



Issue No. One

Spring 2008

Table of Contents

My Wheel Is in the Dark.....	3
Jenna Lechner	
Groceries.....	4
Ross Concillo	
how to be unforgivable.....	5
Dorothy Ice	
Hearts and Minds.....	6
Elin Guttormsen	
The Abandoned Living Room.....	10
Jenna Lechner	
Ferry Park.....	11
Lauren Hoelle	
A Sort of Prayer.....	12
Laura Pizzo	
Venice Beach, California.....	13
Brooke Borcharding	
Poem for Some Parents of Mine.....	14
Cody Bohan	
Asilomar.....	15
Greg Blake Miller	
Venice Beach Café.....	19
Brooke Borcharding	
Auspices.....	20
Lauren Hoelle	
First Comes Chaos (then comes freedom).....	21
Jessie Weitzel	
one possibility of an angel.....	22
Dorothy Ice	
Body Slam.....	23
Michael Michel	
Unfinished.....	29
Emma Grant	
My Name.....	30
Ross Concillo	
Highway 5.....	31
Lauren Hoelle	



Jenna Lechner

My Wheel Is in the Dark

encaustic/mixed media

11" x 14"

Groceries

By Ross Concillo

There
There was a grocery list

In my pocket
In my left pocket

Chicken noodle soup, broccoli, strawberry yogurt, baby carrots, Snapple, Q-tips,
wine, celery, ranch, ice, avocados, Cheerios, DONT FORGET ICE

She must have written it
It's her handwriting

I don't even eat these things

Chicken noodle soup, broccoli, strawberry yogurt, baby carrots, Snapple, Q-tips,
wine, celery, ranch well I don't eat Q-tips
Nobody eats Q-
I did like strawberry yogurt
I do like strawberry yogurt

She underlined ice
She wrote ice twice
Caps
Were we having a party?

Has it been that long since I washed these jeans?
Should I call her?

Chicken noodle soup, broccoli, strawberry yogurt, baby carrots, Snapple, Q-tips,
wine, celery, ranch, ice, avocados, Cheerios
Ice

Her handwriting

how to be unforgivable

By Dorothy Ice

after the scene she caused at dinner,
she wondered

if there would still be room for her
among the happy ones.
having said the worst of all things,
as she clawed at him with those wild and burning eyes.
she might as well have put something else on, for all the good it did her.
at least then she wouldn't have felt so
unbearably lonely
if it were torn fishnets and stained lips.
she could have protected herself.

but instead she was wearing a turtleneck,
instead she was leaning across the table
lettuce stuck between her teeth and hissing

listen to me (you bastard):
you have to love me.

Hearts and Minds

By Elin Guttormsen

"I put my heart and my soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process."

-Vincent van Gogh

John had lost the damned brain. The damned, brand-new brain, only recently donated. John had been the doctor to remove the brain from the body; it was quick, clean, fine work—some of his best. He did his best work on the dead; there was no pressure, no fear of failure, since the dead patient couldn't die again. Nothing could go wrong. Still, Dr. Lawson had been there during the procedure, hovering, reminding John to take extra care, since the family wanted the body returned for the open casket. John thought it odd to mourn before a body, an empty vessel, when the best part was already gone—the brain, which was miles away from the funeral home, sitting in a cooler, soaking in formaldehyde.

But now the brain, *that* brain, was gone. Dr. John Manning had left the brain in its cooler, safe in the hospital lecture hall—or so he thought. Ingrid had treated John to lunch to celebrate his successful presentation. Upon returning from his hearty steak lunch, John had found the cooler, and the valuable mass of tissue inside it, gone. And all the janitor had to say to him was, "Check the dumpster."

So now, John stood, riding the elevator the nineteen floors downward. Nineteen floors that were taking him down, down, down to the basement so he could sift through a dumpster, dirtying his clean white coat.

Floor 19, 18, 17. The elevator smelled of sweat and aluminum. John thought of the times he had stood in this elevator, his own brow dripping with sweat, shouting "Charge!" and "Clear!" and thrusting defibrillator paddles onto the chest of a patient whose darting, frightened eyes had already gone still. 14, 13. He remembered how, calling time of death, he'd wipe the sweat from his eyes and flick it onto the aluminum wall, glaring at Ingrid as she watched him in pity.

10, 9, 8. But Ingrid was a nurse, and she never held the paddles. At the end of the day, after the Chinese take-out, and the Dateline, and the quick, routine sex, she'd move her mouth close to his ear, and ask if he needed to talk about it. She always worried that the deaths weighed on John. And he always grunted, rolled away from her warm body, and went to sleep. 3, 2, 1. Ingrid never held the paddles, so she'd never know.

The elevator doors opened. John jogged past the cars toward the dumpsters. Lifting the lid, he looked inside, and his eyes fell on the rust and the peeling green paint of the dirtied floor. The doctor swore; the damn dump truck must have already come. He moved to the second dumpster, then the third and the fourth, lifting each lid, cursing to himself, and slamming it closed. John lifted his foot to kick one of the dumpsters, then thought better of it—he didn't want to scuff his shiny black shoes with grime and filth.

John wondered if they would take the cost to replace the brain out of his paycheck. Or worse, could it unhinge his career? He was up for tenure in two months. Could such a stupid, irrelevant mistake lose him something he had been working so long for?

The doctor decided it was too early to give up, to crawl, tail-tucked, to the chief and admit his foul error. John ran to his car and drove out of the garage. He couldn't be far behind the dump truck, and the dump was what, twenty minutes away?

Driving down I-105, John thought about the man, the husband of the brain—that is, the woman to whom the brain had belonged. He had been in the room with the man—Mr. Novak, that was his name—while Dr. Lawson asked for the organs. And Mr. Novak had responded: a nod, a nod, a falling tear, a nod. John had sat, silent and uncomfortable, watching the poor man give away his wife's brain, her eyes, her kidneys.

Later, exiting the room, Mr. Novak caught John's arm.

"I guess it's what she would have wanted, Cassandra, my wife. Our daughter is in med-school, and we've been swimming in the tuition bills. I guess it's only fitting that Cassandra could help in one last way—you know, donating herself for the sake of science, so maybe, you know, you'll learn more about a brain disease, maybe cure it. And I guess the money is helping our daughter become a doctor."

John cleared his throat and responded, "You'll get about 4,600 dollars in two weeks."

That was all John knew to say. He couldn't tell the man that since Cassandra didn't have a neurological disorder, they weren't going to study her brain, or cure anything, for that matter. The brain would sit in formaldehyde, in a cooler, in a medical storage room. Every few weeks, a doctor would sign it out to use it as a prop during a lecture, like John had done. Sometimes the brain would even be lent out the university, where a professor would hold it up in front of students, to "oohs" and "ahhs," and maybe even a couple "eww gross!"

John pulled up to the dumpsite and was directed by an attendant to the most recently dumped pile.

"Whadya lookin' for?" the man asked.

"Just something important to me," John replied.

"Then why'd ya throw it away?" the man called after John and chuckled as the doctor ran to the newest mountain of garbage.

John realized immediately that he should have brought gloves and a mask—and a knife to open up the garbage bags. He ripped open the first bag with his hands. The stench hit him in a wave, and he tried to cough out the smell of rot, excrement, vermin. He sifted through the contents, his hands trembling and shrinking back from the touch of wet Kleenex, chicken bones, tampon applicators. As soon as he had sifted enough to know there was no cooler in the trash bag, he staggered back and retched.

Wiping the vomit from his mouth, John moved on to the next bag. One down, fifty or so to go. The last time John had thrown up was his first day as an intern. He'd seen a six-year-old girl come in with multiple stab wounds. Her father, high on amphetamines, had attacked the girl and her mother. The mother had died on the scene. John, just a helpless intern, had been pushed out of the way by the attendings. From the corner where he stood, he couldn't see the girl. He could just hear her, weeping, wailing, and screaming for her mama. And eventually, the wailing stopped.

And now John was retching, not because he'd seen the brutal death of a little girl, but because of the smell of garbage.

2, 3, 4, garbage bags ripped open and searched. John shook himself, trying to flick off his repulsion like he was flicking sweat off his hand. He was repulsed by remembering himself as an intern. 10, 11 bags. That naiveté, that open heart, those dreams of saving lives. 12, 13, 14 bags. Back then, he'd thought nothing of tenure, but only about joining Doctors Without Borders. He was going to go to Africa and save the continent, one village at a time. He'd had no thoughts of tuition bills, or salary, or promotions.

17, 18, 19 bags. Covered in food grease, dog shit, and wood shavings, John stood up for fresh air. He looked, past his mountain of trash, past the other mountains of trash, past the mile of grass meadow, to the wide, rushing river in the distance. It would be the McKenzie he thought—or maybe the Willamette. It didn't really matter. John hadn't been to either river since childhood, when his father had taken him salmon fishing.

"You won't find cleaner water anywhere in the world, son," his father said on one trip. "It's clean and pure, and holier than the holy water at that church your mother takes you to."

John heard the caws of crows, and turned to look.

"Son of a bitch!" he screamed, and ran toward the birds, waving his arms madly. The crows scattered up into the sky, leaving behind the mangled, grey-pink mass. John knelt to examine the brain; it was smeared with dirt and grime, and covered in peck marks. An entire piece of the frontal lobe was gone. *The part that let her speak*, he thought. There was a jagged rip in the somatosensory cortex. *The part that let her feel*.

John reached out and placed his hand on the brain. It was solid, hardened by the formaldehyde. Not tender, and soft as butter, as it should have been—as it was, when she was alive.

John remembered the moment when he decided to become a doctor. He was five, and his mother was reading *Anatomy for Kids: A to Z* to him. After "H is for Heart" John had pressed his hand to his heart, to feel the life beating in his chest. The beat was quick and light, and fluttered. He had put his hand to his mother's chest. He could feel her warmth, and heard the slow song of her heart beat. "Bum-bum, bum-bum," John and his mother had sung together.

Maybe John had wanted to be a doctor before then—after all, he did already have the anatomy book—but it was in that moment, when he felt the beating life in his mother's chest, that John decided to be a doctor, and to keep the life beating in people.

Now, as John picked up the brain, he felt the weight of death in it. He supposed he should bring the brain back to the hospital so the damage could be recorded, and the brain properly disposed of with other medical waste. But then, it would just go back with the trash, again.

So, though it was illegal, John did it anyway. He walked to the river, cradling the brain in his hands. In his dirtied white coat, carrying a human brain, he probably looked like a deranged serial killer, John thought. But he walked to the river, not caring if the attendant or anyone else saw.

At the riverbank, John waded in. The mountain spring water hit him with icy force, like a shock from defibrillator paddles. When he was three or so feet deep, John submerged the brain into freezing water, and wedged it between a large rock and the river bottom. He knew he was being an idiot; the brain would probably be eaten by fish, or dislodge itself and float down river, only to terrify

some unsuspecting fisherman. But, maybe, before that happened, the clean, pure water would wash away the formaldehyde. Maybe the brain would soften again, and be like it was when it was Cassandra's mind.

And then, though he was already quivering and chattering his teeth, John submerged himself in the river too, trying to wash off the grime and dirt. He cupped the cold water in his hands and poured it over his head, letting it trickle down his face and mix with his own warm tears. He stood there in the river, letting the clean, holy water soften him again.



Jenna Lechner

The Abandoned Living Room

digital photograph

2006

Ferry Park

By Lauren Hoelle

She taps one finger, keeping time,
One white leg of the spider
Her hand makes in the dusk
Tight on the cigarette-burned bench
Upon which she swings
Back and forth,
Her torso like a snake,
Back and forth,
Her head uncommitted to yes, then no,
And enjoys the hard wood pushing into
That divot of flesh where the leg curves up
Into a more artful feature.

She snaps a rubber band, the kind used to keep
The bread bag shut, on the top of her wrist,
And watches the welts fade and reappear,
Amongst a host of ink stars,
Like magic.

She watches the stars come out above
Still keeping time with that index finger
And favors the crows
Which pop out of the gummy trees
Which pick up trash and keep
Closer company.

She counts the pieces of a dead crow in the river
Keeps track of the number of feathers
On her free hand.
She snaps her gum
And spreads her legs in waiting
And sings to herself.

A Sort of Prayer

By Laura Pizzo

I hardly recognize you
in your camouflage, combat
boots, buzz cut. Even
your rosacea hides
to make you look
like a man.

War taught you to detect
an undetectable bomb - hands on
training only. You feel guilty
when a mine explodes, killing
three, but what can you do
when the sky falls from
the ground up?

We met in the quad – you had
blue hair, cigarettes, and
a friend's car. You called me Sissy
when there was no love left
at home. Please,
don't leave me at ground zero again.



Brooke Borcharding

Venice Beach, California

oil on canvas

36" x 48

2007

Poem for Some Parents of Mine.

By Cody Bohan

Critical narcissistic bull—

Sedated seamstress of dementia—

Unite!

Nurture fear in the child of freedom.

Lullabies of transparent cages and scary masks.

ASILOMAR

By Greg Blake Miller

Again, sports talk. Far too many mornings of sports talk.

You could have gotten a new CD, but that would cut the week's take-home to \$130, a figure that helps you avoid paid entertainment altogether. So sports talk it is. It's free, it fills the road hours, and where else can you hear a three-hour debate on whether a young tennis star was out of line to tell two teenage admirers, "You can't afford me"?

So you drive down Sunset and Hollywood turns into Beverly Hills, which morphs into Bel Air, which shape-shifts into Brentwood, which comes gloriously out of its cocoon and spreads itself into the golden-winged monarch of Pacific Palisades.

You turn right, head up a mountain, just for the heck of it. You're running early today. Up, up the winding streets, just to rid yourself of that feeling of flatness you get in the lowlands, to add a vertical dimension to your horizontal life. Then back down the hill, back across Sunset, and into the lost world of neighborhoods. These look like good old American family streets. In Los Angeles, anything that looks like a good old American family street is something you'll never afford. Ever.

But here you are, driving into the forbidden land. People from other places think that wealthy L.A. is all nauseating glitz, the kind of place any tasteful, modest chap wouldn't want to be anyway. Well, you're a tasteful, modest chap, and, just as soon as you get a chance, you can tell them they're wrong. There are streets upon streets here of modest wood-panel homes with old-lady rose gardens out front and the steady woof of Labradors out back. This, you have convinced yourself, is Normal Civilization, and Los Angeles wants most of all to hide it from you. You can't have it anyway.

You find yourself very interesting. You studied history, chased down that master's and bagged it as a trophy. You accepted a faraway job; you always liked the sound of *faraway*. You bounced around on shivery shins outside the Kremlin gates, interviewing passers-by about the president's bypass. You pulled about seventeen bucks a day, but it made for nice cocktail conversation with yourself. Eventually you came home.

You have designed your entire life to avoid a boring biography. That's what six-year-olds do when they dream. No matter what Madison Avenue says, those dreams are better left to six-year-olds. Somewhere around the age of twenty it should have dawned on you that you were going to need to live somewhere someday, and that they don't give away houses for free.

You had the chance to make yourself useful to the world. Instead you made yourself useful to the six-year-old inside you. You can tell it stories of the thrilling raids of the Crimean Tatars. The six-year-old will squeal with delight and fall asleep on your chest. Try breathing after that.

You have nothing to sell.

Therefore, you have nothing to buy.

But it is pleasant to drive up to Normal Civilization, park your car, and take a hike.

The hills just north of Normal Civilization would seem puny, dry, and twiggy to a Coloradan or a Utahn or a Himalayan. But one can't spy the Pacific from Everest. Just north of Normal Civilization you can almost imagine you're in a wild place. It is exhilarating to hike past pinecones and coyote droppings smack dab in the middle of a ten-million-man city-state.

You turn off the ignition and the sports radio man finds it within himself to shut up. You get out, stretch your legs, your arms, breathe. You can breathe!

You grab some plastic bags and put them in your backpack.

She came to Los Angeles trusting you. Came to town knowing, after all, that her man was an educated man. That surely he would be able to put four walls around this love. It was only a matter of time.

She is bright, learned, classy. Picks up foreign languages like scents in the wind. Goes to job interviews with young men in nice slacks who ask her questions out of management handbooks and then never call back. Men!

She has the soul of an artist, but when she needs to she can put on a magnificently navy-blue cloak of efficiency and make the lives of CEOs infinitely easier. Of course, it occurs to you that she was not put on this earth to make CEOs' lives easier, but by making their lives easier, she could make your life easier, so you keep taking her to job interviews. If she gets a good job, you reason, you can just keep being interesting.

You walk to the back of the nearby van and take the dogs out. Up in the mountains yesterday, you had two black labs and a brown and you galloped ahead of all the other dogwalkers and the whole thing became an athletic drama and you were winning the Iditarod of the California Cliffs. Today, you're down on the streets of Normal Civilization, and there will be different delights and different dogs and you end up with the leashes of a Samoyed, a Dalmatian, and a dark-furred melting-pot American. The group goes one way. You make an absentminded turn and go somewhere else entirely.

This was not part of your plan to be interesting. Since you started, it had, of course, crept into your devious mind that this might look cute on your résumé some misty day when you live in Normal Civilization. *Look at the way he made a living as a young man!* But that's not what brought you here. It was time to do something. It was time to drop the conceit that you would make a life with your mind and your Tatars and Cossacks and conspiratorial boyars. It was also time to break with the indentured servitude into which every Humanities major at some point enlists himself: No More Internships. Ever.

You looked for a paying job. You meant business. Businesses were uniformly unmoved by the fact that you meant business. In the end, Kinko's read your application and silently declined. So you seized the last brass ring on the carousel: Two hours and forty-five minutes a day. An hour's drive each way. Thirty-two dollars and fifty cents. Benefits: the sky, the movement of muscles, the kindness of dogs. One day a motormouthed, drug-cultured woman had come out

for a hike-interview and, atop the hill at Inspiration Point, breathed deeply and declared, "And you guys get paid for this?"

Yes, you did. And you were proud of it. Responsibility, regularity, three ten-dollar bills, and a dose of humility: a recovering intellectual should not pass up such opportunities.

You put your hand in the bag, reach down and grab the tan-brown paste. Then you turn the bag inside out, tie a knot at the top, and carry it along. It swings aromatically along in your leash hand, incense for a canine congregation, until you reach the altar of a city-sanitation plastic receptacle. The receptacle is empty. Your bag drops with a pleasing thud.

You like the house with the green gables. It is gingerbread, but you like gingerbread. Someone carved these curlicues, forms forged through five hundred years in dark Bavarian forests to stand for home, kind shelter in the wilderness, Normal Civilization. Whether a child-eating witch lives behind those gingerbread doors is no concern of yours right now. Right now you are picturing yourself there, your wife there, the children you dream of having, and, barking in the back, a dog of your own. Right now you see yourself in Normal Civilization, and it is good, and you walk on, smiling.

A squirrel scampers up a mulberry tree. A smug brown cat tries to stare your dogs down, thinks better of it, and tears into the broad-leafed bushes. You hold your panting minions tight and tell them they are good, and you walk on, smiling.

An old lady raking leaves looks across the street at your shaggy, sparkle-eyed companions and says, "That's quite a crew!" She is good, you think, and you walk on, smiling.

An ancient Golden Lab scampers across the street on tired legs to sniff your dogs. You hold your team a little tighter, just in case, but when the Lab lives up to its kindly face and harmless gait, you let the greetings continue. You pet the Lab. You pet your pals. You tell them all they are good. "Okay, buddy," you say softly to the Lab. "We gotta go. Nice to meet you!" You give your dogs a short pull to move on, and the Lab watches thoughtfully, wagging his tail goodbye. The Lab's owner stands across the street. "Thanks for being gentle," he calls to you. "Dogs can sense that." You decide he, too, is good, and you walk on, smiling.

You will not give up. America's soil has not dried up yet. You will find a place to put your roots. You will find a place to hold your wife as the sun sets. You will find a window behind which you can sip lemonade and watch the dying of the light.

Sunset Boulevard is the scoliotic spine of Heaven. The dreams start at the base of the spine, the rear-end of the public imagination, right there in Hollywood, and they work their way north, past pomposity, through canyons ribbed with skinny lanes of tree-shrouded homes and on past brighter blocks of one-story-backyard-barbecue earthly aspirations. A place for family, a place to exhale and draw breath anew and step out to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond the highest vertebra, a place where you need not exhale because the air is taken from your lungs by force. Here your breath is replaced with something grander, if you are willing to accept it.

Heaven is an unruly host, and cheeky too. As you drive west, Sunset Boulevard tunelessly, relentlessly hums "But Not For Me." You can't drown it out with sports radio. But at the top of the backbone, past earthly dreams and perilously close to the cliff side and the rolling blue mind of God, you hear a different song. You can't hum it, but you think it sounds a lot like hope. Someday it will hurt to remember all this. You will not want to forget.

You have reached Asilomar Street. You and your dogs walk the dirt path along the cliffs to a crumbling stone point. You sit down on a bench and stand up again. You walk to the edge of the cliff so that your toes touch only air. Below you there is a trailer park hugging the seaside, Winnebago stubble on Heaven's chin.

The breeze grows into something stronger. Your sweat cools. You gaze out at the rhythm of moving blue. To your left, your dogs stand silent, squinting, seeing. You swear you feel the tickle of your wife's wind-whipped hair on your right cheek. A gust ruffles the brush. The ocean pulses. Heaven yawns and shudders and stands. The dogs sink their claws into its shoulders. You hold onto them. You steady yourself in the sway. You hold on.



Brooke Borcharding

Venice Beach Cafe

oil on canvas

60" x 48"

2007

Auspices

By Lauren Hoelle

I am struggling
With the delicacy required
To write you a poem.

When you are loving me, I cannot help
Crawling on top of you
And stiffening my back.

But you must have known what you were getting into
When you picked me up by the docks-
Where only fools who

Took the plunge
Must remain-
Addicted to the pieces at the bottom of the lake,

Attracting others with their pieces,
The ones dipping their toes
Into the flat black.

You love a beast, my sweet.
And with every tender breath you take
My vertebrae, my hands thicken.

Forgive me for backing you
Into corners and shadows
When I want to feast.

Strength in gentleness, you say.
But when I am in love I cannot speak
I can only watch you step

Over the velvet ropes *you* laid down long ago,
Sucking in those heavy breaths
I've just heaved out.

You, coming towards your night,
Setting the full moon in my blackest pupils
Whispering onto my glistening face

You.
Don't change back.
Another night, another night...



Jessie Weitzel

First Comes Chaos (then comes freedom)

plaster, wax, synthetic hair, sand, acrylic paint, deer antlers,
sea urchin spines, down pillow, and nylon thread

49" x 18"

2008

one possibility of an angel

by Dorothy Ice

me? no.
never done any drugs, never wanted to.
so i can't exactly write about it
but then, i do see the lovely darkness
in people and stroke my own with soft fingers.

like a child, delighting in how we both have belly buttons.

and maybe it will keep me from catching on fire
when one day i face my demon
at a picnic, in the sunshine.
i will take his hand, breathe without
my lacy wisp of a spirit
slipping through my nostrils,
onto his slithery tongue.

then maybe we'll just
drink milk together,
and gurgle and giggle
as the cold fills our bones.

Body Slam

By Michael Michel

He cried in bed most mornings. His wife had never been woken by one of his fits, but he thought she might be feigning ignorance. He rubbed the tears away on his pillow.

“Good morning, Nick.” Maia lay on her side, smiling. “Rough night?”

Nick nodded as Maia rested her head on his chest. “Sorry, honey. When I get my promotion at the bank we can think about seeing Dr. Riley again. You have to start getting good sleep. You’re a wreck by the time I get home from work.”

“Yeah, I’m a wreck alright. A washed up, fucking wreck.”

Maia sat up on her elbow, face going sour. “Nick Miller, you have to stop talking like that...for your own good. It doesn’t do our family any good if all you contribute is your shitty attitude. What if Brady or Maddy heard you say that? You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Don’t worry, I am.”

“You’re an asshole.” Maia came around the bed and helped him to a sitting position. “Alright, sit up.” He sat up. “Legs.” She helped him swing his legs over the bed. “And stand.” He stood.

After she got him out of bed, she laughed because he was crippled, or maybe it was the roaring fart he unleashed as he took his first step towards the bathroom. It could have been either, he thought.

Maia brushed Nick’s teeth. A little paste leaked down his chin and dripped onto his old gray robe. Maia grabbed a rag and carefully wiped it away. As Nick watched her work he noticed his stomach pushing down his shorts. Fat jiggled where abs of steel once rippled.

“Here, honey.” Maia handed him his walker, twenty pounds of aluminum shame.

“Thanks,” Nick said. He nearly fell on his first push forward and Maia grabbed hold of his waist. Lifting my two hundred and fifty pound body each day has made her strong, Nick thought.

“Whoa, whoa! Where do you think you’re going in such a hurry? Dr. Riley said to lift, step, and then push. Now let’s try again, and this time with a little more effort. If you fall on your face, I’m not helping you up.” Maia grinned.

“Yeah right. Like you’d let me fall.” Nick gripped the rubber like a baby clutching its mother’s finger. He lifted as high as he could—an inch or so—took a mincing step, and then pushed the cart.

“Good! Slow, and easy. Amazing what you can do when you focus, huh?”

“Yeah, I can walk. People have done it since the dawn of time.” Nick smirked, pleased with his witty comment.

“Alright smart ass, keep it up and I’ll push you down the stairs.”

“You keep it up and I’ll fall on my face. Have fun helping me up.” They both laughed as they made their way across the bedroom. Maia rose onto her toes to plant a quick kiss on her husband’s stubbled cheek.

Nick looked at the shelves on the wall as he passed. He couldn’t resist the pull towards the gallery of painful memories. Trophies, placards, and pictures of his fighting days adorned the glass shelving. He paused.

“Maia. Why won’t you put this crap away?”

“No.”

If he could, Nick would have smashed the pictures.

He studied a photograph of him and his two trainers, each with their arm around the other’s shoulder. Sweat covered Nick’s muscled body and his trainers wore towels around their necks. The photo was taken moments after Nick won his title shot.

“Come on, Nick, let’s go.”

He barely heard her. He was deep in the past now. Wet salt filled his mouth; his muscles felt so full of blood he could hardly throw a punch. The crowd screamed for action. His corner screamed for leg kicks. He felt constriction, like the squeeze of a python, around his waist as he was jerked off his feet...

“Honey?”

A tear rolled down Nick’s cheek as he tore his eyes from the picture and snapped back to reality. He started forward. He wanted to lift the walker high in the air and snap it in two.

In the living room of their one-story rental home was Nick’s recliner. Maia gently eased him into the chair where he spent most of his days.

“Alright. I’m gonna go get the kids up and get dressed.” She handed him the channel changer and walked to Brady and Maddy’s room.

Nick flipped on the television. A wave of excitement passed through him when he saw that a barbeque cookout show had begun. Barbequing was one of his favorite past times—well, parties in general—but barbequing was one thing Nick always looked forward to. He took pride in his skill and people seemed to enjoy themselves when he grilled.

Nick sighed and switched to a comedy show. Grill tongs would feel like a sledgehammer in his hands.

Maia returned thirty minutes later, her blonde ponytail swinging from side to side with feminine grace. She wore a deep-blue suit; Nick knew it brought out her eyes without having to see them. Nick’s son Brady zombie-walked to the center of the living room a second after his mother; he had his head tilted back in an exaggerated act of exhaustion. He flopped on the floor in front of the television, rolled to his back, and looked at Nick with sleepy eyes.

“What’s up buddy?”

Brady covered his face with a floppy arm. “Nothing...sleepy.”

Nick smiled. “Uh-huh. School’s been hard?”

Brady sat up looking confused. “I don’t have school, it’s sum—.”
Confusion turned to laughter. “Hey! Don’t try to trick me, old man.”

Nick laughed and called to Maia. “Did you hear what our son just called me?”

Maia leaned out from behind the kitchen cabinets as she made breakfast.
“No. What?”

“Old man.”

Maia laughed.

Nick turned the channel to Spongebob Squarepants for Brady. “Where’s Maddy?” he asked his wife.

"She refuses to get up, so I'm just going to get her before I leave. She says she's sick, but she isn't."

Nick nodded. Maddy had been doing the 'I think I'm sick' routine since she was three.

"Don't forget; Beth's picking the kids up around noon, so don't fall asleep or something."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to be awake when she gets here."

"No, no, why is she taking the kids?"

"Oh." Maia emerged from the kitchen with a plate of scrambled eggs, a piece of wheat toast covered in peanut butter and a glass of water. "She's taking them to register for soccer and then to visit with Grandma for a while." Maia sat on the couch. "Brady, your food's sitting in the kitchen."

Brady pushed himself from the ground and went into the kitchen. Maia brought Nick's plate to rest on his stomach—still holding it—and put the fork in her husband's hand. "You're doing it today," she said.

Slow and steady, Nick stuck his fork in the eggs and placed them in his mouth, then repeated. Between bites he said, "Can we really afford for the kids to play soccer?"

Maia pursed her lips in frustration. "Yes. No more worrying for you, I told you last week I already budgeted for it."

"What about cleats, shin guards, pictures and all that stuff?"

"Budgeted for that too, now stop fretting."

Nick looked at her for a long moment as she gave him a drink of water. It took a minute, but finally he noticed that something about his wife's appearance had changed; something was missing from her usual outfit.

"Where is the necklace your grandma gave you for your twenty-first birthday?"

Maia turned her head to tell Brady not to get egg on the carpet. "What?"

Nick glared at her. "How much?"

"How much what, honey?" She called him honey when she wanted to soften him up.

"How much did you get for that necklace?"

She stared at the ceiling as if remembering how to compute astrophysics, "Two hundred or so. I think. Yeah, about two hundred."

It made him sick with guilt. "And I am betting that soccer is what? Two hundred."

She reached down and began distractedly fiddling with a loose thread on his shorts. Nick could feel tears coming. "It should have been one of my trophies. That necklace was your grandma's. Damn it Maia." His fork slipped with his focus, sending the rest of his food all over his robe and shorts.

"Shit, Nick." Maia stood and collected a few of the bigger chunks onto Nick's empty plate. "Brady, could you help clean your dad?"

Nick could feel his ears burning. He sat, stone-faced as his seven-year-old cleaned him. He didn't say thank you. He was too angry: angry with Maia, angry with his worthless body.

Maddy came from her room and climbed into his lap without a word. It took all his effort to bend his head forward to kiss hers. They could care less about his uselessness, they all loved him—or maybe they just loved the memory

of what he once was. He felt like his heart was being slowly rolled in broken glass, each kiss, hug and unselfish act from his family another stabbing shard.

Maia approached holding his water glass and two pills; one for pain, one for joint and tendon lubrication that would help him move around. Nick took the pills and tried putting them in his mouth, but the fire in his back wouldn't let his arm bend far enough and Maia had to help. "Nick, I love you," she stared at him, letting the statement hang in the air, "but you're wrong, dead wrong. I don't care if we have two cents to our name; our children are going to get to do the things all the other children get to do: sports, ballet, gymnastics...martial arts." The last was like a clap of thunder in Nick's ears. "Now, I'm not blaming you for anything, but it's real hard to run this household by myself and I'm doing my best, so don't get mad at me and throw childish fits.

"Some day you're going to be able to live like you used to, but right now, I need you to stay level headed and strong for me, I want to see that you can still be the man you were before. Hopefully, we can go back to Dr. Riley soon and you can finally start working. Maybe even one day you'll fight again."

Nick started to talk but Maia cut him off. "I will never sell one of your trophies just because they give you a false sense of regret. Those are my memories too; I was with you through it all." Tears welled in her eyes as she continued. "You think it's all about you, you think you're the only one who wishes our lives were different. Well guess what, they're not, get over it. You're still a man; you have children to think about."

He gave no reply as she grabbed her purse and left for work.

You're still a man; you have children to think about. Maia's words refused to leave his mind.

Nick leaned forward—but not far—trying to see if it was in fact the mail truck outside. A styrofoam to-go box on wheels decorated with a blue eagle rolled down the street. "Brady."

"Yeah?" His voice sounded muffled coming from his bedroom.

"Mail." Light footsteps preceded the boy. "Remember to stay where I can see you and leave the door open." Brady nodded as he stepped out and ran to the mailbox then back to the house.

Brady was calling out the names in the top left corners of each envelope as he walked through the door. "Another Bed Bath and Beyond coupon."

"Trash."

"Shell credit card."

"Trash."

"Popular Science Magazine."

"On the end table."

"Cincinnati Family Therapy Clinic." Nick scrunched his brow when Brady read the name.

"Let me see that." Brady handed him the letter and got him the gold, dull-edged opener.

Nick read the letter three times. He was having trouble believing what he was reading. It was an old bill, almost six months past, for seven thousand dollars.

Nick's eyes studied the bill as he spoke to Brady, "Give me the phone. I want you to take Maddy to your room and stay there 'til I call for you." Brady

grabbed a headband off the table next to Nick's chair and took the phone from the receiver, placing the elastic band around his father's head with the phone under it. The bitter taste of iron filled Nick's mouth as his blood pressure rose.

"No, I'm watching Hannah Montana Br—,"

"Go with your brother now." Nick's tone left Maddy no room for argument. She ran past Brady to their room, crying.

Nick began dialing the number to the insurance agency. Slow and steady.

The woman on the other line seemed nice enough, but Nick was in no mood to be pleasant. Nothing, there was absolutely nothing the agency could do about the bill. It seemed like only a few seconds before he hung up and dialed his wife.

"American National Bank, this is Maia."

"Maia." Nick stopped, seething. He regretted calling his wife before collecting his thoughts.

"Hello? Nick?"

"Maia...I just opened a bill for seven thousand dollars from the Cincinnati Family Therapy Clinic."

"Oh. Well did you call the insurance company and tell them about it?"

"Yeah. It's not a mistake. This is real. Supposedly, they have been trying to reach us."

"Nick, that's not our fault."

"It doesn't matter, Maia. We still used their services."

"Maia, what are we going to do? Our budget is so strict right now I can hardly move."

Nick could hear Maia's exhausted breaths. "I don't know. We will have to figure something out. I can't deal with this right now; we'll talk about it when I get home."

"Okay. Love you."

"I love you too honey. Don't worry, I'll think of something."

Nick hung up and called to Brady and Maddy.

The room seemed to spin a little as he looked around at his dingy rental home. Even with the tax breaks and social security and all the rest, seven thousand dollars would put them behind bars and their kids in a foster home. What could Nick do? What had he ever done since his injury? *You're still a man; you have children to think about.* The only thing that had hurt more than Maia's words was the body slam that had bent his spine.

"Are you okay?" Brady was staring at him, his face anxious.

"Yeah. Daddy just needs something to eat." Brady started toward the kitchen, "Wait. I want to do it myself, son. Help me up."

Nick usually didn't try to walk unless Maia was around and Brady struggled to get him off the couch. With Brady's help, Nick managed to stand and feebly grip his walker. "Thanks," he said with a sigh.

Nick inched toward the kitchen, each step sending barbs of pain through his back and down his legs. *You're still a man; you have children to think about.* Still, nothing came to mind. He thought his life had become as bad as it could be. From his family's champion to their endless burden.

On the counter sat a fruit bowl, mostly bare but for a single apple. As Nick reached for it, his jerky hand swept a glass from the counter. The glass exploded

into a thousands shards when it hit the linoleum floor. "Fuck," Nick exhaled. He couldn't even eat on his own.

Brady rushed to the kitchen holding a broom and dustpan. "It's ok, Dad, I got it."

Nick stood there unmoving while his seven-year-old son cleaned up the mess he had made. Nick wished he'd fallen on one of the bigger shards and bled to death.

A thought hit him as hard as the body slam that ended his career. That was the day they should have let Maia collect his life insurance, he'd been dead ever since. Maia could stretch a hundred thousand dollars a long way.

A knock at the door drew him from his thoughts. Brady had all the fragments in one big pile when he went to the door. A woman leaned her head in: Beth, Maia's sister, here to pick up the kids.

"I have to help my dad clean up some glass real quick."

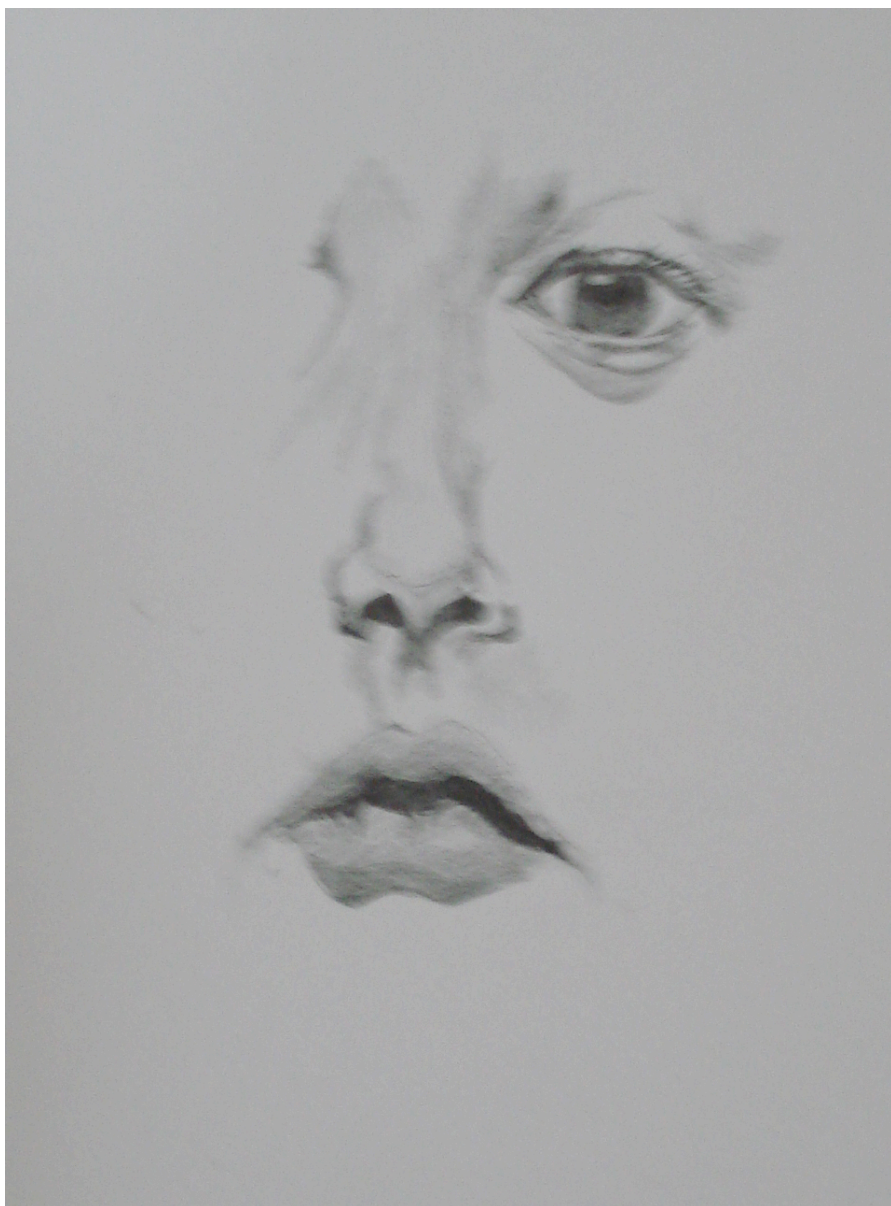
"It's okay son, I can go around it."

Brady gave him a questioning look.

"Get Maddy's coat for her. Your aunt doesn't have all day." Beth agreed, saying that soccer sign-ups closed at twelve thirty. Slowly, Nick meandered his way around the glass to the edge of the kitchen.

Maddy and Brady each gave him a hug and left with their aunt.

Nick started the arduous turn back into the kitchen. *You're still a man; you have children to think about.* The bottom of the glass was still mostly intact, its jagged edges reaching for the sky.



Emma Grant

Unfinished

graphite on paper

6" x 10"

My Name

Ross Concillo

My name is Stephen Spielberg

Not pronounced Steven

Pronounced Stefffffffen

As in ffffffffuck you

My parents weren't movie buffs

Just your everyday, ignorant sons of bitches

Real run of the mill

Highway 5

By Lauren Hoelle

That good-bye-baby-blues-kiss, I'll never forget.
It was like all those dirty words you said to me
Fell off in my mouth

Or just kind of slipped off with the sweat
It was hot that day
Hatred dripping from your temples, your collarbone

You pushed me around with a knowing shove,
Nodding to the distance as the world spun,
The promise of casinos in my near future renewed.

Kind of dizzy with the scent of your sweat-
Might have been the fumes from the truck, or pure hatred
At that god awful paisley shirt you put on.

Anyway - from your face I was suddenly
Eyeball to eyeball
With the long county road

With only two dirty, stepping feet and
Ratty, sexed up hair to my name.
But that's more than before.

Well.
Good riddance.
Who can make a life in this heat anyway.