Metamorphoses
A Journal of Literature and Art
2006
Metamorphoses is published annually by Cerro Coso Community College and features both established and emerging twenty-first century voices and visions from a variety of perspectives. Met publishes poetry, short stories, creative non-fiction, reviews, literary criticism, and fine art in any medium producible in print. Special consideration is given to Cerro Coso students, alumni, and community members and to pieces which highlight in some way the Eastern Sierra, Indian Wells Valley, Mojave, and Kern Valley regions of California.

Submissions are welcome year round. To submit writing or art, visit www.cerrocoso.edu/metamorphoses

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At last, the afternoon is gone. The sun
Is low enough behind the mountains now
To raise the blinds. The ragged peaks allow
A glow to light the landscape, like the dun
Of lampshades muting bulbs too bright alone.
My yard, composed of white and speckled rocks,
Has kinship with the purple ridge that blocks
The sun—too little flora, too much stone.
The weeds that, here and there, proclaim belief
In Darwin’s rule (survival of the fittest)
Do so half-heartedly. Each yellowed twist,
Thrown prostrate, thirsting, blindly seeks relief.
If this were not the desert, I could hope
For green in March to tint the rocky slope.
Petrarchan Sonnet
By Kevin S. Howe

Come then, my love, beneath this canopy
Of spreading pines adrift with morning dew.
Lie here and let the rising sun imbue
Our hearts with ardor. Lean against this tree—
Or better still, incline your heart to me,
Reclining on my body as you do,
And let me chant a canticle to you
Of carefree love and jovial, amorous glee.
Amid the forest, bid me draw the cork,
And let the pungent sweetness of the wine
Intoxicate our bodies, as our soul
(As much a unity as every fork
In every tree above us—neither mine
Nor yours, but ours) ascends, a seamless whole.
Some Days it’s Hard to See the Sun
By Melinda Carroll

A graffitied bridge curved
over a usually dry creek bed
where water flowed freely
on this day.
Tires gripped pavement,
retracing beloved memories,
driving towards a quaint seaside town
nestled on the Central Californian coast.
This day,
one of many in an unrelenting heat wave,
made me believe Jeff Tweedy when he sang,
“We fell in love in the key of C.”
Just leaving Bakersfield was possibility.
Feel that air… breathe!
Here, bad air-quality days don’t exist.
Smiles graced faces
as happy hands glided in the wind—
we were almost there.

Beachcombers and tourists mobbed
a gray seashore with umbrellas and surfboards;
stood in line for clam chowder bread bowls
at Splash Café.
This day,
Pismo was overcast and cold.
In life,
some days it’s hard to see the sun.
I walked down to the waters edge,
wiggled wet sand between my toes,
let the ocean’s waves wash away the strain of many past days.  
We bought Hot Lix cinnamon suckers from a famous candy store that had candied apples behind the counter.  
The day before, a friend had just said to me, “Chicago is a machine—it doesn’t know candied apples.” Yet this seaside town dealt in candy-coated dreams.

Fishermen fished from a wooden pier that jutted from the shore out into the sea.  
Surfers rode waves and bobbed in the deep as beach patrol yelled, “The tide is coming in!” This day was almost surreal.  
I lay on a beach towel listening—listening to the sound of waves crashing, children’s laughter, and sea gulls. Content in the moment.  
This day was peaceful.  
We waited in line for famous old-fashioned cinnamon rolls only to be disappointed when the lady in front of us bought the last three. This day was almost over.  
Sulking, we headed home.  
Pressing down a curved highway, etching this day’s memories,
we headed home.
Pressing down a curved highway,
etching this day’s memories
among the beloved.
Red Rock Canyon
Conté Crayon on Arches Paper
13”x 21”
By Joan Desmond
NOTE: The following account was written in 1991 when my two-year commitment as a Peace Corps Volunteer teacher in Sierra Leone, West Africa was about to come to an end. I wanted to reflect on my experience so that I wouldn’t forget the important details, and to let family and friends know that I was alive, well, and about to return to the States.

Letter from West Africa May 1991

Hello one last time from West Africa:

It’s been raining since early morning with great booming thunder and waves of rain that sweep along the open land, sending all into their houses and leaving the area quiet and peaceful as if at rest while the healing rain washes the trees free of six months of dust and soaks the freshly turned soil, making the cycle complete once again and the ground ready for another season of planting. All this makes for a very conducive environment to sit at my typewriter and do some reflecting. This letter has been moving around in my head since last October, but I could never quite get it to come together in some sort of readable form. It just seemed to want to be a book with myriad details of the sum total of my two years here in Sierra Leone. It became overwhelming, and each time I tried to organize my thoughts and condense the information, it got longer! So, now, after all this time, I have scrapped my original effort and will just try to entice you a bit with some of my memories and impressions.

I will finish my commitment with the Peace Corps on July 31st, taking with me some wonderfully rich memories and knowledge about a culture that is at once so different from my own and yet comfortingly familiar. To have made this discovery for myself has
been the single most enlightening experience of these two years.

There is a great order in people’s lives here. Time is kept according to growing seasons and certain religious holidays that mesh amicably with traditional activities such as the secret society business ending with the advent of the Muslim Ramadan, a time of fasting. I keep time by the fruits that are in season. It all seems so simple to me and yet when I think about it, life here is every bit as intricate and complex as my own and therefore relative. For me it has been like a stepping back in time. My needs are basic and met with perfunctory regularity. Water is drawn from the well each morning, and now that the rains have returned, I can set out the buckets to catch the rain off the tin roof of my house. Food is cooked by me on my little two-burner kerosene stove or by my cook/launderer/watchman on the 3-stone fire in the baffa (thatched hut with open sides) in my compound. My bath is from the bucket and still my most favorite thing to do. You cannot imagine how absolutely revitalizing it is to pour cold water over your over-heated body and be instantly cooled.

There is also a certain cadence to life here. For instance, the pounding of rice can be recognized by a steady thunk over and over when the long heavy pestle hits the cone of the mortar. Laundering the clothes has a distinct rhythm as the clothing is slapped against a rock with a whap, whap, whap then a pause while the cloth is turned and the whap, whap, whap continues. When gara (colorful tie-dyed cloth) is freshly dyed and dried it is then “ironed” by first carefully folding the cloth into a lengthwise strip which is then dampened and laid on a smooth log (the grain of which is so beautiful that if I could figure out how to lug it home to the States, I would do so) where two people (often children) sit on each side and pound the cloth in tandem with bowling pin-like mallets in an ear-piercing konk-konk kind of cadence. The cloth is made wrinkle-free with an exquisite sheen. With
each of these rhythms, to be able to see the activity adds a beauti-
ful dimension of grace and coordination that appears as effortless
as breathing.

While all of this goes on, out on the lanes children walk along
with head pans full of soap, biscuits and palm oil, singing in na-
sal, rhythmic voices, “Fine soda sopa, ten-ten leones” (prices are
always quoted in doubles as if to underline the cost), while off in
the distance someone is playing reggae music that makes me want
to move to the rhythm. And all along the way, children chant
“Porto, Porto, Syrian” as a way of acknowledging my approach. I
yell back, “Mi no Syrian, mi na Pisco!” I find myself yearning for
the anonymity of American streets but then wonder if I will miss
the attention and extreme friendliness.

As I think about what to focus on for your interest, it oc-
curs to me that to tell you about the people would give you the
greatest insight into life in Sierra Leone. Take, for instance, the
aforementioned cook, Idrissa. He is a multitalented young man
who was originally hired to watch the house during the day while
I am at work (at the insistence of my school principal, and as a
way of helping the economy). But it was clear that the money he
would earn far out-reached his single duty as watchman, so it was
agreed that he would wash our sheets, keep the compound free
of weeds for snake control, and cook African meals a few times
a week. He’s terrific with the laundering and cooking, tending
the flowers and his small vegetable garden, and nurturing small
seedlings I bring home, but “sweeping” the compound is not his
best thing. He would rather rest on the railing of the veranda
and watch the weeds flourish than to get rid of them. This is a
continual challenge for me because in my mind nothing is more
crucial than snake control! I have, in fact, found a small black
snake curled up on my suitcase stored in my bedroom. It liked
the dark, cool (that’s a relative term here, you understand) space,
but I preferred that it find relief elsewhere. More than likely, it was poisonous, and I am only grateful that all it wanted was to rest and be left alone. I tried to accommodate its needs as well as my own by shoving suitcase, snake, and all out of the front door for it to escape. I think it would have been a fair exchange, its life for mine, but my housemate, a fellow Volunteer who has a clearly different opinion about snakes, came out with a bush pole, bludgeoned it to death, and flung it off the veranda into the field beyond. I know I’m in the minority of opinion here, but to let it live, albeit other than in my bedroom, seemed reasonable.

Idrissa and my friend Sanfa built my baffa last spring. It’s a wondrous structure of bush poles, vine rope, and thatch all built with native ingenuity and a cutlass. The baffa serves as the focal point in any compound (a cluster of houses facing inward around a shared common space) where the 3-stone fire cooking takes place, as well as all other food preparation, socializing, hair plaiting, bathing, laundering, gara dying and ironing. I have been learning how to cook African food by watching my friend Napha and her family prepare the soups and gravies to pour over rice. She then carefully apportions all the food into various dishes, pans and bowls for all the people in her family and others who are single and live in the compound. It is a fine skill to take so little and make it stretch for however many may be around at mealtime. I’ve been teaching my students about the “balanced meal” concept, pointing out to them that all the ingredients in plasas (sauce), poured over a large dish of rice, gives them a rich, full compliment of all the nutrients they need each day to keep healthy. I think they’re getting the main idea. How I hope they will remember so that they can keep all their babies they’re bound to have healthy and strong.

I’ve also learned how to scrub the blackened pots used on the 3-stone fire: a small boy turns the pot over, puts sand and water
on it, then climbs on top and dances all around in his bare feet, rubbing the sand into the surface and scrubbing the black soot away. It looked like fun to me, but I bet the little guy wouldn’t agree. I also watched two little girls bathe by fashioning a shower with a large plastic cup filled to the brim and then clapped over one’s head, letting the water drizzle down over her face and body, washing the soap away. They chattered and giggled while scrubbing with lots of soap from top to toe. I think Africans have a love affair with soap. They make oodles of suds whether washing themselves, their pikin (child), their clothes, or the pots and dishes. They make their soap from lye and caustic soda, and it is very harsh to the skin and clothes. But there leaves no doubt that anything scrubbed with it is CLEAN though possibly a little the worse for wear.

Children at play are undeniably my favorite thing to watch. Like children everywhere, they play at anything they do whether it’s work, traveling, or free time. One of the most endearing sights is of the little girls with their dollies bound to their backs with scraps of cloth, just as their mothers do to carry their babies. The dolls are made from anything that remotely resembles a head and body. For example, I’ve seen two twigs bound by string with one twig crossing the other to fashion a head, arms, and a body. Another little titi (girl) had an empty talc container that, with a little yarn and a dress, even I could imagine a doll. There is no end to their ingenuity: cars and trucks made out of wire, small tomato tins and lids; scooters from crossed pieces of wood with a long-stem handle and wooden wheels; kites made from newspaper and bits of string and rags; jump ropes from tree vines, and soccer balls made from anything remotely round (fruit, sock toes that are stuffed, small rocks(!), mango pits, potatoes, rags bound into a ball). I’ve seen children play a form of hopscotch by drawing the lines in the dirt, dodge ball and tetherball, and swinging from a
tree limb on a double piece of rope that has a twig twisted into it at the bottom over which the kids straddle each side of the rope. Nothing is impossible here. And everywhere there is laughter and singing when children are at play.

Just as surely, I can hear crying and sadness too. It can be for a lot of reasons, but during the daytime it is most likely for the harsh punishment of flogging that the parents mete out for misbehavior. At night the crying is almost always because they are sick or hungry or both. I know there is an inordinate amount of sickness and starvation in this little country, but in the moderate-sized town of Makeni where I live I don’t see as much as my counterparts who live in the villages see. What I am more apt to see is the kind of starvation caused from poor nutrition called kwashiorkor, which is easily recognized by the bloated bellies of the children. They are lacking protein, but just as quickly as it can be introduced into their diets (maize, millet, milk, groundnut paste…peanut butter), so quickly too their little bodies will respond and begin to grow. The irony of all this is that this small, lush country grows abundant foods that are rich in all the nutrients needed for healthy, balanced diets, but most are too poor to buy the food in the market or the seeds to plant or the land to sow. It all seems so simple, but in truth it is very complex and overwhelmingly vast in magnitude. The work that Peace Corps does to teach, guide, and promote education, sanitation, and health is our greatest gift, and, of course, it works, but very slowly. It takes a lot to encourage people who have done things a certain way for eons to consider changing to more modern, proven techniques. We often teach more by our own example: growing small gardens, using fertilizer from compost heaps, boiling our water, hanging our clothes on lines instead of spreading them on bushes where all kinds of insects infest the cloth which in turn infects our skin, and keeping latrines clean.
and covered and free of flies. Over time there are those who are
daring enough to emulate, and they in turn influence others. It’s a
wonderful people-to-people concept of learning.

I always carry plasters (Band-Aids) and a tube of Bacitracin
supplied to me by the Peace Corps doctor, and have more than
once bound up a wound, or offered two aspirin for fever from
malaria. One time, a woman in Napha’s compound came to me,
lifted up her lapa (wrap-around skirt), pulled down her pants, and
showed me a nasty infection on her hip caused by an inocula-
tion from a dirty needle. The salve seemed to stem the infection
enough to allow the wound to heal. What amazes me is how
well they do heal with so very little care. Their bodies must be so
attuned to the hostile world around them that it takes, in some
cases, a minimal amount of effort to counteract the microscopic
offenders. Another time a little boy was in obvious pain with an
oozing ear. I offered aspirin for pain and some penicillin from the
local pharmacy, where it can be bought over the counter, to try to
kill the infection. Luckily I did the right thing, and he was bet-
ter in a few days, but I try not to play doctor here…it can get too
risky. In Foday’s case, he lived in a remote village, and the native
remedies were not working. We try to do health work here in such
a way as not to alienate the medicine men and women, working
rather in concert with them. When the patient responds, both
entities can claim credit!

Some of you may have heard that Sierra Leone has been
dealing with some border incursion by their neighbor to the
south, Liberia. Actually, it appears to be Liberian rebels trying to
distract attention away from their rebellion in Liberia and force
Sierra Leone to pull their ECOMOG forces out of Liberia and
tend to affairs at home. It has been a pretty effective technique
and has the southern and eastern areas of Sierra Leone in a state
of siege. In the meantime, the north, where I live, is ever on the
alert, Sierra Leonean style: when it rained recently, the various check points around the city were unmanned with the bush pole road blocks left in an “up” position, allowing us to pass unquestioned. It would appear that our safety is in direct proportion to the weather conditions…when it rains, the military “no day”!

There are many theories with regard to all this rebel business, and I’m sure I will leave here never knowing just exactly which version is true…very intriguing and slightly unnerving. The Peace Corps has issued letters of passage to each one of us to carry at all times, and is vigilant with bulletins from the American Embassy.

A final thought: the BBC recently interviewed a woman from the United Nations who said that a human development index had been made from a world survey showing that Japan was first with its people being able to take charge of their own lives and improve their destiny. The United States was seventh and Sierra Leone came in dead last. I was not surprised by this news, but it did serve to emphasize what I have already observed: literacy and education are the key, and without those elements, a nation cannot survive.
Chingpea
Digital Photography
10” x 6.6”
By N. L. Belardes
Dogfights are always worse than cock fights. I never cared about the roosters. They would primp themselves, puff up their chests and tail feathers and walk in a strut. It wasn’t much different than the way I walked each Saturday onto the football field my cousins had made in the grape vineyard. I was proud to be a girl who could block, tackle and carry a ball. I hadn’t learned to kiss back then. I learned to hit; and I could hit hard, so hard that sometimes boys went home crying.

Roosters don’t cry. They do sometimes make strange gasps as they go from majestic birds to angry avian fighters, tearing each other’s eyes out, with feathers flying in every direction, endless squawking, and beaks jabbing into feathery flesh like hoes raking into the onion-filled earth.

Yet, those fights never bothered me. When they began in the dirt of the abandoned almond orchards, I stood with my hand over my mouth and giggled, often thinking about blowing up cats’ asses with firecrackers and seeing their tails stand straight up. The roosters were no different. They seemed to explode in a feathery ball of plumage during their fights to the death. And yet I giggled. I would get angry stares from Tatay and Papa and still giggle. In those days I would cause so much trouble giggling at cock fights and making cats run and scream the way farm cats do when they howl from having a red ass and burnt tail.

During the dogfights Papa would hand me his money. So would every other greasy hand in the orchards. These were the old men who wanted to see the young girls dance the hula auna with coconuts and grass skirts made of tapa. They would give us young girls money just to see us shake and dance. But we didn’t care so much. What was swinging a few grass-shaking moves, hips
swaying for one dollar or ten dollars? In a little migrant town in the 1980s like Delano, California, that was a lot of money.

During the dogfight they wanted me to run money back and forth while they stood and cheered for their favorite dog to rip the throat right out from another. I stopped giggling at such horrible moments. Besides, it was much work just to take the money from Papa and all those men before each fight. You had to gather the money on time or bets weren’t laid. And that meant bets weren’t paid. Tell that to a drunken old Filipino farmworker when you’re just thirteen years old. “Here’s the money little girl. Take it. Now run it to the keeper and tell him one hundred dollars on cousin Louie’s Doberman. That dog has a mean streak and he’s going to kill that damn pit bull once and for all.”

The pit bull he was talking about had a particularly dirty habit of tricking dogs into attacking and diving low. Extremely smart and agile, it would go barreling toward another dog, only to get the unwary enraged animal to expose a juicy neck for the pit to lock onto with its powerful jaws. It did that time and again, crushing throats and ripping and biting in such a calm ferocious manner that people like my uncle Boy had grown red in the face from losing so much money. My stomach was already churning. I could see my uncle seething, but I just turned to my father who had placed a fifty-dollar bet on the Doberman. “Tatay, that Doberman won’t win against the pit,” I said.

“Don’t you tell me how to bet, Neneng. You take my money and place it right or I will hang you on a hook. Now go! Before it is too late and I miss all my winnings!”

And so I did. I ran and gathered money and names. I knew all the names. We Filipinos know everyone in our immediate culture of weddings, funerals, Filipino days at the parks, sporting events and so on. I just had to remember the amounts, and to try not to get into trouble with the money keeper. The money keeper might
as well have been a beekeeper he had so much sting and venom. It was as if he had been born in a beehive himself. Physically, he was an old man with one good eye. He looked as squat and mean as the pit bull and he never trusted me not to keep some of the money for myself. “How much did you take this time? Let me see your tiger eyes,” he would say. I knew him as one of the dirty coconut men. So I looked at him straight in the eye for only a second then ran off to another part of the orchard. “You take one dollar,” he yelled. I did. I don’t know how he knew that. But he never chased after me even though I kept stealing.

I just knew this dogfight was going to be just as violent as other dogfights. How could dogs grow so mean? Why did so many Chinese, Filipinos and Monguls of the valley love to see such hatred between beasts? I overheard Papa say the fieldworkers were angry at Chavez for letting down the Filipinos and Asians, that fieldworkers bottled up their hatred during each long workday, and let out their emotions between the spirits of two angry animals. Perhaps that’s why such battles were so violent. Dogfights are a terrible tearing of flesh, where there are gaping holes and exposed bones; muscle and arteries pump blood onto each dog’s coat, making them both reddened beasts that many drunken red eyes scream at while spilling beer and whiskey in a terrible sight of blood lust.

I stood and waited for the latest fight that I knew I would watch. Although the fights made me sick, I never threw up. Not like my brothers. They couldn’t handle the sight of so much blood as well as animal and gambler screams: the dying, the cheers, the anxiety and energy of animal and man. The roar could almost shatter eardrums.

My brothers couldn’t pluck a chicken or gut a fish without crying about blood and exposed stomach lining the entire time. Tatay watched them and I knew he felt ashamed. I’ve seen him shrug his shoulders and wander off to be with grandpa who was
a soldier in World War One. Papa was a descendant from the Spanish-American War in the Philippines. He grew to respect the Americans, Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders; they were the cavalry who liberated his family and helped him get to America where he could move west to the farmlands of California, where there was no hope as a migrant, but work for him as a cook; that set our family apart from other Asian families, because we depended less on hardened seasons of gathering fruits and vegetables from the land.

Papa was more patriotic than the very colors of the American flag. He told me once, “Neneng, my debt is to America. Yours should be too.” I don’t know if he taught that debt to my Tatay. He hardly spoke to Tatay at all. They were like ghosts passing by each other although we lived in the same house. At least, I never heard him say it. Instead, Papa would go drink, play mahjong and chess with the other old timers. He wouldn’t tell anyone his war stories about how he came to America. I had to find out through a drunken old man he called his war buddy. I tricked him one day while doing the hula auna into telling me about how he and grandpa went to Europe to see a country of dying Europeans. He said, “We all dreamed of America and of being rich businessmen.” They never fulfilled that dream. I often wonder if it is the way American culture is. Culture enters culture. People just want to live day to day and sometimes forget risks and who they are when submersed in the grand delusions of society. They allow themselves to be swallowed.

The pit bull and the Doberman face-off began more than twenty yards apart. Already there was blood from the fights earlier in the day that coated dirt, grass and the base of a stand of nearby trees. A German Shepard lay in a heap fifty yards away. I watched as several of my cousins poked sticks at it while one drunken old man stood by crying for the ghost of this now dead animal.
The owners stood with bulging muscles. They tried very hard to hold their animals from ripping into each other’s flesh. No, the leashes weren’t released. Not yet. These animals were held back so they could snarl, drool and grow more hateful of each other. They hollered in maddening yelps while their owners struggled to hold them back. We all waited. The dogs and the old men were most impatient, while the owners simply knew that the angrier the dogs became, the more ferocious their attack. Even Papa paced.

I was just happy that during such anticipated pre-fight moments that no old man looked at me as if they had just seen me perform the tinikling, a dance much like the hula auna with just as revealing coconuts on us girls as any of our dances. I wore a football jersey and didn’t feel like being thought of as a girl just then. Most of the time I preferred to be one of the boys.

Yet, I loved to dance. I could move more graceful than most butterflies, let alone the girls in dance class who seemed far too fragile to sway their hips. Most of the time I wanted to beat them up too. But they didn’t seem like they could take my forceful spirit coming down upon them and their pink world.

I hated talent show and speech competitions. I had trouble speaking English anyways. So getting into discussions with the old men was sometimes difficult. I almost had a stutter the way I spoke and got tongue-tied; my tongue couldn’t form all the letters of the alphabet the way normal people would speak. What did I care? That’s what speech therapy was for. My mother had put me into the pageants. She insisted on screaming at me when I wouldn’t take the pageants seriously. She knew I dreamed of football during moments I should have been dancing with candles on my head. “Why can’t you be more like Elvis!” she yelled more than once.

Why couldn’t I? Because I was not him. I was me, a little Chinese-Filipina girl who could shake with the coconuts on. But
I was no singer, and I reminded mother time and again, “But I’m not male. And I can’t sing like Elvis. Just let me do the rock-a-hula the way I know how.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she would argue, get offended and grab me by the collar. “You’re not pretty anyways. You’re terrible and won’t amount to anything like your brothers, even though you look like a boy. They could be Jailhouse Rock Elvises if they wanted to. Besides, none of them ever killed their piano teacher.”

I always laughed when she said this. I had taken piano lessons and after the third lesson my teacher died of a heart attack. She held it against me ever since. “My brothers are afraid of dead fish and chicken bones,” I argued back every time. I could beat both of them up and sometimes did. I even added their friends to my football game day poundings. We’d go playing football at our prized Saturday field, and in between snapping the heads off gopher snakes, we played some rough football. And if anybody groped me and didn’t tackle me clean, I would give them a sharp fist to the gut. I wanted to be treated like a boy, though I learned that crybaby girls got their way more often than not. I learned how to cry and get my way when we were losing. I would turn on the tears and the boys would say, “What’s wrong Neneng?” And I would cry that they hurt me. The next thing they knew my team would be winning again and I was running into the end zone with another touchdown to my credit.

I thank Papa for teaching me football skills. It wasn’t so much that he was young and could throw a ball. In fact, he was ancient. He was as carved and eroded as the hills of the Southern San Joaquin Valley. His brittle grey hair and yellowed eyes shown with a timeless energy that spawned in the Philippines many years before. I imagined him on some distant island, running after American horses, maybe swimming in a river and eating fish in a seaside town while a war raged. “You have fight in you, Neneng,”
he said, staring at me as if remembering. “More than any of those boys you have the fight of a soldier. That is your Pinay pride. You take it to them and they won’t know what to do with your sharp fist and fast legs. Always be the same no matter how old you are: a sharp fist and fast legs. Football is just one way for you to show your skill at conversation with the world around that will always try to talk down to you. Break down those around, then push ahead as hard as you can. If done at the right angle even a pyramid will fall, and you will still be standing with that football in your arms.

“Remember, my granddaughter, my Neneng, that I was a Filipino soldier in World War One. That was many years ago. It was a time to be proud in the Philippines. It was a time to be free. It was adventure, and America was a window to opportunity, though an oppressive opportunity because there were few Asians in the American military. We may not have much today, but we have a freedom of life that can be found in reflections on the strength of our culture. The dirty old men who watch you with the coconuts aren’t always as dirty as you think. They see in you a heritage of dying culture. In you hides the energy of that culture; even in the moments of old smiles at grass skirts. We were young ourselves once. Yes?”

When the dog owners let go of the dogs the pit bull immediately pulled its old trick on the Doberman, taking a quick leap. Thinking it could come up from beneath and disembowel the pit bull, the Doberman ran and lunged as if to take a lower position on the smaller dog. Right away I knew what was coming. My stomach lurched and I stepped back to lean against a tree to try not to throw up.

In the same moment the pit bull sidestepped the Doberman’s attack. While doing so it twisted into a position that brought the Doberman’s neck right against the pit’s terrible jowls. Using the
Doberman’s momentum in a massive flip, the pit locked its jaws around the Doberman’s neck but held firm. By digging its wide feet into the ground, the larger dog’s body kept moving over the pit while its neck snapped right in two. In an instant the pit shook its head in violent victory while blood poured and squirted in a moment so terrible that I felt light-headed.

As the pit bull stood panting, a cheer went up from the crowd, the field spun, and I wanted to vomit. My head spun as I looked up and saw into the dog’s eyes. I felt its anger and saw into its terrible blood breath where a portion of the Doberman’s neck still rested on the dog’s tongue.

As the owner came over, the dog seemed to smile greater than ever before. This was the pit bull’s moment. It stared at me and I felt its mad pleasure in killing the Doberman. The owner smiled to himself and at the dog for another victory. As he began to hook the leash the smiling dog’s face turned terrible. It lunged in my direction and barked, spitting blood. The owner stepped forward and hit the dog ferociously. Instead of the animal cowering, it turned and locked onto his hand, instantly crushing bones, and causing the man to scream and drop to his knees. He kicked and panicked, but the dog wouldn’t let go.

It was then I saw my aged Papa pull a knife so quickly that I almost missed it by blinking in my vertigo. He slowly walked toward the beast, who saw Papa, released the hand and began one of his fake lunges. I screamed. I knew that dog’s every move. Worse, I had seen the smile in the dog’s eyes. I knew the dog was up to its tricks and would try to kill Papa. I cried out and fell to my knees as the dog made a quick feign to draw Papa off balance.

But Papa knew the dog’s moves and simply anticipated the dog’s lunge. As the dog did so he calmly jammed his knife into the dog’s throat then pulled forward, releasing the dog’s jugular
and airway in one sweep. The beast gasped, suffocated and fell. 
Papa then stepped back as it kicked and thrashed for a moment 
before dying.

Months later, after the dogfight between the Doberman and 
pit, my grandpa died. He stared at me and smiled one afternoon. 
That evening he was dead.

Tatay kept a chest in the garage full of the tokens of an 
American-Filipino soldier’s life. I found myself constantly hiding 
out in the garage after his 21-gun-salute funeral. I would sneak in, 
open the chest and take out Papa’s old soldier hat. I would smell 
it and wear it. I would stand real straight like a soldier would. 
And then I would dance the rock-a-hula like I was moving on an 
island far away, tucked in a breeze of waving fronds and smiles.

Once, my Tatay caught me doing my dance around Papa’s 
old chest. He would never speak of Papa, and he rarely spoke to 
him when alive, so he couldn’t understand why I moved the way 
I did wearing an old soldier’s hat. For him to see me this way he 
was terribly offended. “You are worse than the clouds of Delano 
blackbirds that shit on the farmland and then eat the fruits,” he 
yelled then hung me on a large coat hook near the front door. 
There I hung, unafraid. I stuck my tongue out at my brothers 
when my Tatay wasn’t looking. He knew better than to beat me.
It only made me tougher. He already knew I could beat up ev-
ery boy in the neighborhood. He just wasn’t sure whether to be 
proud or not.

“Tatay! Neneng stuck her tongue out at me!” my youngest 
brother yelled.

At such moments Tatay would strangely side with me as I 
hung there on a wall. “Be quiet. You deserve more than a mock-
ing tongue for being afraid of fish guts.”

“But Tatay!”

“I said silence!”
And I would go on sticking out my tongue until I got bored and imagined myself once again on that island and dancing in Papa’s hat.

A few days later we all got in the back of an old Chevy pick-up truck and headed to grape vineyards on the furthest edge of town. I was especially sick to my stomach and the smell of grapes was especially pungent. We drove along a two-lane road and stopped. “Everyone out!” Tatay said. “Today you are fieldworkers. Go gather grapes.” I knew the grapes weren’t ours to take. But I heard Tatay mutter, “Chavez can’t help us so we take to help ourselves in this world.”

I picked handfuls and without washing them, shoved grapes into my mouth, hoping my stomachache would feel better. I puked at the taste and smell but made sure no one saw me. After all, I always was the tough boy in the family, girl or not.

Later that day my stomach still hurt, but I joined a football game anyway. I couldn’t run as fast as usual, but did crush one of my cousins with a vicious hit. I giggled, “Sorry,” as he ran off crying. I shrugged my shoulders. I couldn’t help that I was so strong, so tough in gymnastics, tumbling, dancing and street fights. I had the strongest legs in the game.

“You’re carrying the ball on the next play,” my cousin Eddie said. He was the quarterback and was distressed about my meanness. “You shouldn’t have hit Bong so hard.”

“What did I do? I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone,” I said.

“Well, you are carrying the ball now because they’re going to try to get back at us anyway.”

“Oh fine. I can take a hit. You’re such whiny boys.”

“Fine. On three.”

We lined up as June bugs sailed over our heads toward a sea of grapes and blackbirds. I stared from the backfield into a glorious future of spinning, weaving, and celebrating touchdowns; I
thought of crushing my opponents with my elbows as I knew I could make my way into the sunset of the Delano countryside like a pigskin-carrying hero. This was my football, and my own time to be the soldier in a personal war against boys, against fields and small town dreams.

The ball was hiked and pitched back. I caught it and I lowered my shoulder, pushing forward into the pyramid of bodies waiting to tackle me. I grunted, twisted and spun around tackles. I lowered into a feigning move not much different from that old pit bull as I wanted to rise up explosively toward the endzone.

And then I was hit. It was the same cousin I had leveled. He had snuck back onto the field and darted in on a cheap shot leveled at my kidneys and back. The hit knocked the breath and ball from me, which skirted into the dirt while I tumbled into the powder of San Joaquin topsoil like a putrid grape with a mouthful of dirt.

Slowly I stood up among the smiles of boys who were all happy to see me crushed for once. As they stood there I gasped for air and felt a moisture between my legs that hadn’t been there moments before. I began to whimper, this time for real. “Now you have done it!” I cried! “I have internal bleeding!” I stood up but fell down, light-headed, and wanting to die. A few cousins helped me back to my feet as I sobbed, bent over. I looked down and could see wetness had built up between my legs as I felt a terrible pain to my abdomen.

“Don’t die Neneng!” One of my cousins yelled.

“I didn’t mean it,” squealed Bong. His eyes had turned red. We were all filled with dirt in our hair, hands and clothes. The June bugs tried to land on us we were so much like the earth that day. As my cousins carried me off the field, I began to feel like I would die there in a game where I had lost the ball; where because of my smiles and pinay pride my blood would spill like the
A few days later my cousins all laughed at me. “You’re a girl after all, Neneng,” Bong laughed. “Internal bleeding…”

My mother looked at me and smiled. She seemed to understand something about me as I left the room to the garage. Inside I opened Papa’s old trunk and pulled out his hat. I took a long breath as if smelling his hair, the war, the island, the blood, the dog, and the steel of his knife. I held the hat to my heart and felt so much more than him there in the darkness. I closed my eyes so tight I saw the colors of my own tears and then the light of a sunset over vineyards and islands. I saw the youth of an island culture and Americans walking among them, and people swimming in rivers where fish swam in brown waters and old men laughed and caught them. I saw the women too. I saw their dark hands moving in front of their soft faces and jet-black hair: some straight and some curved, but tied up around their heads showing off lovely necks, full lips and smiling eyes. They didn’t all wear grass skirts but all danced by the riverside while the men swam. Children ran and swung bamboo as if about to lose control in a war of youth among converging cultures. There the children ran near river waters so smooth and inviting that you could hear two young lovers talk while dangling their feet in the lapping of such shores. Only, I could barely understand them.
You have to go with it, because there is no turning back. Summer has passed.
An early snow dusts the pyramidal peaks, Highlighting ravines and cliffs usually hidden in purple shadow this time of day.
The harsh abruptness of cliff fall to the gentler swell of suede hills Soft in afternoon light.
The fire of orange and yellow aspens spreads down a winding crevice Like lava from a caldera.
The frost not yet come, but the chill enough To cause the green to give up its sugar and chlorophyll retreats until Spring.
Reluctantly, I trade favored Birkenstocks for snug shoes. I lament Summer’s passing.
The caress of hot days and brisk swims in high altitude lakes. Yet, the fire of leaves cannot happen at any other time, and I admit Fall is my favorite season.
In this state of heightened senses, nature’s dramatics intensify before The curtain close of day.
At the crucial moment, an unbearable beauty. I cannot take my eyes away.
The blunt-edged lens clouds hanging from a purple sky Turn savage.
Last light seeps gold into deep magenta,
Then orange-lined clouds sing more fiercely than aspen leaves,
As if crying, “Look! We bring the denouement!”
Now, turn silver-gray, and darkness descends so quickly I cannot see my hands.
Valley of the Crows
By Melinda Carroll

My office is on the second floor of a building located not far from Beale Park and the Downtown Bakersfield area. My desk faces two large windows with a busy traffic street view from an elevated level. My boss’s office is across from me; he usually leaves his door open, and I’m able to see out his office windows. The conference room with wall-to-wall windows is directly behind my office area, and when I turn around in my chair, I can look out the windows at a quiet residential street view. I am the only one in our firm with this many window-viewing opportunities. The only one who wonders if the convergence of crows on our building is normal!

It is not uncommon for me to look up from my computer at any given moment and see thirty or so crows perched on the power lines at eye-level, staring at me with their black, beady eyes. It can be a little bit disconcerting, and unnerving at times. They seem to see through me, “wondering, fearing, / Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.” And I’m transported back into an Edgar Allan Poe “Raven” moment of memories long gone. When in ‘Hitchcock’ thriller fashion the birds descend on the building ledges along the windows and “suddenly there came a tapping, / As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.” The crows peck and pound on the tempered glass windows and flap their wings trying to gain better footing on the ledges. They want in. I just know it! “Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.” They peck and pound so hard, I often wonder if they will one day break through the glass and attack. I can see the headlines now: Psycho Crow Mauling Inside Local Office Building! My boss will take his shoe off and beat the glass trying to make the crows stop pecking and pounding the windows in his office. I don’t know which is worse,
being freaked out by crows or watching my idiot boss beat the window with his shoe.

During staff meetings in the conference room, I sit, half paying attention to my boss as he micro-manages us to death, and wonder and marvel at the crows pecking the windows. They squawk and spread their wings and peck some more. “But the raven still beguiling all my sad soul into smiling, / thinking what this ominous bird of yore— / What this grim, ungainly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore / Meant in croaking “Nevermore.”” Do the crows have a message like Edgar Allan Poe’s “Raven”? (Crows are supposed to be intelligent birds.) Or are they just pecking at their reflections in the glass? Will they suddenly burst out in song? Perhaps a squawking rendition of “Accidentally in Love,” a song by their fellow kin. At least their pecking drowns out my boss’s dominating voice for a brief time, giving me a reprieve, however small.

The other day I heard a very loud and unique squawking noise behind me. It was so unlike the usual crow pecking and squawking it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I turned around in my chair and there on the conference room window ledge was the biggest crow/raven I’ve ever seen in my life! Instead of pecking the window, it looked at me with black piercing eyes, opened his large beak, and squawked at me, “Nevermore.” I was freaked! I was sure that crow was Brandon Lee reincarnated as Eric Draven, and not being a cult-follower—I was a goner. “‘Bird or fiend!’ I shrieked upstarting / Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore! / Leave my loneliness unbroken! / Take thy beak from out my heart.”

Beep, beep went my intercom line. I picked up the phone and my co-worker said, “Is that your computer making that noise?”

“No!” I shrieked, “It’s the biggest, freakiest crow I’ve ever seen!”
My co-worker came out to take a look at the crow torturing me. We both stood there staring… “And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting…”

“What the hell is that thing?” my co-worker asked.

“I don’t know!” I exclaimed staring into its eyes. “His eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming.”

And I wondered if the crow had seen ‘in’ me. If I would be somehow changed. “And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted—nevermore!”

My boss came out of his office and threw a shoe at the window. The crow cocked his head, looked at us, then flew away. My co-worker went back to her desk. And I sat at my computer and began to type again. From somewhere behind me I could still hear the squawking chant of a crow’s “Nevermore.”

“Nevermore.”
Fishtime with Fatt Katt
Adobe Illustrator Drawing
7” x 7”
By N. L. Belardes
I was looking out my bedroom window one morning when I observed a strange woman ringing my next door neighbor’s doorbell. She looked like one of those women of the night, you know, the kind that traipse up and down the street.

My neighbor’s husband, Richard, opened the door and let her in. This concerned me greatly because I knew for a fact that Richard’s wife, Linda, had gone to work. Linda left home every morning, Monday to Friday, at exactly 6:00 a.m. sharp.

So I went next door, just to make sure that everything was okay. I rang the doorbell, six times. Richard didn’t answer. But I persevered because that is what a good neighbor does.

Richard finally opened the front door, but only a few inches, only enough for me to see a fragment of his shiny bald head; one dreamy brown eye; half of his slightly upturned nose; half of his moist looking lips; a few silky hairs on his chest; and a little more than a hint of red briefs. I knew by the satiny look of the briefs that something immoral was about to occur, and I was determined to stop it because that is what a good neighbor does.

“Good morning, Miss Plack, I mean Black,” Richard said. He was obviously nervous.

“Good morning, Richard. I baked these wonderful chocolate chip cookies last night...well, you know how much your wife, Linda, adores my chocolate chip cookies,” I said. He nodded his head.

I didn’t detect any movement behind him which meant only one thing: that the tramp was waiting for him upstairs under the white three-hundred thread count sheets that Linda washed and hung out to dry every Saturday morning.

“Thank you, Miss Black. I’ll make sure Linda gets them,” he said, extending his hand out for the plate. Richard was in the process
of closing the door when I shoved my old foot between the door and the door jam. It hurt like hell, but it was worth it in the end.

“What is it, Miss Black?”

“Richard, I need to talk to you about my washing machine,” I said, as I delicately pushed my way into the house.

“Miss Black,” he said roughly, which only validated further what I had suspected. “Now is not a good time. I’m getting ready for work, but I’ll take a look at it on the weekend.”

I knew that Richard was lying because he always got ready for work at 1:30 p.m., and he always left home at exactly 3:00 p.m., except for that one time, about a year-ago, when he left at 3:30 p.m. because he was talking on the phone. I only know this because, out of concern, I went into his backyard and looked into his windows to see if he had been claimed by some fatal mishap. I was relieved when I saw him in the kitchen, talking on the phone.

I was such a good neighbor that I waited for Linda to come home. She needed to know that her husband had left home late that day. So when I saw her car pulling into the driveway, I dashed out of my house.

“Linda, Richard’s paycheck is going to be short this week,” I said.

“Miss Black, what are you talking about?” she said.

“Well, I’m sure Richard will explain.”

“Explain what?”

“Why he left home late today. Anyway, don’t worry about it. I mean, if you’re short this month, I’ll be more than happy to help because that is what a good neighbor does.”

I had to get upstairs. So I started dancing like a child about to release a dam of urine all over his foyer.

“Richard, I must use your washroom!”

He didn’t respond. He just stood there glaring at me with his arms folded.
“Richard, really, I must use your washroom!”

“There’s a washroom downstairs,” he said. He sounded angry. I had to think fast.

“My doctor says I need to exercise; not much exercise in going down a flight of stairs, is there?”

“I guess not,” he said, while looking at the marble ashtray on the pine console. I sensed he wanted to plant it, deep inside my cranium. And I was ready, as ready as an old lady with a knife in her pocket can be.

It wouldn’t have been the first time I had to defend myself against a wanton husband. Jim Tuttle was a wanton husband too.

Jim Tuttle, and his lovely wife, Betty, and their five children lived in the red brick house directly across the street from me. Six months after they moved in, I discovered that Jim was having an affair with a man.

I can’t express how deeply this saddened me. I mean, Jim seemed like such a normal fellow. He was a successful trader on Wall Street. I know this because one night I saw two raccoons rummaging through his garbage. So I went outside and chased them away. The raccoons made such a mess, I decided to clean it up because that is what a good neighbor does. In the process of cleaning, I discovered several bank statements with hefty balances.

Jim was a handsome man too. Truth be told, he was yummy-looking, every inch of him, even the inches I didn’t actually see, but imagined.

I made my discovery on a cold November evening while immersed in my role as a good neighbor. A car, not a car I’d seen before, pulled into the Tuttle driveway. It was difficult to see into the car because, as I mentioned, it was evening. But after several seconds of squinting, I was able to make out the back of Jim’s head. I don’t recall whether or not I mentioned this before,
but Jim had the most beautiful curly brown hair. In hindsight, I should have known that Jim wasn’t a real man because real men don’t have beautiful hair. And real men never reject the sexual advances of older women even if they are married.

When I realized that the passenger was Jim, I instantly turned my attention to the driver because a friend can turn into an enemy in seconds, and if that happened, I wanted to be able to help the police as much as I could because that is what a good neighbor does.

The driver was a man, I could tell by the wide span of his back and the largeness of his shoulders. I moved to the left hand side of my living room window to see if I could garner a better view of the man. But I couldn’t. So I went upstairs to my bedroom, opened my dresser drawer, and pulled out my theatre glasses.

I saw them, clearly. They were laughing. And I could tell by the way their bodies moved close together every time they laughed that they were lovers or on the verge of becoming lovers.

The next morning, after Jim left for work, I told Betty the awful truth. It was difficult for me to do, but sometimes a good neighbor has to do difficult things.

That night, Jim came charging across the street like a rabid dog out for blood. He started banging on my front door and yelling obscenities.

I opened the door, but before I could say anything, Jim punched me in the face. The force of the punch caused me to stumble backward, but I didn’t fall. That was when I reached for my baseball bat, the one that I kept in the corner of my foyer. I took a swing at Jim’s head, but I missed. I took another swing and hit his arm which sent him whimpering back across the street.

I knew that it would take more than my words to convince Betty that her husband was a homosexual. So I sent her articles,
everyday, about homosexual men who marry straight women. In fact, one of the articles that I sent her was written by a woman whose husband was also a trader on Wall Street.

That poor woman. She thought she had it all—the perfect husband, the perfect kids, the perfect house, until that fateful day when the phone rang. It was her doctor. He needed to see her right away. She was pregnant with their fifth child, and hoped it wasn’t bad news about the baby. Oh, but it was worse, much worse. She had HIV, and she got it from her husband who had been living a double life for years.

She said a neighbor, a concerned neighbor had told her that she had seen her husband kissing another man in a romantic way. But she didn’t believe her; instead she chose to believe that her neighbor was an old miserable woman who had nothing better to do with her time than to destroy happy families. If only she had listened.

I hoped with all my heart that Betty would heed the advice given in the article; and that the same fate wouldn’t befall her. But just to make sure, I sent Betty condoms. I also sent her pictures of Jim eating lunch with this fellow at work.

Eventually, Jim moved out. Please, don’t get me wrong. It hurt me to break up this family. It hurt me even more to watch Jim’s ten-year-old daughter, Sara, with her face smudged against the living room window, crying as her father drove away. But the hurt was worth it because I saved Betty and her five children from a life of lies.

I slid my hand into my pants pocket and wrapped it tightly around the knife.

“Unfortunately, the toilet upstairs is broken. So I guess you’ll have to get your exercise somewhere else,” he said. I detected a subtle grin. But Richard was no match for me.

“Richard, can I borrow a tea bag?” I said. “I used my last one last night.”

He glared at me and then walked into the kitchen which was
about fifteen feet away from where I was standing. When I heard him riffling through a cupboard, I crept upstairs.

When I got to the top of the last step, a strange smell snatched me and dragged me down the hall to the last door on the left. I opened the door and there she was, the tramp coiled up in Linda’s good sheets.

When she saw me, she jumped out of the bed and screamed. A few seconds later, I heard Richard’s feet charging up the stairs.

“Get out of my house,” he yelled, “before I call the police.”

I tried to kiss him, you know, to calm him down, but he pushed me away.

That night, Linda knocked on my front door. She asked me to come outside. She wanted to know what my problem was. I didn’t tell her what I suspected because I knew it wouldn’t be enough for her. So I told her the inevitable instead. I told her that I knocked on her front door, but no one answered. I told her that I was concerned because I knew that Richard was at home. I told her that I juggled the doorknob and discovered that the door was unlocked. I told her that I opened the front door and called out for Richard, but he didn’t answer. So I went inside. I told her that I searched downstairs. No Richard. So I went upstairs, and that was where I found him making love to a woman of the night.

“That woman is Richard’s sister,” she said, with utter disgust.

“Oh my,” I said. “What is this world coming to?”

“You’re a sick bitch,” she said, and walked away. At first I thought, how ungrateful, but then I realized that Linda was in denial, like every other woman I had helped in the neighborhood before. Still she was my neighbor. So I said goodbye. I waited for a neighborly response, but none came.

“I was just looking out for you,” I screamed. “Because that is what a good neighbor does.”
The sleek, gray rat preens himself.  
On stage, he swaggers and waves back and forth.  
His religion is a shiny, red coat.  
The deluge rolls right off the protective coating.  
His words are magic incantations.  
He says them over and over again,  
So that even he believes them.  
He creates a world of make-believe.  
The words he calls honest and full of integrity.  
Tonight the crowd has gathered to watch the magic show.  
From his white ten-gallon hat, he pulls a card.  
The crowd cheers and waves their flags.  
“The ace of hearts,” the sleek rat chants.  
One rat in the crowd screams, “No, no, can’t you see?  
It’s the joker card!”  
The crowd is displeased and stomps the outspoken one into the floor.  
They wave their flags and shout in unison, “She did not believe.  
This is a democracy!”
Matt was running late. He was supposed to meet his friend George for lunch twenty minutes ago. His tall, slender body dodged traffic as he attempted to cross Main Street. Out of breath, Matt finally arrived at the café. He spotted George’s old, brown, leather flight jacket on the back of a chair on the patio. He sat down in the chair across from it. Still tired from running, Matt picked up a menu and started to read it.

“There you are,” Matt heard George say from above him. “I’ve been waiting for…twenty-three minutes.”

Matt looked up and saw George’s faint outline, lost in the sunlight behind him.

“Sorry about that George. So how are you doing?” Matt asked.

“Well I’m just splendid, except for this ax that accidentally got lodged in my head,” George answered.

“What?” Matt asked. As soon as George sat down, Matt saw that a metal ax was indeed lodged in the side of George’s skull. “Oh, dear lord!”

Matt stared in horror at the ax that protruded from his friend’s skull. Blood had soaked the shoulder of George’s yellow polo shirt and still continued to trickle down from the wound.

“Does that hurt?” Matt asked, astonished.

“Not really, but it’s inconvenient as hell. It’s hard to move around indoors, and on the bus I kept losing my balance and the handle kept hitting stuff. Plus, you wouldn’t believe the stares I get,” George said and nodded to couple at a nearby table who were staring at him. “I’m starting to feel self-conscious about it.”

“Umm, that’s too bad,” Matt said. “Listen, let me take you to the hospital.”

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“No that’s alright, Matt, I’ll be okay,” George said and picked up his menu. “So, what are you getting? I hear the sea bass burger is pretty good here.”

“Are you sure? I can call an ambulance.”

“No thanks, I don’t feel like answering a bunch of people’s questions. But hey, you could just pull it out for me.”

“No way.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one, it would just bleed even more. Two, I could end up further damaging your brain. And three, no way am I putting my fingerprints on that thing.”

“Don’t worry, Matt, if the police get involved, I’ll tell them the truth.”

“But what if you’re dead.”

“Well, you have a point there,” George said and returned to his menu.

Matt was at a loss for words. He wasn’t sure what to do. George was adamant about not seeking medical attention. Matt himself was becoming self-conscious from the stares. The couple at the nearby table had completely abandoned their plates in favor of staring at George. A man to the left of them looked like he was about to be sick. Behind George, the waitress was talking to her manager and pointing towards the bleeding head. Matt distinctly heard the manager say “police.”

“So, what are you going to get? ‘Jill’s Magical Hobo Chili’ looks pretty good,” George said nonchalantly.

Matt decided to ignore the ax and have lunch.

“I guess I’ll get the sea bass burger. What are you getting?” Matt asked.

“I think the chili. Or the ‘Super Silly Shrimp Cocktail.’ Though I’m not sure I want to eat something that’s ‘super silly.’ Regular silly would be fine, but I don’t know about ‘super’ silly.
Just how silly does a shrimp have to be in order to be ‘super silly’?

“How in the hell did you get an ax lodged in your skull?!” Matt yelled, finding that there was no way he could ignore an ax protruding from his friend’s skull.

“Well, it’s a funny story actually,” George began. “I was bored and a little depressed this morning, so I decided to hit myself in the head with an ax.”

“Yeah, that’s not funny,” Matt told him.

“Yes it is.”

“No, no it’s not.”

“I beg to differ. Have you ever whacked yourself in the head with an ax?”

“No, of course not,” Matt said.

“Well, then don’t tell me whether it’s funny or not.”

“Well, fine then. Anyway, I thought you said it was an accident.”

“No, I said that the ax ‘accidentally got lodged in my head.’ I wasn’t expecting it to get stuck in there.”

Matt just stared at George. Finally, the waitress came to their table.

“It’s about time,” George told her, “we’ve been waiting forever. I’ll have the—”

“I’m sorry sir,” she interrupted. “You’re disturbing the other customers. You have to leave now, or my manager will call the police.”

“Excuse me...” George looked at her name tag, “Lucy, but I don’t know what you mean. Exactly how am I disturbing the other customers?”

“Sir,” Lucy said quietly, “your head is bleeding and there’s an ax protruding from it. People find that very disturbing.”

“Since when can’t a man eat a meal with an ax protruding
from his bloody head? Isn’t this America?” George yelled indig-
nantly.

That’s when the manager started to march over to their table. When he got there, he tripped over Lucy’s large foot and landed on George’s ax. The collision forced the ax deeper into George’s head. Blood was now gushing out of the wound. Lucy was screaming.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” the manager cried, looking genuinely sorry. “Don’t worry, sir, I’ll fix it.”

The manager braced one leg on the table as he prepared to pull the ax from George’s head. Matt leaped from his chair and tackled the manager to the ground.

“Don’t touch it!” Matt screamed as he wrestled with the manager. “Don’t worry, sir, I know what I’m doing!” the manager yelled as he tried to pry Matt off of him. The manager broke free from Matt and prepared to pull the ax from George’s head. Matt tackled him again, this time, taking a still-screaming Lucy down with them. “Please stop tackling me, sir!”

As Matt, the manager, and screaming Lucy wrestled on the ground, George rose from his chair, spraying the white table cloth with blood.

“Hey, Matt,” George said, making the wrestling trio stop in their tracks. “I’m feeling a little woozy here. Could you take me to the hospital now?”

“Sure thing, Buddy,” Matt said. He let go of the manager’s neck, pried Lucy’s fingers from his leg, and rose from the ground. He grabbed the two green cloth napkins from the table and wrapped one around the bleeding wound. Matt dragged George from the Café’s patio and onto the sidewalk where he hailed a cab.

A yellow cab pulled up and Matt quickly opened the door and pushed George in.
“Where to?” the cabby asked as Matt closed the door behind him.

“General Hospital, please.”

“Sure thing,” the cabby said as he pulled from the curb. “So why are you going there?”

Matt was afraid that the cabby would be angry once he noticed that George was bleeding all over his cab, so he answered, “Oh, no reason in particular.”

Matt took the other napkin and began to mop the blood from George’s face.

“You alright there, buddy?”

“I’m alright. Well, except for the ax and all the bleeding,” he told him, making Matt laugh.

The cabby heard this and turned around.

“Holy crap!” he yelled and slammed his foot on the gas. The cab gained speed as it zoomed around traffic. “Hold on there, guy, we’ll be there soon!”

The cab screeched to a halt in front of the emergency entrance. The cabby and Matt carried George through the emergency doors.

“We need a doctor here!” Matt yelled.

Matt had expected some kind of response to two grown men carrying a bloody man with an ax sticking out of his head. But none came. No doctor came running. The people crowded into the dingy waiting area didn’t even look up. The nurse at the front desk finally noticed them.

“Take a number and please wait,” she said.

“My friend has an ax in his head and he’s bleeding profusely!” Matt exclaimed. “We need a doctor right away!”

“Take a number and please wait,” the nurse said sternly.

Matt and the cabby dragged George over to the occupied chairs.
“Hey, can my friend please sit there?” Matt asked a middle-aged man.

“No,” the man replied.

George nodded his head and blood splashed down on the man. He shrieked and leapt up and ran away crying. Matt plopped George down on the seat then strode over to the nurse.

“Look here,” Matt said as looked at the nurse’s nametag. It said ‘Lucy.’ “Look here, Lucy, my friend could very well bleed to death. Get a doctor now!”

“Fine,” Lucy the nurse said and got up and walked away.

Matt walked back to find the cabby gone and the seats around George vacated.

“How you doing, George?” he asked and sat down.

“Alright, except for—well, you know.”

Matt smiled. “That nurse’s name was Lucy. Just like the waitress. Isn’t that weird?”

“That is weird. My ex-wife’s name is Lucy,” George said. “Remember I told you about her? She called this morning to tell me she was getting married…to my brother.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt said. “Is that why you were depressed this morning?”

“Yeah.”

“So you wanted to kill yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“But it didn’t work?”

“No it didn’t”

“Were you going to do it again?”

“Yeah. But then I remembered I had lunch with you. And I was really looking forward to it.”

“So you went out in public with an ax in your head?”

“Well, I couldn’t get it out, and I didn’t want to be late.”

Matt felt guilty for being late for lunch.
“George, promise me you won’t do anything like this again.”
“Don’t worry, I’m through with axes,” George joked then caught the worried look on Matt’s face. “Alright, I promise.”
They sat in silence. Matt saw the cabby enter the hospital with two police officers behind him.
“That one there,” the cabby said as he pointed at Matt. “I think he hit the other guy in the head with an ax.”
Matt panicked; he couldn’t remember if he touched the ax while he was helping George. My fingerprints might be on that thing, he thought to himself. Matt took the napkin he’d used to wipe George’s face. He stood with his back to the police officers and started to discreetly wipe the ax’s handle down.
“Hey!” one of the police officers shouted. “Stop that and sit down!”
Matt had just sat down when Lucy the nurse came back followed by a female doctor.
“Hi, I’m Dr. Lucille Stephens,” the doctor said. “Now let’s take a look at that head.”
George looked at Matt and smiled, “It all comes down to the Lucys, don’t it?”
An orderly came and took a laughing George away. The officer that had yelled at Matt now stood over him, asking him questions. Matt glanced at the officer’s name tag; it said “Officer Greg Lucy.”
Matt smiled.
Autumn Kern Vista
Watercolor on Canvas
14” x 18”
By R. D. Hermansen
Wildfire
By Joan Desmond

I

Even inside you breathe the soot pushing in through cooler vents—pine, cedar, manzanita; the mountain coyotes are burning. How oddly this wet, ashtray scent sticks against the sky, thickens it, drags it down, taints the evenings orange-gray.

II

Everywhere somewhere is sound—helicopter rotors plunge buckets through the lake, sloshing spray, something lost and fallen trails after into the smoke. Old bomber planes foam at fire boasting warlike from their bellies their retardant stains like wound debris fluorescent against the earth. The screaming flames bully on, wasting everything everywhere

III

Even then, inside you remember the drill—unlocked doors, front and back,
closing windows to smudge and ash. The firefighter grimly knocking—
how clear that sharp white moment;
it straightened up the house
recalling the moment it found you
carefully it shuts the door as you leave.
The piteous cry came from the deep, dark regions of the blackened forest, and stumbling around hysterically, the woman tried desperately to follow the sound. The direction was being driven from her ears by the violent wind that shook the trees above, and threatened to uproot the bushes that had brought forth the sumptuous blackberries that she and her son had picked earlier that year.

She negotiated her way frantically through the marshy forest, vaguely heedful of the dangers lurking within the seemingly innocent ground beneath her feet, and her heart plummeted as the wind carried faintly forth the sound of the town clock striking the seventh hour. Timmy should have been home three hours ago.

With fear gnawing at the pit of her stomach, she lurched forward, tripping and stumbling over the jutting roots of the tall, dense trees, in a bid to find her son. How many times had she told him not to take the dangerous shortcut through the marshes of Satyr woods? Her lamp illuminated the surrounding terrain. The infinite trees hit her full force, and with her flowing tears being beaten into her face by the wind, she wondered if she would ever find her son.

The cry came again—this time closer—and she prayed it was not the wind playing tricks on her ears. In fact, she had not stopped praying since she had sat in the kitchen earlier, watching Timmy’s dinner go cold, followed by her heart, at the realization that Timmy was late. Of course, she had done the usual things panic-stricken mothers do: called all his friends, spewed forth a repetition of questions to each child. “No, no, no,” one after another had replied, “he wasn’t with us.” Her innards screamed as her mind envisioned him at the side of the road somewhere.
dying, or kidnapped, or any other numerous horrors her imagination could conjure up.

Stumbling through the branches and underbrush, she could not remember when it had struck her to look for him in the woods. Maybe she was just grasping at straws, but Timmy was all she had left in the world, and she wasn’t giving up hope of finding him there. Suddenly, she heard a small cry to her left, and peering through the trees, she saw the faint outline of red. Uttering his name, she began tearing her way toward her son, oblivious to the scraping of her skin and clothes by the surrounding bushes. He was there—desperately clinging to a fallen branch, waist high in the pit of a bog. “Timmy!” she cried his name again, this time loud and with the force of her lungs behind it. “Hold on. Mommy’s here. I’ll get you!” Grabbing hold of a willow branch, she tore it from its lifeline and started on her hands and knees towards the sodden body of her beloved son.

As Timmy grasped at the branch, the last ounce of energy was depleted from his small arms. He knew all he wanted to do was to embrace the weariness and let his body accept the delicious sleep that was inviting deep within. But at that moment, his mother seized hold of his jacket sleeve and pulled him slowly from the sucking abyss of the living deathtrap. Carrying his mud-soaked form back to the safety of their house, his mother held him tightly by the heat of the large, open fire in the living room, a feature she’d added to the house a year before her husband had passed away.

Droplets of tears cleansed the boy’s face as his mother wept openly, the fear of another loss ebbing slowly from her mind. Letting the warmth of the fire seep its way into his passive body, eliminating all traces of cold and dampness that had pierced his small soul to the core, the boy gradually opened his eyes. “Mommy,” he whispered in a small voice, “I guess I should have listened
to you. Taking a shortcut through Satyr woods was not a good idea.” She just smiled and held him tight. Her nightmare was over and her son was safe within her arms.
Beatific Vision
By Kevin S. Howe

“...listening first with incredulity, then with toleration, and finally with delight, to something so strange and new in their experience as the praise of chastity.”
—C. S. Lewis

When angels, in the former days,
Would visit sons of men,
They weren’t the girlish, happy type,
As we imagine now.
The faithful whom they blessed with news
Would never smile and bow,
But fell as dead before their feet—
Unclean, impure, condemned.

And when I dare to look on you,
An angel, if ever there were,
To stand within your holy gaze,
To lift my eyes to meet
The sacred face, I know I too
Should fall before your feet,
And lie as dead, and feel myself
As well unclean, impure.

But, as the angels offered peace
To those they filled with fear,
And set them on their feet again,
I’ve found one word from you,
A single smile, can give me strength
To stand the blessed view
And find that it is all the same
To love and to revere.
Reflections of the Kern
Watercolor on Canvas
16” x 20”
By R. D. Hermansen
Restless, unable to sleep, I got out of bed, dressed, grabbed my Walkman and keys, and headed for my car. Pulling out of my garage, I steered the car into the night and the moonlight. Green Day’s *American Idiot* filled my mind with sounds of punk rock—or is it rock punk? I drove aimlessly, with no destination in mind—only the overwhelming desire for a new beginning. I wanted peace and headed north on a two-lane, desolate highway winding out of Bakersfield.

I passed lonely oil wells slowly pumping the ground, digging deeper and deeper, in search of Bakersfield’s lifeblood. I am that lone oil well. I’ve been digging deeper and deeper, pumping, searching for that illusive black gold called love, hitting only dry dirt. Standing strong, dust-covered, proud, only to watch oil wells near me gushing in black liquid love. It’s hard to be dry, thirsting. It’s hard to be the only one not bathing in oil.

An orange orchard appeared on the side of the highway as I silently drove. My mind was inundated by the memory of an afternoon years earlier, where two young lovers ran into an orange orchard and made love in the dirt, blanketed by sweet citrus smells. I could almost taste the orange with its sweet citrus nectar dripping down my mouth. My hand unknowingly reached up and wiped imaginary sweet drops of stickiness from my face as the memory of past love converged with reality in an empty car.

I passed by little one-horse towns on the edge of this isolated highway I traveled. I drove for an hour or more before pulling over in the parking lot of a Denny’s restaurant. I wasn’t in the mood for people. I wasn’t in the mood to be stared at for being alone. My mind needed rest. I lay back in the car seat and closed my eyes. Lyrics from Green Day’s “Boulevard of Broken
Dreams” spun around inside my head. I heard Billy Joe Armstrong’s wisdom as he sang:

My shadow’s the only one that walks beside me
My shallow heart’s the only thing that’s beating
Sometimes I wish someone out there will find me
Till then I walk alone
I’m walking down the line that divides me somewhere in my mind
On the borderline of the edge
And where I walk alone
Read between the lines of what’s fucked up and everything’s alright
Check my vital signs to know I’m still alive
And I walk alone.

Surely he knew the ‘single’ state I reside in when he wrote those words.

I slept for a couple hours, waking up to the cold night air that had seeped into my bones. Shivering, I turned the key in the car and woke a determined engine that had, until now, been asleep. I headed south towards Bakersfield and home. I drove steadily, with great concentration willing my eyes to stay awake, to look, to see my surroundings for what they were. The simplicity of an orange orchard with much fruit to be harvested. An oil field with geysers waiting to burst black liquid at any moment. A solitary road leading me back to my home and an electric blanket, where warmth and comfort waits to encompass my body as my mind leaves the obscure and drifts off into realism dreams.
The Storm
By Angela Rose

The stench of alcohol lingers on your breath.
I ask of you, “Why?”
You deny the liquor that courses your veins.
A storm fills the sky.

Bitter insults fly off of your tongue.
I seek shelter from rain.
A drop hits my face, another my arm.
I wince from the pain.

The storm, it grows; lightning begins.
I seek solace in sleep.
The thunder rolls in and keeps me awake.
I huddle and weep.

The storm rages on, feeding off of my tears.
There’s nowhere to hide.
The storm spins out of control and into the night.
Because I asked, “Why?”
Despair is in the eyes of those he passes;  
Surrender to abandonment.  
On every face—men, women, lads, and lasses— 
He sees resigned bewilderment.  
A pilgrimage of death to Londonderry,  
They tell their beads, and pray for grace to Mary.  

October chill blows softly through the group  
Of huddled Irishmen. Disease  
Has stolen everything, a diet of soup  
Reduced their bodies, and the breeze  
Invades with ease what once were brawny souls,  
Now starved of faith to seek for miracles.  

He tugs his hat’s wide brim to shield his face,  
And pulls his wool coat tight.  
His feet trudge on, a wedding-funeral pace.  
Passing farms to left and right—  
Abandoned, or their tenants starved—he stops  
To wander past a house to view the crops.  

Before he nears the shallow bed of dirt,  
He finds a stench pervades the place,  
A well known smell. A tear to match the hurt  
Inside his heart rolls down his face.  
“'Twere like exhumin’ Katie from her peace,”  
He whispers, yet he settles to his knees.
Within a foot of soil, his searching hand
Descries a tuber. Void of hope,
He nonetheless extracts it from the land,
Invokes Saint Isidore and Pope.
The root is brown and firm, of decent size,
And promises nutrition to his eyes.

He breaks it open, praying that the flesh
Is white, but black decay—a cloud,
A noxious stench that fills the air afresh—
Invades his heart. He cries aloud.
Now openly he weeps. A muttered prayer
Falls from his lips, encumbered by despair.

A month ago, his only son set out
On this same road to beg his passage
To America. Infectious doubt
Displaces hope, and terrors ravage
His mind. And yet, what faith his soul can foster
Enables a believing Pater Noster.
Anguish
Acrylic on Canvas
16” x 20”
By J. Hermansen
In “The Story of an Hour” the author, Kate Chopin, begins the story with a young woman being told that her husband has been killed in a work related accident. To her disbelief, the news of her husband’s death does not bring her denial, anger, or great sorrow, but instead begins an afternoon of transformation, the beginning of a new life, the creation of a new woman. Just as it is with the metamorphosis of a caterpillar, its life simple and concentrated only on the demands of life, it eventually is led by natural instinct to build and occupy a cocoon, a resting place, a place where great changes occur and from which it leaves as a new creature, a butterfly. Likewise, Mrs. Mallard’s existing life, like that of the caterpillar, is simple and concentrated on the demands of married life and the will of her husband. With her husband’s death, there is now opportunity to rest, to suspend herself in time, to wrap herself in thoughts of a new life, to create change, and to emerge as a new woman. As a new woman supported by the wings of empowerment, self-assertion, and the control of her own destiny, she can now pursue her will, her ambitions, and her joy.

When considering the demands of Mrs. Mallard’s married life, we first need to consider the time period in which this story was written. Understandably, at the time of this writing, most women are still living in an environment that does not recognize them as equals with men. Although the feminist movement is in existence, women still have not achieved basic equal rights, such as the right to vote, education, ownership of property, and employment. In marriage, the husband is considered the “man of the house” and therefore by default the “ruler of the house,” while the woman is granted a subservient role as “home maker.”
The issue of spousal abuse or withholding of love by the husband is not supported nor implied in the context of the story. Instead, we learn from her thoughts that she saw her husband’s hands as “kind and tender” and his “face never looked saved with love upon her” (510). These sorts of reflections bear prudence and support that abuse or the withholding of love by her husband is neither a contributing factor nor the cause of her loss of joy, her unhappiness in life.

It is the issue of male dominance which appears to be the crux of Mrs. Mallard’s unhappiness in life. Although in her shared thoughts she acknowledges that she “had loved him—sometimes,” but “often she had not” one needs to consider the reasons why (510). Her reasons for justification include her husband’s “powerful will bending hers in blind persistence,” and her own desire for “self-assertion,” and to be “free, body and soul” (510). Under the weight of his “will” her life is reduced to a crawl and the days seem long and she “shudders” to think “that life might be long” (511).

It is with revulsion and contempt that she realizes that her life only exists to serve the need and the will of her husband. Now, with his untimely death she has an opportunity for change, a change that seems ever pending and urgent to her perceived value and status in life. Subconsciously led by instinct, she now seeks time alone; time to collect her thoughts, time to rest and to prepare for the pending transformation. She slowly shuffles and weaves her way up the stairs, to her room, to be alone, to be suspended for a period of time, wrapped in her thoughts, in total isolation.

It is there, in her room, isolated, in front of a window, warm with sun, that she sinks into the roomy chair and allows it to wrap around her. It is there, in her room, that she allows her thoughts, her sight, her hearing to weave a silky lining which binds her in
total isolation as she sits motionless in suspension. There alone, draped, and enclosed in her woven shelter she can now initiate the pending change. As she absorbs the tranquility of the moment, the great change begins as the “delicious breath of rain” fills her lungs, and the “patches of blue sky” show promise of a burden-free future, and the faint “sound of singing” and “sparrows twittering in the eaves” fill her heart with a new joy (510). As she relaxes in the surroundings of the “new life of springs,” she allows it to engage and to massage the change which is taking place in her body and soul (510). Awakened from her transformation by the call of her sister who beckons her to open the door, she first pauses in observation of her new self; she finds it to be complete and pleasing.

She wishes not to leave the moment, but to savor the essence of it. Just as a butterfly drinks the nourishment of life from the flower, Mrs. Mallard wishes to continue to drink the “elixir of life” through the open window of her room (510). Just as a butterfly travels with the breeze of spring and summer days, she likewise wishes to go with the wind, to seek new adventures and travel to new places. Realizing that it was only yesterday that she “shuddered that life might be long,” she now prays that “life might be long” (510).

She opens the door, which represents new life, and walks with renewed confidence, with grace; seemingly without effort she glides down the stairway. As she descends the stairs there is a significant and observable change even in her walk, she no longer meanders aimlessly or shuffles her feet; she now carries “herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory” (511). Her eyes, no longer glazed and lost, now sparkle with a “feverish triumph” (511). She now stands in the presence of others, renewed, fresh, and empowered by the ownership of her new life, destiny, and joy.

It is with the sound of the latchkey in the door and the a-
pearance of her husband that her life now filled with joy ends. When the doctors arrive and examine her, they pronounce the cause of her death as “heart disease—of joy that kills” (511). It is obvious that such words from a doctor would be comforting to the husband and family, but for those who have read this story, for those who have witnessed Mrs. Mallard’s thoughts, would they agree? It is likely that many readers would interpret her death as one of sorrow, not of joy, but I think not.

As it is with the metamorphic process in life, so it is with Mrs. Mallard. She no longer lives to serve the demands of married life and the will of her husband; her life has changed, body and soul. She is a new woman empowered and full of joy. Just as the butterfly cannot and would not wish to return to living as a caterpillar, so it also is for Mrs. Mallard. It is her will and her destiny to die while still embracing the joy of her new-found life. She willfully dies while still clutching the wings and spirit of her newly-formed body and soul; she dies, just as the doctors say, “of joy that kills” (511).

WORK CITED
Poetry Dreams
By Joan Desmond

Oh golden, golden tongue I found dreaming last night
issuing glistening lines
a rolling parade of perfect sound
unheard of metaphor
sweetly orated on the world microphone
sped forth through teletype
bannered behind stadium planes
pasted on national billboards
words that soothed souls
hushed babies’ cries
caused mermaids to sing
and rivers to rise

Oh wicked, wicked tongue I found waking this morning
careless words stuck on my cheek
drooled out on the pillow
scattered between quilted folds
that left me scrambling for coffee
they tumbled over the rug
I snatched at them longingly while they
jumped from the window ledge
and flew free in the air
Sundown
Acrylic on Canvas
11” x 14”
By Karen L. Mitchell
CONTRIBUTORS

N. L. Belardes
N. L. Belardes was 2005 visiting author in Cerro Coso’s online Creative Writing Community. Chicano writer, artist, photographer, punk, social commentator, hockey player, and all around creative juvenile extraordinaire, Belardes is the author of the novels Lords: Part One and Thick White Crust and the children’s book The Blimperwhirls. Belardes currently resides in Bakersfield, California, the very same city where the scandalous and very real Lords of Bakersfield news story still makes headlines. He writes a local blog called Paperback Writer and hosts the first podcast out of Bakersfield, The Buck City Podcast, which features local music, theatre, and more. He has worked as a creative writer for The Las Vegas Fremont Street Experience, TV, and various magazines.

Angela M. Bell
Angela Bell is an Air Force wife raising three boys, as well as a Cerro Coso student currently working towards a degree in psychology. Bell’s hobbies include spending time with family and good friends, writing, reading, riding motorbike, swimming, and enjoying good food, and a wine.

Melinda Carroll
Creative Writing Community participant Melinda Carroll currently works as an office manager for a civil engineering firm in Bakersfield, California. She enjoys writing, reading, horseback riding, music, theater, her friends and family. Melinda began writing in high school and studied creative writing in college. She has had several poems published in the Bakersfield College literary magazine, Grapevine (now called Eclectica). Carroll is currently writing a novel called Killing Cinderella and writes a local blog called One Bakersfield Woman’s Blog to Mankind located at www.matildakay.com.
**Joan Desmond**
Joan Desmond is a former adjunct faculty member at both Cerro Coso and Bakersfield College, where she taught drawing, design, and art appreciation. Desmond’s art has appeared in the literary journals *Orpheus* and *Black Bear Review*. Her studio is in Lake Isabella. Visit www.joandesmond.com for more information.

**Jennifer K. Ellis**
Jennifer Ellis is a Cerro Coso student who will graduate with an AA from Eastern Sierra College Center in May 2006. She is a life-long resident of Bishop, California. She enjoys reading and writing and one day hopes to become a professional writer. Her favorite color is off-white, and her least-favorite color is white.

**J. Hermansen**
Cerro Coso student and artist J. Hermansen resides in the Kern River Valley of California.

**R. D. Hermansen**
Cerro Coso student and artist R. Hermansen resides in the Kern River Valley of California.

**Kevin S. Howe**
A 2005 graduate of Cerro Coso Community College, Kevin is a billing analyst at NAWS China Lake and is currently enamored of 16th and 17th century British poetry.

**Melinda Sue Hutchings**
Having raised four sons, served in the United States Peace Corps for two years, and worked for fifteen years in Public Relations at Rice University in Houston, Texas, Hutchings decided to resettle on a mountaintop in Kernville, California. Her retirement was short-lived when she answered an ad for a K/1st grade instruc-
tional aide position at Wallace Elementary School three years ago. Hutchings is active in the Kern Valley area Sierra Performing Arts (SPA) and enjoys speaking to school children and adults to promote the work of the Peace Corps. She has worked as an editor on past Peace Corps affiliation newsletters. “Letter from West Africa” is her first published work.

Valyrie Ice
Valyrie Ice has been keeping a writing notebook since childhood and has always been an avid reader of good literature. She has always found language fascinating. She loves the melody of word combinations and the powerful understanding that words can evoke. Currently, Ice is a substitute teacher in the Eastern Sierra region of California. She enjoys painting, skiing, and hiking.

Karen L. Mitchell
Cerro Coso student Karen Mitchell decided to return to school “for something to do” and found that she truly loved art. Now she wants to paint everything!

Angela Rose
Angela Rose is twenty-six years old and lives in the beautiful Kern River Valley with her three sons and her beloved pup, Stacy. She attends Cerro Coso Community College full-time at the KRV campus, where she also works in the bookstore. She holds office as the secretary for the Associated Student Body and is a member of the Creative Writing Community (CWC) through the school. Rose first discovered her love for poetry more than fifteen years ago, and that passion still thrives within her. She says that one of the goals in her life has always been to get her work published.

Janet Thorning
Janet Thorning’s short stories and poetry have appeared in Write
Away, Inscape, Birmingham Arts Journal, Long Story Short, Carillon, and WOW, an e-publication for writers. She is currently working on her first novel.

**Dan Tuttle**

Dan Tuttle recently retired from his first career and enrolled at Cerro Coso Community College, Lake Isabella. His goal is to achieve an AA at Cerro Coso and then transfer to California State University, Bakersfield for the completion of his BA. Tuttle is presently considering going into teaching as his second career.