?

DR. CAMPBELL: I beg your pardon?

JESSICA: A number. Do you have an actual number?

DR. CAMPBELL: Uh, I would say that your chances are less than two percent at this point. That is, two out of every 100 women with your same physical considerations would successfully carry a baby to term.

(JESSICA continues looking at him without responding. DR. CAMPBELL clears his throat)

DR. CAMPBELL: Now, you've had miscarriages before so you know what to expect. If you experience bleeding beyond changing one pad every hour you need to go to the emergency room. Call me if you don't begin passing tissue in the next week. If all goes as expected I'll see you back here in two weeks to do a postpartum exam. *(DR. CAMPBELL walks towards the door and puts his hand on the doorknob, then turns back to JESSICA)* I'll have the nurse give you some literature to help you with...next steps.

(DR. CAMPBELL exits. JESSICA sits staring at her hands, then stands up wearily and leaves

the room. The lights go down)

(The lights come up in the Laboratory waiting room. JESSICA walks in and steps up to the LABORATORY TECHNICIAN, handing her the slip of paper)

JESSICA: Dr. Campbell ordered these tests.

(The LABORATORY TECHNICIAN nods and takes her slip)

JESSICA: Thank you.

(JESSICA turns, walks to a chair, and sits down to wait. SHARON and ROBERT walk in, with ROBERT carrying ISABELLA. They approach the LABORATORY TECHNICIAN. JESSICA looks up as they enter, then spots the baby and looks away)

ROBERT: Hi. How are you doing?

(The LABORATORY TECHNICIAN smiles at him)

This is our daughter, Isabella. *(ROBERT holds up the baby carrier to show the LABORATORY TECHNICIAN)* She's here for some tests.

(LABORATORY TECHNICIAN smiles at the baby and then holds out her hand for the paperwork. ROBERT hands it to her. ROBERT and SHARON sit down near JESSICA. ROBERT places ISABELLA's carrier on the floor in front of him)

ROBERT: *(Smiling at JESSICA)* Good morning!

JESSICA: *(Smiling weakly and nodding at ROBERT and SHARON)* Hi.

(SHARON nods back at JESSICA but says nothing. She looks miserable. ROBERT gets up and walks over to a magazine rack and examines the titles. DR. CAMPBELL'S MEDICAL ASSISTANT enters the room hurriedly. Out of breath, she holds out a pamphlet to JESSICA)

ASSISTANT: You forgot this. It's the information Dr. Campbell wanted you to have on infertility.

(JESSICA winces and takes the pamphlet, glancing at SHARON as she does)

JESSICA: Oh. Thanks.

(JESSICA holds onto the pamphlet but doesn't read it, looking down at her lap. ASSISTANT exits. ROBERT returns to his seat without a magazine. ROBERT glances back and forth at SHARON and JESSICA, each looking miserable, then looks at ISABELLA, and back up at JESSICA)

ROBERT: You've got something there on fertility, huh?
That must mean you're having a baby!

JESSICA: Uh –

(ROBERT leans down to take the sleeping ISABELLA out of her carrier. SHARON looks up quickly and starts to put her hand out to stop him, but ROBERT has already stood up. He walks over and bends down to place Isabella into the startled JESSICA'S arms)

ROBERT: *(Tenderly, beaming)* This is Isabella. She was born 8 days ago at 11:30 in the morning. Look at her. Isn't she is a good baby?

(JESSICA stares down at the baby in her arms, a look of shock on her face. She looks up to meet SHARON'S eye and then back down at the baby)

JESSICA: *(Softly)* Oh! She's beautiful.

(JESSICA begins to weep. SHARON rises slowly with her hand on her abdomen and walks over to JESSICA. She sits down next to her and puts her hand on JESSICA'S arm. JESSICA looks up at SHARON)

Oh, I'm not crying because I'm sad. I'm crying because...she's so beautiful!

(SHARON and JESSICA stare down at Isabella as ROBERT returns to his seat)

JESSICA: Is she your first?

SHARON: Yeah, can't you tell?

(ROBERT stands up, looking uncomfortable at the women's tears. He approaches SHARON and combs the hair on top of his head with his hand as he speaks)

ROBERT: I'm going to go down the hall, okay honey? I'll be right back. *(ROBERT turns and exits quickly without waiting for a response)*

JESSICA: That's one proud father!

SHARON: Yeah – she already has him wrapped around her little finger.

(There is an uncomfortable silence, then JESSICA looks down at the pamphlet in her hand, then back at SHARON)

JESSICA: I'm...probably not going to have any children. My doctor told me I'm infertile. I don't have a problem getting pregnant, but then I can't carry the baby to term and I lose it. I'm pregnant right now, actually, but they think the baby's dead. I'm here to have the blood test to confirm it.

(SHARON puts her hand to her mouth and her eyes fill up with tears)

SHARON: I'm so sorry!

JESSICA: *(Weakly)* Thank you. It's not the first time, so I know what to expect. At least I know what to expect. And, today, the doctor told me that my chances of ever having a baby are...slim. Two percent. So, yeah. I guess that makes me infertile.

(SHARON shakes her head, still crying)

JESSICA: It's all right. Really. It'll be all right. My husband and I have always said we wanted to adopt someday. I mean, we wanted children of our own, too, but we were also okay with the idea of adopting...This isn't how we wanted it to work out. But it'll be okay. *(Looks down at Isabella and speaks as if to herself)* Eventually, it will be okay.

SHARON: *(Wipes her eyes and leans forward a bit)* I...I had to have a C-section, and I've been so upset about it. I'm a soldier, I just got back from Iraq, and

then I was pregnant. I wanted so much for it to be a natural birth, and I tried so hard, and then there were complications, and I ended up in the hospital anyway.

(SHARON ignores ROBERT and turns away from him, hugging ISABELLA closer to her. She smiles down at her through her tears)

JESSICA: Oh. So you're...disappointed.

SHARON: I just, you know, it seemed so important to have her naturally, and I didn't want to give up on that dream...

JESSICA: I know how you feel. I'm sorry.

SHARON: No, no, it's so stupid! Don't feel sorry for me! God, I have been feeling so sorry for myself.

SHARON: Did you see that woman, Isabella? She was brave and strong, like a soldier. Just like you'll be someday. Like mommy's going to be again, starting now.

(Blackout)

(JESSICA looks down at the baby, then looks up, thinking for a moment before she speaks again)

JESSICA: Just remember, you did what was best for *the baby*. For her safety. I'm sure you're not someone who's used to playing it safe, but sometimes, you know, it takes more courage to give up than it does to keep going.

SHARON: Yes. I see that now.

LABORATORY TECHNICIAN: Jessica Whitman?

(JESSICA looks up, then hands ISABELLA reluctantly to SHARON)

JESSICA: You have a beautiful daughter.

SHARON: Yes. Thank you.

(JESSICA stands up and walks over to the LABORATORY TECHNICIAN. She passes ROBERT on his way back into the room)

ROBERT: Good luck! I hope you have a baby!

(JESSICA keeps walking and then exits. SHARON smacks ROBERT on the arm)

SHARON: You doofus! INFertility, not FERtility. That woman couldn't have a baby!

ROBERT: Oh...gee. No kidding? Wow. That is really sad. You see how lucky we are?

How To Survive

By Courtney Forsyth

The room is out of focus,
Balance is heavy and off.
“I didn’t take too many,”
She reassures herself,
Pokes her stomach...
“Take more!”
Sinister fingers lunge out to rip open more,
Violently, throws herself on the bed.
“No more.
Not tonight.”
Staring at the ceiling, abusing herself to fix her fat.
Barely, very small movements come from her lungs.
“Legs lose ability; arms require more effort after swallowing many.
What if lungs do too?
Must I pry eyes open all night to beg lungs to rise then fall?”
Eyes suddenly freeze over from shock.
She wants to live.
Terrified, redirects crashing thoughts.
Nasty. Disgusting. Repulsive.
“Stuck in this horrifying body.
In my worthless mind.
Take a few more,
To escape.
Just for the night until a new sun.”
High pitched buzzing forces her out of the chemically induced, almost coma.
Dress, class, binge, pills.
She stands in the same spot,
With the same pills,
Caused by the same thing.
Eyes criticize pudding like thighs.
And her mind questions,
“Will life forever revolve around these pills?”
The little tablets become a part of the body.
And for tonight,
Her life will revolve around them.
Rising and falling,
In a chemically induced, almost coma.

Leaves tinted blue

By Amy Watkins

I feel most alive when everything around me is dying. Sometimes I wish to be a tree, so that I too can take off a few months of life and go dormant in my own mind. Search around my own weary roots to find and mend all that I've been desperately letting go. Feed my tiny toes into the earth and feel the gentle pulse of all that is quiet and jointly searching for peace.

When the time comes to resurface: my branches will sprout buds of a new promise, reaching up to a sky blanketed in every color found in her eyes. When it rains I'll catch each drop in the folds of my growing leaves and soak it into the dehydrated soil that is my prison. Thirsty roots will drink in blue rain. Growing leaves will reflect the sky. And I will be stained hopeful.