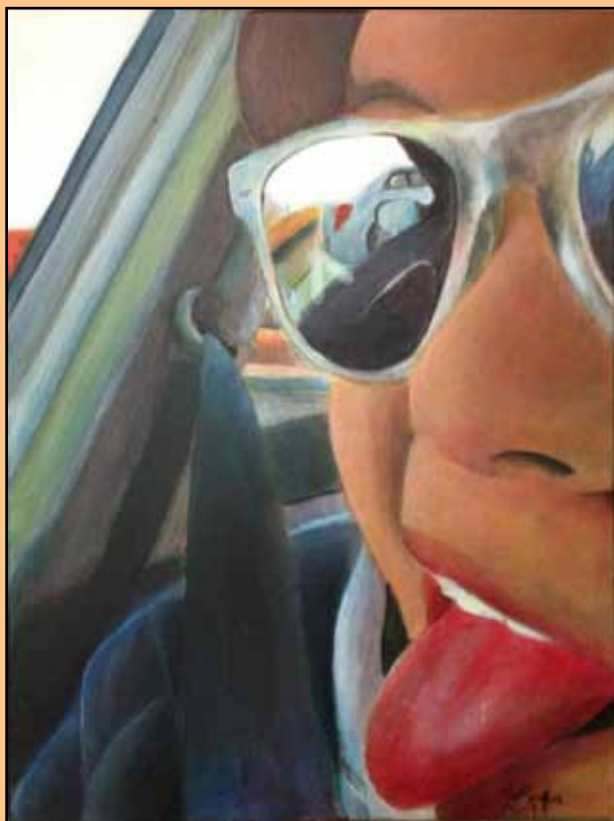


The Metropolitan



Little Girl Named Train Acrylic on Canvas Zagee Flores

A Magazine of Writing
by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2014

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by Students
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“So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness
the dancing.”

T. S. Eliot

The Metropolitan 2014

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The Metropolitan publishes all types of academic and literary writing, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive works, as well as creative prose and poetry. We encourage writings from across the disciplines and also welcome visual art. Our goal is to showcase the best of the many voices, styles, and subjects MCC writers and readers find meaningful and to support critical thinking, creativity, and expression at Metropolitan Community College.

The Metropolitan is published once a year. The print edition includes the best selections from the full web edition which can be read at <http://resource.mccneb.edu/metropolitan>

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2014 Writing Awards

For her essay “Between a Kingdom and a Country: A Tale of Two Immigrants,” Sue Maresch is the winner of The Metropolitan 2014 Prize for Student Writing, a 13.5-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up, Tina Piercy, is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for her story “Quiet.” The second runner-up, Elle Patocka, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for her poem “If she wanted you to know her.”

Between a Kingdom and a Country: A Tale of Two Immigrants *Sue Maresch*

My father, whom I call Baba, was named after the second King of Iraq, Ghazi ibin Faisal, crowned in 1933. My grandfather told me once that Baba was fascinated with airplanes as a child. When he grew older, he had dreams of riding the same biplane that King Ghazi rode over Iraq, a magical aviatic carpet that would fly him straight to America. “I was crazy for America,” Baba said. “Everything I read or saw on the television fascinated me. I wanted an education from America and to start a life here.”

One of five children of a retired Army soldier, my father was born in March of 1935, the year of the Great Uprising, and grew up in a small house in the center of town with his three sisters and only brother Ghassan. He never knew his brother George or the other babies who had died in infancy from malaria or yellow fever. Even trips to the holy city of Nazareth and the very streams from which the Blessed Virgin Mary drew water could not save them.

Being a shy boy, Baba was coddled and pampered by his mother, from whom he learned his soft mannerisms and generous nature, and from his father he developed a love for knowledge and sketching. He was quick of mind and excelled at his studies, but he was often scolded by his teachers for sketching in class. Short and awkward, he walked along the dirt roads of his hometown of Al Husn, Jordan, with his sketchbook under his arm and stopped from time to time to sketch the short, broad wings of the sparrow hawk nestled in a Valonia oak tree or the long, straight horns and tufted tail of the Arabian oryx grazing in a field of grass.

Baba sketched cityscapes of America from scenes he had seen on his black and white television, the Jordan Press, or on film. “The cinema was only ten cents back then,” he said. “I walked several miles just to catch an American film.” He was exhilarated by the prospect of living in America one day, where a man could pursue an honest life and not be denied his chance,

where its citizens may move freely within her vast borders without hindrance or fear, a land brimming with opportunity and freedom of choice. He waited for ten years to come to America, teaching English to elementary school children in our hometown to help support his parents and siblings. Finally, in the spring of 1963 at the age of 28, he left for America to fulfill his dream.

With 33 Jordanian dinars (the equivalent of 64 US dollars today) in his pocket and dress shirts in his suitcase ironed until they crackled like parchment, Baba set off to the great land of America, the first son to leave home. In his pocket, he carried a pack of Pall Mall cigarettes and a black-and-white photo of Sophia Loren with whom he was enamored after seeing her perform on screen in the 1953 film *Aida*. He left his family, but he carried with him their memory and the determination to succeed.

He first arrived in Omaha after following the advice of a family friend who lived here. He needed to work and save money for school, so he sold tapestries and artwork door-to-door with his friend Nabil. He then moved to Tempe, Arizona, and attended Arizona State University, where he declared a major in business. He continued to sketch in his free time and took up soccer as a sport. It was there at ASU that he developed another love: Western literature. He read with a great appetite the works of Chaucer, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Twain, Shakespeare, Hemingway, Poe, and Faulkner and of the great philosophers Descartes and Rousseau. I remember one day my father entered my bedroom as I was reading a novel for literature class in high school. "*Kwais kteer*," he said. "Very good. One day my child will grow up to teach fine literature like the book you are reading." He was referring to Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Although Baba was exposed to the great paintings of Van Gogh, Degas, Picasso, Caravaggio, and da Vinci, sketching came more naturally to him. On weekends when weather permitted, he visited one particular congenial outdoor café off campus where he would sip strong coffee and smoke his Pall Mall cigarettes while sketching the passersby and parade of pedestrians that filled the café—the great-breasted American women with wasp waists and the men who courted them with slicked back hair and

broad shoulders. In my mother, though, he found true beauty that came from devotion to her family, loyalty, generosity, and kindness. A sketch of my mother in her early twenties still hangs in their sitting room today. "So beautiful your mother was, more beautiful than Sophia," my father said with a childish smile. "That was a long time ago," my mother added, laughing.

My parents reminded me of how they came to marry. On a return visit home three years after my father arrived in America, my grandmother cried that her oldest son was still unwed. She feared the laxity of America, that Baba would be drawn to women not well suited for him, and that if he were to take an American wife, he would lose touch with his country and his family. This happened to one of my grandmother's neighbors, a charming woman named Khalood who lived next door. Her cousin settled in Texas, married a petite Hispanic woman named Esther, and never returned home.

Baba chose his distant cousin for a wife, a young girl of seventeen with shimmering black hair. My mother Amal, which means "hope" in Arabic, was the daughter of a poor, hardworking farming family of seven children. Mama told me the story once of how her family was so poor, she had to share her only pair of shoes with her mother. She walked to school every morning wearing the same pair of shoes that her mother had worn to work in the fields earlier that morning. When she returned home in the afternoons, she wore the shoes to complete her daily chores. She tended to the chickens that lived on the roof of the house and gathered milk from the goats to make cheese. On Fridays and Saturdays when school was not in session, her mother wore the shoes when baking bread in the oven, as the floor was so hot from the steam. On those days, my mother completed her outside chores in bare feet. "The ground was so hot in the summers, but what were we to do? We couldn't afford shoes for everyone," my mother said with a look of melancholy. Everyone slept on floor mats in the main room, as there were not enough beds or bedrooms. At her young age, my mother learned of hard work, how to keep a meticulous house, and how to make do when you have very little. My father asked my mother's family for her hand, and they were married three days later in early spring of 1966.

My father returned to America after their wedding, and five months later, after her visa arrived, my mother was reunited with him. “The airline lost my only piece of luggage,” she recalled. “I came here with only the black coat on my back.” My father met my mother in Chicago, and they settled in Omaha, as my father had made friends with a gentleman who owned a motel in downtown Omaha, in the area where Midtown Crossing stands today. Because my father had to work even more to support his new family, he did not finish his studies at ASU. My mother became lonely here. She was very young, spoke no English, had no friends nor family, and she missed home. She didn’t know what to do with herself while Baba was gone very long hours selling tapestries, sketches, and art pieces out of the trunk of his old Chevy Impala.

They rented a room by the week at the Hamilton Motel at 33rd and Farnam Streets. The motel was a neglected building with hallways that carried the overwhelming stench of stale cigarettes. The rented room housed a squeaky bed, a sofa and wobbly end table, a small armoire, a corner desk with a feeble lamp, and a kitchenette. When she was fatigued in the afternoons but couldn’t sleep, Mama sat outside on the front step of the motel with her rosary and recited prayers in Arabic, working the beads with her fingers while looking down at the shoes she missed sharing with her mother. She sucked on lemon slices to curb her morning nausea, and to pass time, she spent afternoons at the city park across from the motel, feeding the pigeons bits of bread. In the late evenings while she waited for Baba to return home for the day, she watched a black and white television set, but she could not understand the words.

Baba could no longer bear to hear her crying at night and decided to send her back home to be with family until he was more financially established and could afford a home of their own. At least then she would have an infant to care for, as she was pregnant with me and could take her mind off her sadness. He planned that my mother would stay with my paternal grandparents and aunt until after my birth, at which time we would return to America to be with my father. By then, he hoped to have a house, and my mother would be needed to arrange the house to make a suitable home for us.

My father was not present at my birth in the winter of 1967, as he was still in America. When I was nine months old, my mother left for America while I remained in the care of my aunt, who was unmarried and had no children of her own. I don’t remember the day my mother left, but I have some memory of how I passed the time while my parents were away. I helped my grandfather feed the chickens on the roof in the early mornings, just as my mother had as a child. I threw the gritty chicken feed, and dozens of birds scurried to the middle of the yellow grains. I loved how they flapped their wings and was amazed at how fast they could run when I chased them. My grandfather scooped me up into his arms, hoisted me onto his shoulders, and pointed to the West, toward the horizon, past the rooftops of the stone houses and the open woodlands of olive and pistachio trees, past the orchards plump with grapes. Baba and Mama were out there, beyond the horizon, somewhere beyond where the clouds disappeared and left only a faint blue light. I was finally reunited with my parents at the age of three, in the spring of 1970.

My father worked day hours at Western Electric, and my mother found a job at the downtown Ambassador Café serving the lunch and dinner crowd. She took the city bus to work, and my father picked her up in the evenings, as she does not drive to this day. Over the years, my parents struggled with raising seven children. They also sent \$100 each month, which was a lot of money in those days, to my uncle Ghassan, who was studying medicine in Italy, to help with his expenses. My father picked up overtime whenever he could, and there were times when my mother held two jobs. We lived a simple life without many material possessions. Christmases were spent enjoying a traditional meal, reading passages from the Bible, and listening to stories our parents told of their childhood. Our needs were always met: we had food, a roof over our heads, and good schools to attend. Although my parents made trips back home to see family, those trips were few and far between because of the expense of travel. In a span of twenty years, for instance, my mother returned to Jordan on two occasions to attend the funerals for her two brothers. My father returned home to baptize his only son and when his parents died.

According to the Census Bureau's 2009 American Community Survey, the US immigrant population was 38,517,234, or 12.5% of the total US population. The number of foreign born living in the United States increased by 1.5% (about 556,000 people) between 2008 and 2009. Upon hearing these statistics, my mother replied, "I imagine the hardest part for all of us is being away from family. You come here, and you are probably alone and know hardly anyone. You miss special occasions with your family; you miss your parents and brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews growing up. You miss your old life, but as hard as it was then, it is even harder now."

My father always held a very high regard for education. Although my mother did not finish high school, my father completed his undergraduate studies at Bellevue University. He did this while working full time, caring for seven children in the evenings while my mother worked, and driving my mother to the grocery store, doctor appointments, and other errands. I remember sitting at the kitchen table typing college papers for him on our Brother typewriter because he typed with only one finger. "On good nights, I slept about four hours," he said. "When your mother was working two jobs, I had to pick her up at midnight and be up at 4:00 a.m. to be to work by five. I am not sure how we did it, but we managed." My father taught me that you do what you have to do to accomplish your goals in life.

I recall a time when I was eighteen. We were in the midst of a snowstorm, and my car wouldn't start. As my father was helping me jump the battery, we sat in the warmth of my car, and I listened intently to him as he spoke to me. I had finished high school earlier that spring and had not declared a major at the university. I felt rather lost then, not knowing what direction my life should take or what course of study would be best for me. "I chose between my kingdom, where my family was, where my life was, and this country," he said with a somber look. "I came here to make a better life for all of us, and a better life for you means education." He placed his forefinger against his temple and said, "No one can ever take away what's in here. When you figure out what you want to do in this life, I will be standing right beside you."

Over the years, my father's health has greatly declined. He retired in August, 2001, and suffered a stroke a month later, two days before 9/11. He suffered two heart attacks, bleeding in the brain from a serious fall, and worsening dementia. His memory remains strong for past events, but he does not recall recent events. The day following my interview with him about his life, he did not remember having been interviewed. He does not remember that I have returned to college and that I wish to be an English professor so I may instill in my future students a love for the English language and literature just like he did. When I remind him, he claps and says, "Good job, good job. I love to hear that," and then holds my hand tightly. This always makes me weep.

As I sit here writing, I imagine what it would have been like for my father had he not immigrated to this country. He could not have publicly denounced his King without fear of imprisonment. He could not have walked publicly with the woman who would become my mother had they not been betrothed or engaged. And I wonder what life would have been like for me.

In the 49 years that my parents have lived in this country, my father obtained a fine education and retired from a company that provided an honest living with wages that helped to support seven children, now all grown and successful. My parents are free to worship, vote, speak and assemble along with the other liberties they are afforded as citizens of the United States under its Constitution. They are free to simply be happy. These are liberties to which we are all entitled as citizens.

I am looking at a particular photograph now of me and my parents taken shortly after we were reunited in America. Set behind a grey backdrop, my mother is carrying me in her arms with my father to her right. She is wearing a black coat with black faux fur at the ends of the sleeves. Her hair is jet black and shiny and curled just at the ends. She has large brown eyes, a slight smile and a porcelain face with a beautiful cleft in her chin. My father has black hair on the sides of his head and wisps of hair at the top that are combed to the right. He has dark features with brown eyes, small and kind, and is wearing a black suit and

tie. I am in the middle wearing a brown sweater, the ends of a white undershirt peeking through. I have short black curly hair, neatly combed and parted to the side, and I am wearing gold post earrings. I am not smiling; rather, I have a look of curiosity.

We had no idea then what was likely or what was possible.

Quiet

Tina Piercy

Warren strolled home on a brightly sunlit morning with his coffee in his wrinkled left hand and a newspaper tucked up under his arm. The hot coffee cup in his hand reminded him how he and his late wife of 48 years, Bennie, had walked this same brownstone-lined block almost every morning together, admiring the vibrant flower boxes and planters of each building.

As he reached the worn, familiar steps of his apartment building, quick foot falls came up from behind him. As Warren reached the first step of his apartment building, a young lady stumbled into him as she clumsily changed direction from the sidewalk to the apartment building steps. His right shoulder jetted forward as she pushed past him, and his white, wavy hair flipped over his forehead. Warren clenched his coffee cup, worried steaming coffee would scald him, and grabbed the concrete ledge with his free hand. He recognized her from behind as his upstairs neighbor. He didn't know her name, only that she lived in apartment E7, directly above his D7. From behind, her blond, shoulder-length hair tried to stay styled, gathered together high on her head, but some of the hair didn't want to cooperate and seemed almost pulled out from the restraint. Her extremely short dress was wrinkled and showed her long tan legs. She grasped the penny-colored door knob, lost her grip, and stumbled backwards. She caught herself with her backside and hand on the rough concrete ledge railing of the stairs.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!" Warren seethed in her direction.

Gathering herself, she balanced on her four-inch lucite heels, clutched the knob with a firmer grip, and wobbled through the big red doors to the apartment building without a look back. "Damn kids," Warren sputtered to no one.

He took his ritual steps back through the two large doors and one step at a time the five floors of stairs to his apartment. As he had gotten older, these fifty-eight stairs up and fifty-eight stairs down consistently put him in a foul, old-man mood.

Since his Bennie had died, he snapped nasty replies to innocent questions and got frustrated easily. His cantankerous disposition pushed friends and family away. He spent most of his time in the apartment where his only son grew up before leaving for college, never to return but for visits every five years, where Bennie died, and where he would probably die as well.

He held tight to the wood railing up each step to his apartment, stopping on the third floor landing between flights to catch his breath. Out of breath, he didn't rush to pull his keys out of his tan, pleated pants pocket to finally open his apartment door. He set his coffee on the doily-covered end table between two arm chairs and the newspaper on the stained footstool in front of the unused chair next to him. He sat in his once overstuffed chair, the fabric on the arms worn thin, watching his favorite TV show, *Wheel of Fortune*. The box-tubed TV with the three channels crackled. He and Bennie used to watch the show together, holding hands between their two stuffed arm chairs. Warren admired Bennie for how quickly she could always get the answers to the puzzles before each contestant could.

Midway through the show, Warren heard angry voices from the other side of his old, worn apartment door. His chest tightened in frustration at the interruption of the show. He pushed up from his sunken impression in his arm chair and squinted through the peephole but saw no one. He cautiously opened the door to investigate as if a ghost might float by him. At the end of the hallway, right before the start of the stairs that led to the fifth floor, was the blond-haired girl from apartment E7 from that morning. But now, her blond hair had escaped the tie and lay ratted over her shoulders. Warren was about to give the young lady another scolding, but he stutter-stepped exiting his doorway. Almost involuntarily, he stopped. A man stood next to the young lady with his hand grasped around her upper arm, his knuckles white, her skin red and swollen between his white knuckles. Black streaks ran down her cheeks, curving past her chin, down her neck. Her eyes looked at the floor. The man moved in closer to her, his teeth clenched, jaw muscles flexing, saying something through his gritted teeth that Warren couldn't hear.

Warren hadn't seen this man around his neighborhood before. This guy had an Italian Mafia look about him. Slicked back black hair, expensive-looking pinstriped blue suit, white button-down dress shirt, and dress shoes that Warren thought he could see his reflection in if he were closer.

"Hey!" Warren blurted out with urgency in his voice, shocked these words had come from his mouth. "You two need to take your lovers' quarrel somewhere else. My hallway is no place to be doing...this...whatever it is you two are doing here."

The man jerked and turned. His eyes squinted at Warren, and his white knuckles pinked up as his hand relaxed from around her arm. The young lady exhaled, sniffled, and wiped the black vertical stripes to horizontal smears. Her eyes in a trance towards the ground, she wrenched from his weakened grip and ran up the stairs.

"Hey ol' man, we got no beef with you," the Mafia type said. "Just a lil' disagreement with me an' my girl is all."

"Well, keep it out of my hallway," Warren said as he gave a get lost motion with a hand flick.

"Take it easy ol' man," he said with an eerie smile, taking one step towards Warren in his apartment threshold.

Warren felt goose bumps over his wrinkly, gray-haired arms. "Umph!" And he retreated to his apartment, where he felt secure behind his two dead bolt locks, door knob lock, and the bar lock across the worn door. He had known men like that in his younger days. Men who were rough with their girlfriends. But his Bennie was treated with the respect he felt all women should be treated with. Doors opened and chairs pulled out.

Warren grumbled his way back to his old overstuffed chair to finish the *Wheel of Fortune* show. One spin into the next contestants' turn, there were lumbering foot steps above his head. He feared his ceiling tiles were about to crash down around him. What were they doing up there? More shuffles and thuds, angry muffled voices.

Warren angrily lurched from his chair, his heart beating faster. His breath labored as he marched to the kitchen. Swiftly, he grabbed his broom by the wooden handle and marched back to the noisy intrusion that came from above his head.

"Damnit! Cut out the racket up there!" he yelled with a quiver in his voice, thrusting the end of the wooden broomstick at the ceiling three times. "Damnit!" he said breathlessly. He tried to catch his breath, closed his eyes, took in a deep breath, then let it out. The broomstick, still in his hand, shook. He opened his eyes, looked around as if he could hear better with his eyes searching for the noise, but heard none. He scowled at the ceiling. His short temper had given his ceiling a couple of round, white, chalked indentations, with the help of the wooden broomstick.

"That's right," he proudly mumbled as he repositioned himself in his chair with the broom dropped on the floor next to him. He squinted at the ceiling, waiting for a response to his parental thumps of the broomstick. He heard nothing. "That's right," he said.

He cautiously settled back in his chair to catch the end of *Wheel of Fortune*. He wished Bennie were in the chair next to him, holding his hand and guessing all the right answers as he beamed at her wide-eyed with pride. But the chair next to him was empty, and he couldn't figure out the answer to the 'place' puzzle with only two empty letters left.

Warren didn't care about furniture updates. His old, faded chair had character. Or new paint to brighten up the coffee-colored walls. He didn't care that his plates, bowls, and glasses were all chipped, that his frayed bedspread was thinned and pilly, or that the drapes were stained and thin.

Warren startled awake, confused. He wasn't aware of when or how long he had been asleep in his chair. The sun washed gold and red over his thin curtains. A brunette robotic news reporter on TV reported about another murder being investigated in the city. He slowly raised his hands to his face, wiped crusty sleep from his eyes, and yawned.

Clank. Bang.

Warren scowled at the apartment door. "Not again," he gruffed as he pushed himself out of his chair where his arthritic old bones had sat still for hours. Teeth clenched and lips pursed, Warren was ready for round two with the young lady and her

slick Mafia boyfriend. The locked door slowed him down. His hand shook as his frustration built. Two dead bolts, locked door knob, and locked bar. Out of breath with anger, he snatched the door knob and flung open the door, ready to deliver a second scolding.

Warren stood motionless in his apartment doorway as the EMT workers rolled a gurney past his groggy eyes. The telltale sign of death shown bright white just as he'd seen on TV shows like *Matlock* and *NCIS*.

"What happened?" Warren gasped at a clean-cut man dressed in a dark blue uniform with a red canvas bag with a white medic symbol over his shoulder.

"The young lady upstairs was killed, sir."

"Oh," was all Warren could manage to eek out of his tightly constricted voice box.

He had just seen the young blond with her greasy Mafia boyfriend in the hallway. Now, her slender form under the crisp, white sheet created a lump in his throat he hadn't felt since Bennie had died eight years earlier.

He stood frozen in his darkened apartment doorway. Police officers and more EMT workers gathered in the hallway, crisp dark blue uniforms blurring together in Warren's narrowed vision. A flash of red snapped him out of his tunnel vision trance when the slimy Mafia-type boyfriend that the now-dead young lady had been arguing with just outside his apartment door was pushed past Warren. Glistening red liquid splotted down the front of the once-crisp, blue pinstriped suit and white dress shirt. Warren locked eyes with the man, trapped in the blood-soaked man's arrogant stare. A vacant sensation washed over Warren from his throat to his stomach. His knees shook under his tan pleated pants.

"Hey ol' man, she's quiet now," he boasted, nodding his head towards Warren. "She won't be botherin' you no more."

If she wanted you to know her

Elle Patocka

When I die,

I want you to go through my belongings.

All of them.

Which should take you longer than you'd enjoy.

You won't find much for yourself.

I am beyond sure you will bypass the most joy I lived through.

The small tokens of my life that can't be found in boxes

or under the heaps of unfolded clothing.

Neither under the springs where I used to lay.

The go-to top closet shelf,

you won't find anything there.

Nothing of my life in the frames upon the shelves.

Even the bookmarks of letters within the pages of the grandest
chapters I read.

Not even on the pages I dog eared.

You want to find my joy?

Don't forget the pockets.

The jackets, coats and sweaters that hold the stitches of my youth
and adulthood,

leftover dinner mints, half pieces of gum, from moments of
enjoying fresh breath,

for my own liking or perhaps awaiting another's lips.

Pins for hair, ticket stubs from films seen recently and years
before, or half-filled Chapsticks.

A poker chip, Hallmark cards ripped to pieces with vulgar spew,
soda-pop tabs and brew lids,

Fish hooks, dried out cherry and olive pits, napkins—with
writing and some with bodily sickness.

Pen caps and threads, used-up bandages, notes that brought us
away from the edge.

The jackets that jingle with loose change.

When worn, one can feel that there are objects within the back.
Insert your hand and find that I took no mind of ripped seams or
lost mementos.

Almonds once covered in chocolate, delicately sucked clean.

Werther's of the original kind, paper clips, cough drops, flasks
and numbers to be dialed,

Chamomile tea ready to be brewed.

To the death within pockets

is what some might say.

A place which stowed away my moments.

To keep something for an unclouded day. You see,
it's the pockets that kept me sane all those years.

They always gave me a small place to hide.

The Rook

William Sharp

Mason closed File #5 and moved it to the top of the stack in the upper left-hand corner of his desk. He reached down to his right, opened a drawer, and pulled out a half-empty bottle of Macallan 12 Single Malt. Over his left shoulder sat a trash can filled with brown-stained Dixie cups. Mason plucked one from the top and with his finger quickly swirled the inside, removing any old residue. He grabbed the bottle, inverted it, and filled the cup to the rim. He grabbed the cup and shot the scotch down his throat while he collapsed in his chair with his arms relaxed over his head. His office was in the northwest corner on the second floor of a five-story building in downtown Chicago at the cross streets of Birkens Avenue and Armour Street. The flip dial clock that sat atop a filing cabinet in the right corner read 11:47 p.m. Storms had just begun to roll in, and the rain punished the half-cracked window behind him. The calendar that lay in the center of his desk under a glass force field read June 27, 1979. It had now been 23 days since the first murder. He could still remember walking up the stairs of the abandoned building with the stench of rotting pig carcasses and seeing the remnants of a woman suspended in midair, strung up like a puppet over a blood-stained mattress lying flat on the floor. This had been the worst murder case he had ever seen, and a little over three weeks later, there were eight more to follow.

There was a knock at the door. Mason quickly scurried to hide the liquor at his feet.

"Come in."

The door slowly opened with a screeching noise, revealing a large, overweight man who stood in the corridor. It was Captain Abrams. He had been the one who'd hired Mason right out of school after he'd received his criminal psychology degree at the University of Chicago. Abrams stood about 6'4" and weighed well over 250 pounds. Once a former football star, he'd turned cop after a bilateral knee fracture ended his career prematurely.

"How are the case studies going?" Abrams asked, moving his body a few feet inside the doorway.

"Better, sir, if the bureau would quit stamping their fingers all over my crime scenes before I have a chance to catalog evidence."

After the fourth victim, the FBI had decided to step in and help out. Their young agents, however intelligent and motivated, were inexperienced in chronological order of crime scene manipulation.

"All right. I'll see what I can do and follow up with you tomorrow morning," Abrams said while he turned for the door. "Oh, by the way," he added, sticking his head halfway back inside, "Forensic says they have a match on one of the prints, and it will be ready in the morning." Abrams closed the door, and the sound of his footsteps echoed in the distance and out of the hallway.

After a few moments, Mason retrieved the bottle, poured another shot, and consumed it in the same manner as the first. Mason laid files numbered one through eight out over the top of his desk. He reached to the inside of his black overcoat and pulled out a pack of Checker smokes. He packed them against the inside of his left palm, ripped the plastic wrap, and tore off the silver metallic paper. He pulled out a single cigarette, lit it simultaneously while he pressed it to his lips, and then tucked the pack back in place. He pushed against the arms of his chair and stood into position overlooking all cases while smoke smothered his head and rose slowly to the ceiling, lingering at the top, just like the woman lingered in the photos before him. The room became humid with the warm rain that blew in through the window, which was now half fogged. Sweat beads began to form atop his head, traced down the side of his cheeks, and accumulated below his chin before dripping on the victims below. In each crime scene, there was one similar identifiable piece. A rook. In file one, it rested at the base of the bed. In file two, it laid in her mouth. Three, on her foot. Four, in her hand. Five, six, seven, and eight, it was stuck in the victims' eyes and ears. But why? In his undergrad studies, Mason once wrote a paper on the ideology of the rook and the significance it played with the psychological aspects of the human mind. It represented

a term of power or total greatness. This clue of trademark was much more than the outlining of a killer, but instead it was used as a legacy. Mason believed this to be a self-obsession.

Before moving to Chicago, Mason had attended a community college in Missouri. During his final semester there, a similar event took place. A young woman was brutally murdered in her dorm room. The investigation lasted for months, and there was never any arrest made in the case. This event eventually sparked his departure from Missouri and to Chicago, where he used it as inspiration for further pursuing his career.

The telephone in the upper right-hand desk corner began to ring. Mason gazed up at the clock, 12:05 a.m. He was puzzled, not only about the fact that it was after midnight but that someone might know he was still there.

"Detective Mason," he answered.

"Mason, it's Abrams."

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Go to sleep, Mason. You're too tired," replied Abrams.

"Come again, sir."

"Go to sleep, Mason. You're too tired. You know the truth."

"What, sir? What truth? Who is this?" Mason said, coming off very hostile now.

"Do you not want to see the truth?"

Click.

The line went dead, and the dial tone now echoed in Mason's ear. He replaced the phone back on the holder and grabbed the bottle of scotch. He pressed the bottle right to his lips and took three slugs before he returned it to the table. His vision started to double as the room became hazed from the dim light. He folded both arms on the front of his desk and dropped his forehead down into the center of them. *I'm going crazy*, he thought. *What the hell was that?*

Mason lifted his head and gathered all of the files into a single stack. On the floor to his right was a worn, black briefcase with a gold four-digit number combination. He reached down and grabbed it, placing the case next to the files on the desk. Entering the numbers five-three-seven-eight, Mason popped the lock and raised the top until it became vertical. One by one, he

carefully placed each individual file on top of another. He closed the lid and snapped both locks into place. He grabbed the bottle of scotch and pressed one more swig to his mouth and down his throat before he returned it to the bottom right drawer. He stepped out from his chair and tucked it under his desk. Mason grabbed his case and started to make his way from around his desk and to the office door. It had been a long night, and he was getting very tired and a little drunk. Whatever his captain had to say to him would have to wait until morning for an explanation. He cupped the doorknob and started turning it counterclockwise. *Ring, ring, ring* came from the phone for the second time.

Mason, determined to find out who was calling, executed an about-face, picked up the line, and held it to his ear. He did not say anything this time. He just waited.

"Hello, dear," a female voice came over the phone.

"Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth was Mason's former wife who had left him two years prior. Mason, after a series of very difficult psychological diagnoses, had fallen into a depression where he developed a mood disorder and an extreme alcohol addiction that led to the collapse of his marriage. His addictive personality just couldn't let go, so there was a restraining order placed on him, and he had not seen her nor heard her voice since.

"Yes, Mason."

"Why are you calling me?"

"The truth, they want the truth, Mason."

"What the hell are you talking about? Who is this?"

Just like the call before it, the phone went dead, and a dial tone echoed in his ears. As he moved it back to its spot, he noticed the cord coming from the jack on the side of the phone. He reached down and pulled on the line. His fingers followed it down the side of his desk and behind a small side cabinet. He grabbed the cabinet at the top and with his foot at the bottom, nudged it back a few inches. The end of the line lay on the floor with no connection to power at all. *That's impossible*. Mason's heart was racing as he started to pace back and forth in front of his own door. He reached down and grabbed the phone, lifting it above his head and smashing it to the ground. Particles of plastic

and wire dispersed across the floor. He walked back around his desk, pulled his chair back out, and sat down. He placed his black case back on the center of his desk. Mason reached down to his left to pull out his bottle of Macallan 12 for yet another drink. He opened the drawer, his eyes widened, and his mouth slowly cocked to the side.

The bottle of liquor was in the bottom right drawer. He had always put it in the right drawer. He never went in the left drawer. Mason reached in and pulled out a clear plastic bag and set it next to the case on his desk. He entered his combination, opened it, and removed all eight files. He moved the files into the trash and out of his inner coat pocket removed his lighter. Mason lit the corner of the files and sat back in his chair looking at the bag. He reached inside and pulled out a single rook and set it on top of his worn, black case. The smoke filled the room and carried out of the window behind him. Flames rose to about three feet before slowly dwindling down into small embers and ash. Mason grabbed a Thermos full of day-old cold coffee that resided in the back corner of the room by the window and poured it over the top of what was left of the once raging inferno. Ashes rose like fireworks lighting up a gray sky, sending a smell of plastic, carbine, and vanilla into the already polluted room. Mason pulled a pen, along with a single sheet of official, documented manila paper out of the center drawer of his desk. He laid the paper flat on the desk and began to write....

The weaker presence that resides in me is named Mason Kane, but my true identity is Vladimir Kosovo. The first time I killed was while I was attending college. Mason was always the brain, but he let me out every now and again. I loved it so much. I can still remember the feeling I had, stringing the wire through her body, in her mouth, and out her eyes. I managed to take special care not to damage any of her natural beauty. It had taken hours to correctly assemble my creation. Once I had finished laying her new metallic veins, I raised her to the ceiling, like a puppet master pulling her strings. I licked the blood that rolled down the cords and rubbed it all over my face and hands. Mason never trusted me again after that. He locked me up, and then, over the years, he forgot where he put the key. I became a bad dream, a dream that never really existed. He thought he could

silence me? Through his alcoholic tendencies and self-induced comas, I had managed to find a way out. While Mason would be asleep, his body would be awake. I had returned. Picking up where I left off, I found my first victim walking alone outside his apartment. It was like riding a bike. The taste returned like it never left, but technique took time. That was okay. I had several more attempts to perfect it. I was very careful to lay fraudulent prints all over each woman, but it was only by chance that Mason ended up with the case. How perfect. So I concealed my actions even from him but made sure I left a clue, a piece to the puzzle that would allow me to finish my work and lead him to my overall existence once more. I will not make the same mistake he did. The key to his tomb in which I locked him no longer exists. I am Vladimir Kosovo. I am the Rook.

Vladimir left the note on the desk and exited the office. Turning one last time, looking back, a faint smile rose upon his face as he disappeared into the darkness like a broom to his very footsteps.

A Green-eyed Girl

Janet Slottje

It was an average day in the fall of 2002. My seven-year-old daughter, Abby, was just getting let out of school at 3:10, and I was waiting to pick her up in a green, two-door, beat-up Toyota. It was still nice enough outside to have the windows rolled down. Kids piled out of the school, so I knew she would be out soon. I wondered what my other two kids were doing. She saw me and smiled and waved as she got closer to my car.

"Hey, sweetheart, how was your day?" I asked her when she got buckled up in the passenger seat next to me.

"It was good, Daddy. We played kickball at recess today, and my team won!" Abby replied.

"Wow! Way to go, sweetheart! That's three times this week you've been on the winning team," I said as we started to leave the school.

Abby looked up at me with big green eyes like a dog begging for a treat and asked as nicely as possible, "So, do you think we can go to Walmart and get those shoes we saw the other day? These shoes are really starting to get worn out and dirty."

"Well, I don't see why not! You can't be the best kickball player if you don't have the right shoes, so to Wally World we go," I said. I could see the grass and dirt stains on her blue jeans as I leaned over to grab the Budweiser by her feet. I put it there because it was too big to put in the cup holder, and I didn't want people to see it when they drove by. I twisted the forty open and took a few gulps, sighed, burped, then placed the beer between my legs, so I wouldn't have to keep reaching down by Abby's feet. It was my first beer of the day, but it certainly wouldn't be my last.

I took my time getting to Wally World, so I could smoke another cigarette. Drinking beer always made me want one. Smoking Marlboro Lights 100's was like smoking air, so I smoked them often. Abby enjoyed looking out the window as we drove. Every time I glanced over her way, all I would see is the back of her blond little head. Her skinny little legs were just

as skinny as mine. She was a spitting image of me besides the freckles that masked her face. When I would think about Abby and who she was going to be, I couldn't help but reach for the bottle and take a few more gulps. I didn't want her to see me like this all the time. I didn't want to fail as a dad to Abby. Abby deserved better than me. So saying no to her was very difficult because I only wanted to see her happy.

We pulled into the parking lot of Wally World, and I parked by the auto entrance on the north side of the building, away from the main traffic in the front of the store. Abby looked up at me again and smiled while she waited for my cue to get out, and I could see the excitement on her beautiful little face.

"You ready, sweetheart?" I asked her with a yellow smile.

"Oh yeah, Daddy. I am!" she replied. She almost sprinted to the door from the car, but she always kept me in eyesight. My long legs didn't have trouble keeping up, but damn that girl was fast. I had finished about half of that forty on the way there, so I was feeling a bit buzzed and really good. The cigarette I smoked covered up my beer breath pretty well, so I didn't feel paranoid walking into the busy store. We made our way to the shoe department, and Abby walked down the aisle with her hand running across the other shoe boxes until she started hopping up and down when she spotted the pair of Champions she wanted.

"Try them on, sweetheart. You need to make sure they fit," I instructed her.

"All right, Daddy," she said.

I watched her skip to the bench, and she threw her old shoes on the ground like they were trash and tore into the new shoe box. I couldn't help but smile because I knew she was happy, and seeing her happy made me happy.

"They fit perfectly!" she exclaimed.

"All right then, let me see." I knelt down in front of her and pressed my thumb on the top of the shoe where her big toe was supposed to be, and there was about an inch gap between her toe and the front end of the shoe. "You're right, sweetheart. There's enough room for your feet to grow, so let's get these."

She smiled really big at me, then at the shoes, then back at me. I could feel the love bursting out of her pores like the beer

bursting out of my own. She packed the shoes back in the box nice and neat, and we made our way to the checkout. I couldn't buy her anything else because I had to be cautious about how I spent my money. It wasn't mine after all. It was my mom's because I didn't have a real job. I had been living in my mom's basement since after I got divorced in '93. Abby was conceived right before the divorce. She didn't have to witness the abuse and mayhem I caused my other two children and my ex-wife during the fourteen years I lived in that house. I was too worried about getting hammered to pay attention to who was most important, my kids. Abby was lucky enough that she didn't have to witness an abusive father. She was my last chance to prove that I wasn't a complete failure. Abby skipped to the cashier.

"Is that it for ya, honey?" said the overweight, plain lady behind the counter.

"Yep, that's it!" Abby said. "Blue is my favorite color!" she exclaimed while the lady checked the size of each shoe to make sure they were the same.

"These shoes look awesome! I bet you can run faster than anyone else at school with these! Now just remember to take care of them, and did you thank your father?" The lady smiled at me. I chuckled.

"Oh yes, thank you so much, Daddy!" she yelped. I felt like a good dad. I felt like I was finally doing something good for my kid.

I needed another drink, so as soon as we got back in the car I chugged the rest of the forty. I lit up another cigarette and got the little black comb from my pocket and combed back my balding blond hair like John Travolta in *Grease*. We started to make our way back on Highway 75 south towards my mom's house. I threw the empty Budweiser out the window so there wouldn't be any evidence. I saw that Abby was clinging onto the shoe box like her life depended on it. I looked at her for a minute and took in all of her beauty. She was so beautiful for a little seven-year-old tomboy. I knew she would grow up to be something really amazing for the world. My head started to spin, and my buzz had turned into something more, and I knew I couldn't go back to my mom's house drunk, especially with Abby.

Instead of getting off at the Bellevue exit, I continued south towards Plattsmouth because I figured I would just drive until I felt sober enough to go home. Abby seemed a little confused and glanced at me with a concerned look on her face. I smiled and winked at her, and she just turned back to the window.

I turned up the radio and started to jam out to a rock song that was playing. I was too drunk to remember the words, but it felt great grooving along. Abby got a kick out of it and started to giggle at me. I was feeling really good. I loved feeling good and wondered why I couldn't feel like this all the time. After the song ended, it went to commercials, so I turned the volume back down. My buzz started to fade while we arrived in Plattsmouth. I started to feel very drowsy, so I lit up another cigarette to wake myself up a bit. I followed the main road for a bit then turned slightly right up a hill because I knew I was getting drowsier. Things went black....

"Dad! Dad, stop!" Abby kept repeating.

"Oh shit!" I said as I slammed on the breaks. We sat there out of breath for several minutes. I was confused. "What the hell just happened? Are you okay?"

"We almost hit that dumpster. I'm fine, Dad. Let's just go home," Abby responded in a calm voice.

"Yeah, good idea. Let's go home. What do you want for dinner?" I asked her as I lit another cigarette.

As I Recall

Luke Buller

I sat and I waited
On our two front steps.

Concrete chipping away from the salt,
But why fix it?
On this cold, Friday evening,
The second weekend of the month.

The sun was still shining, however. I
Stayed out of the shade for warmth.

Beautiful colors of leaves flutter around me.
They remind me of butterflies,
Such beauty and grace.

I run up to the sidewalk and look down both ways.
The dead trees hang and bow down to the street.
They, too, are waiting,
To welcome him, I'm sure.

I run back down the stairs and fall in the grass.
The wind is a like an ocean.
Its current controls me.

Such innocence now, as I recall.
Jeans torn on both knees,
To be young again. Just for a day.
Before scars were found deeper than the skin.

A phone rings inside.
I walk slowly towards the screen.
My mother hangs up, looks at me,
And mirrors my face.
There is no happiness here.

Contributors' Notes

Luke Buller now attends UNO, studying English. He was born and raised in Omaha but wouldn't mind eventually getting out to see the world. He is a huge fan of sports, football in particular, Notre Dame football to be exact. He loves to relax and listen to music. The Eagles, Led Zeppelin, and Tool are some of his favorites. He also loves sitting down and watching a good movie.

Zagee Flores never got serious about her art until her sophomore year of high school, but art was the best decision she ever made. Photorealism is everything to her in any medium.

Kris Freeman graduated from Dana College in Blair, Nebraska in 1975. She received her Master of Science from UNO in 1981. She retired from the Omaha Public Schools in 2009 after 34 years of teaching. A strong proponent of lifelong learning, she has enjoyed returning to the classroom as a student. She loves interacting with fellow students of all ages. Kris has always loved the creative arts and is now taking the opportunity to develop new talents. She enjoys drawing and painting, gardening, reading, golfing, interior decorating, carpentry, and playing the piano.

Sue Maresch was born in the northern Kingdom of Jordan and immigrated to America as a child. She is dual-enrolled at Metropolitan Community College and the University of Illinois, Springfield, where she is pursuing a BA in English. She plans to pursue graduate study to earn an MFA in Creative Writing so she may one day return to MCC and teach. She was so fascinated by her Children's and Young Adult Literature class at UIS that she is currently working on a picture book of children's literature entitled *The Cupcake King*, which she plans to self-publish this summer. When she's not writing, Sue enjoys a variety of interests including Renaissance art, travel, and philanthropy.

Elle Patocka is a Czech lady born and raised in South Omaha. She has attended both Metropolitan Community College and Bellevue University to finish her degree in Communication Arts. She stays active with changing career paths, stand-up comedy, playing for the Omaha Rollergirls, announcing and interviewing racecar drivers at Eagle Raceway, road tripping on a whim, learning the ukulele, acting, baking cupcakes, reading all genres of literature, and writing whilst enjoying a cup of tea in her hammock when the weather permits, which is where “If she wanted you to know her...” and “She Stopped Breathing” came to life.

Tina Piercy is an Iowa native who, after working twenty years in the financial industry, became a stay at home mom of “Irish twins,” now 10 and 11 years old. For the past five years, she has worked towards her associate’s degree in liberal arts and dream job of becoming a writer. In 2014, she became the first person in her family to earn a college degree. She lives in Omaha with her very supportive husband, son, and daughter. She likes to golf, crochet, sew, write, read, and be active in her kids’ school. To fulfill her passion, Tina would love a job writing for a local publication. A blog might be in her future as well.

William Sharp, an Omaha native, is in his last last quarter of study at Metropolitan Community College. He will be transferring to UNO for his undergraduate degree. His eventual goal is to become a doctor.

Janet Slottje was born in Omaha and raised in Bellevue, Nebraska. She has lived in the same house her whole life with her mom and two older siblings. She was the first kid of three who went to college right after graduating from high school. She hopes to be accepted into the Dental Assisting Program at Metropolitan Community College in the fall of 2015. She loves reading, especially on her Kindle. Renting movies and watching TV shows on Netflix are her next two favorite things to do besides eating.

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