

[The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Announcements](#)[Interviews](#)[Fiction](#)[Poetry](#)["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)[Writers' Craft Box](#)[Writers' Challenge!](#)[Submission Guidelines](#)[Feedback & Questions](#)[Artists' Gallery](#)[Indie Bookstores](#)[Literary Arts Patrons](#)[Scrapbook of Six Years](#)[Archives](#)[Inscribing Industry Blog](#)

Come in...and be captivated...

"Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



"Street Lamp, Fall" by Christopher Woods; <http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/>

Consecrated by Use

by Adrienne Pine

When we were growing up, my mother collected S&H Green Stamps. She referred to them as her “mad money.” She got them every week at the grocery store as a bonus for the money she spent on groceries. The stamps accumulated until there were so many that it was time for her to cash them in. Then we would hold a Green Stamps party, where my mother, my sisters, and I sat around the dining room table, each equipped with a stack of empty books to paste the stamps in and a bowl with a sponge sitting in a puddle of water.

The stamps came in perforated sheets. We separated the sheets of stamps at the perforations so they were the size of the pages in the books—five stamps across and six stamps down. The backs of the stamps were coated with a glue that was activated when wet. The trick was not to wet the stamps too much—just enough to get the adhesive sticky but not enough to soak the stamps through.

It was pleasant work, sitting around the table, wetting the stamps on the sponges, and pasting them in the books, while our hands turned green from the dye, and Mom discussed with us what she was planning to buy. In this way she accumulated a blender, a steam iron, a toaster oven, an automatic “baconer,” and other useful objects. We loved to pore over the Green Stamps catalogue, calculating what she could buy, converting the amounts into what they would cost in dollars, and finding the best deals.

One of my favorite items Mom bought was a three-tiered sewing box that cantilevered open. The exterior was white-and-blue wicker, the interior quilted blue satin. I thought it was beautiful, and I enjoyed helping Mom organize the spools of thread in different colors, embroidery scissors, tape measure, pin cushion, and thimble; the flat paper packets of sharp needles with eyes of different sizes; the little plastic boxes holding buttons, snaps, and hooks-and-eyes. Mom had been a home economics major at the University of Alabama, and she insisted that we all learn how to sew. I learned to sew but not to enjoy it, though I loved the accoutrements and supplies.

When I was accepted into college, Mom promised to use her Green Stamps to buy me what I needed. For once, I had permission to spend her capital, and I was determined to enjoy it. One hot June day after I’d left high school forever, we drove to the S&H Green Stamps store with two shopping bags of Green Stamps books and a list. I used Green Stamps to buy an electric pot to boil water for tea, a pillow, a mattress pad, a light blanket to start out the

year with and a heavier one for when it grew colder, two sets of sheets for a twin bed, and bright orange bath towels, so mine wouldn't get confused with anyone else's.

I had ideas about the sheets I wanted, and I wasn't sure I would find them at the S&H Green Stamps store. Its linen selection was from J.C. Penney's. When I expressed my reservations, Mom called me a snob.

"I'm not saying I won't look," I explained, "but I don't want plain white sheets; I want a pattern, with nice colors."

To my surprise I found two sets of sheets I liked right away; they seemed to jump out at me as I walked down the linen aisle. Blue was my favorite color in those days, and one set of sheets was blue and white in a geometric design. Its design featured two sets of parallel lines that crossed diagonally, meeting at right angles. A third set of parallel lines intersected the squares at every other row. The lines appeared to be woven through each other where they met; the effect was like an abstract trellis in Grecian blue and white. The fitted bottom sheet was blue on white, and the flat top sheet was white on blue, with a matching pillowcase.

The second set of sheets was in a floral pattern in shades of dusty blue, blue violet, lime green, and yellow green. The flowers appeared to be roses and cosmos. I liked the fact that the colors of the sheets did not correspond to the colors of the flowers in real life; it gave them an abstract quality, and they also matched my color palette.

All through college I slept in my two sets of sheets, alternating them with each other, and they grew softer with repeated washings. After I graduated, I moved in with the man I would later marry, and we slept in a full-sized bed. I no longer had a use for the sheets, but I kept them on a closet shelf. They had a second life after our daughter was born, and she used them after she graduated from a crib to a bed.

My sheets became her sheets, though we bought her other sheets as well. And when she went off to college, she couldn't take any of her sheets with her, because the beds provided by her college were longer than standard beds, and we had to purchase special sheets for them. Once she left home, we turned her room into a guest room, replacing the twin bed with a full-sized bed.

Though I no longer own a twin bed, I have held on to my old college sheets. Now I use them only once a year, when I rent a house at the beach in August. Here I come to spend time alone, and then my family comes to join me. Before my family arrives, I sleep in a twin bed in a little room overlooking the sea. When my husband comes, I move to the big room with the larger bed. It is a nice room, but it only looks out to the yard.

I come alone to write, think, dream, and end each day watching the sun slip into the sea. I come when I am sick at heart, for the wide vistas and the silences, the healing sun and birdsong and rustling breeze, the fogs and drenching rains. I come for the moon-and-starlit skies, rolling surf and crashing waves, the sand between my toes, and the piles of rocks worn smooth as eggs by the surf. I come in search of my essential self, the girl that I was before I evolved into who I have become, the person I would still be even had I not followed the paths in my life that beckoned me.

Built by an artist for himself, the house dates from the middle of the last century, which means it is as old as I am. From the first time I saw it more than thirty years ago, it seemed to me that the owner might have been designing it for me. Its sitting on a hill sloping down to the sea. Its modest scale, its grays and blues. The handmade attention to every detail. The artist's paintings on the walls, the drawings of his friend. Here I have always found everything that I need.

Like my old sheets, I bring old clothes with a talismanic quality—a white cotton smock I use for writing, an ancient gray sweatshirt. Faded beach towels, a white cotton nightgown, old jeans, cut-offs, stretch pants. I bring a needle and thread, and like my mother, I mend what is torn. I wash my sheets and clothes and hang them to dry and bleach in the summer sun, smelling of roses and the sea. And when I leave, I put my old clothes and my old sheets away, and I hope I will return the following year.

Bio- Adrienne Pine is pleased that "Consecrated by Use" is her third essay to appear in *The Write Place At the Write Time*. Her creative nonfiction has also been published in *The Yale Journal of Humanities in Medicine*, *A Tale of Four Cities*, and other literary reviews.

Saving Grace

by Katie O'Sullivan

Grace, a decade older than I, was all her name implied. Sage of advice, wry in wit, she could be found in her chintz-clad parlor for some tea time philosophy whenever we both had time to spare. Her blue eyes would crinkle in self-mocking laughter as we analyzed life's big questions while her husband, Jack, puttering in his basement workshop, remained quietly out of sight.

Grace and Jack, childless, were intrigued by our children's adventures and became involved in our lives. They taught me the secrets of Rhode Island gardening, found us a seasoned sailboat when we joined the yacht club and showed us how to sail against the river's tide. And through Grace, I gained humor of living.

When my husband's company transferred us abroad, Grace and Jack traveled to New York to see us off and then returned to oversee the closing sale of our home.

Years passed before we came back to our New England town. When my last baby was due and my husband was still in North Africa, Grace took me to the hospital for the delivery. I cherished the warmth of Grace's friendship, but this time circumstances were different. After Jon's birth, I was in a deep depression which the gynecologist lightly referred to as 'Baby Blues'. Meanwhile, my husband returned to a job he hated. Both of us were unhappy in our own little worlds. I moved like a robot doing chores for our home and children, maintaining an outward appearance that belied the tired and empty vacuum of nothingness that I felt inside. At night, I didn't pray to die for fear of offending God. I just hoped I wouldn't wake in the morning. My mother would phone me nightly with ideas to change my mood. I would accept Grace's invitation for tea and biscuits only to find the invitations always included others in whom Grace assumed I would be interested.

When Grace called one day to ask me over, I blurted out, "Couldn't it be just you and me?"

Grace chuckled, "But my friends are yours. I'm like your mother."

"I have a mother, Grace, you're my friend."

I hurt her deeply. I didn't mean to. She refused my phone calls. She was a polite stranger whenever we met. A year later, both my husband and I

regained our equilibrium and we returned overseas. I thought I would never see Grace again.

Years later, I was visiting old friends in our former home town and on impulse, as I drove past Grace's home, I decided to pull into her driveway. Would she greet me? Through the kitchen window, I could see a busy happy Grace. She recognized me and I was surprised as she gaily waved before opening the door. Her eyes had the same delightful crinkle as she hugged me close and said how much she had missed seeing me. She led me through the comfortable rooms without mentioning the absence of Jack who had died several years before. I was surprised at the stacks of clothes spread across chairs and tables. She explained that she was sorting them out. Over tea we relived our early friendship without mention of the rift. My heart was grateful as we said 'goodbye'. Our friendship had revived.

That evening I had dinner with a mutual friend and told her about the joy of seeing Grace.

Nodding sadly, she asked, "I guess you saw the clothes all strewn about?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"She does that over and over, week in and week out. Too bad, Alzheimer's, you know. Barely recognizes old friends."

I cooed a thought to myself.

It gave me back Grace.

Bio- Katie O'Sullivan, daughter of a naval officer and educated at UCLA and the American University of Beirut, has lived in California, China, Illinois, Rhode Island, Beirut, Libya and Holland before settling down with her husband in Houston, Texas, where she started her writing career after their seven children were grown.

Her work has appeared in several issues of *The Write Place At the Write Time* and her poetry, fiction and memoirs have been published on-line, in print and on stage. A collection of her poetry, was published this spring. She is currently working on a memoir of their family's Middle Eastern adventures.

The Safe Place

by Lori Schafer

“Is this a safe place?” she inquired softly, her contrived timidity carrying the persuasive force of conviction. Her delicate hands, with their long, well-manicured nails, twitched where she held them behind her back.

The middle-aged man in the doorway didn’t know how to respond. How could he? His eyes took a stab at me, crouching behind my mother’s tall figure, made even taller by the puffy blonde wig she wore as a disguise against her dangerous but imaginary enemies. I shot him back a look that revealed nothing. *I’m sorry I can’t help you, sir.*

“I don’t—I don’t think I can help you, ma’am,” he answered at last, perhaps taking my mental cue after all. He glanced back towards my mother, not quite meeting her eye.

“Alright... Thank you, sir,” she replied politely as she turned to go. The man retreated inside, closing the door quietly behind him, as if afraid that a loud noise might summon us back. But she had already grabbed me by the wrist and was dragging me down the sidewalk. Again I marveled at how firmly those seemingly frail hands could clutch bone, how the nails pinched and imprinted my skin, always enough to hurt, never enough to break or bleed. I tried to remember that I ought to be grateful that I wasn’t broken or bleeding.

The next house was broader, loftier, an elegant two-story Colonial with wood-shuttered windows and pink rosebushes set in a tree-lined yard. When my mother rang the bell, a little girl of about eight answered the door with as much alacrity as if she had been hiding behind it.

“Is this a safe place?” my mother asked again. The child stared at her, stared open-mouthed at the funny-looking wig, at the tight jeans and sneakers and tie-dyed T-shirt that were supposed to allow a forty-year-old woman to pass for a teenager, someone her daughter’s age. I fixed my own gaze on the little girl, mentally commanding her to go back inside. She failed to obey.

A young woman appeared behind her and laid her hands upon the child’s shoulders. “May I help you?” she inquired kindly, after sizing up the unusual pair on her doorstep and erroneously deeming us harmless.

“Is this a safe place?”

The woman frowned, peering around my mother’s shoulder towards the wide, empty street. “Is something wrong?” she asked. “Did your car break down? Are you...hurt?”

My mother sighed and bent her mouth towards my ear. “I don’t think this is it,” she whispered with evident disappointment. “We appreciate your time,” she said aloud to the woman, who stood, like her daughter, gaping open-mouthed as we made our way back down the concrete walkway towards the street, the familiar sinewy handcuff again controlling my arm.

We had to wait some minutes at the next house, a one-story ranch with an ancient sedan in its driveway that wore the dust of decades of disuse. As the music of the doorbell faded away, it left in its wake the cadence of a soft shuffling, a shuffling that grew gradually more audible as the slippers that generated it drew near. At last she appeared in the doorway, a suspicious-looking elderly woman who peered out at us through thick-rimmed glasses and the slotted screen of her outer door, which she did not open. The town was funny that way. Small enough to get you to answer the door for strangers, but not enough to make you feel quite comfortable doing it.

“Is this a safe place?” my mother inquired again. “I heard that there was a safe place around here.” Perhaps somewhere inside that impenetrable mind she’d decided that some further explanation was in order if we weren’t to be stuck wandering door-to-door around the neighborhood all night.

The old lady hemmed and hawed, noisily rearranging her dentures while she attempted to formulate an answer. I pitied her. It was a hard question. And then, as if struck by a sudden inspiration, she burst out loudly, “Have you tried the church?”

Again my mother turned to me, and her eyes were lit up like Roman candles as she shouted gleefully, “That’s it!” and pushed me down the walkway before her as if she had finally decided that this was more efficient than dragging me along behind her. But I didn’t like it, not being able to see what she was doing. I tripped on a crack in the sidewalk and stumbled, causing her to stumble slightly over me in turn. Back unbroken, she nonetheless cursed as she resumed her place by my side, clutching at my shoulder and

elbow awkwardly before again fixing her grasp on the trusty bones of my wrist.

But recalling her purpose, so nearly attained, she rapidly recovered her good cheer. "We look just like sisters, don't we?" she said brightly, clearly pleased with the undeniable success of both her mission and her disguise. I didn't answer.

It was a long walk to the church. The whole town was out, it seemed, enjoying the cooler evening air that was temporarily supplanting the hot humidity of an early New England summer, but I rigidly ignored their curious stares and unspoken inquiries, concentrating instead on my mother's claw-like grip on my arm, the power of that pain and not the other pain. I was so focused that I failed to notice a friend of mine approaching from the other direction until he had nearly passed us by. He slowed, with deliberate nonchalance, and, nodding almost imperceptibly, met my eye, his expression telling me plainly that he didn't know what to do, either. I hadn't been in school for some time, and the exact state of things was no longer known to anyone but my mother and me.

I didn't think I could communicate it with my eyes. "Help me," I mouthed silently, and he started, but caught himself and continued walking. I thought it was an intelligent decision, not to reveal himself to her until he had executed his plan, whatever it was. By the time I dared to look back, he had vanished into the thickening dusk. Some minutes passed but he did not return, and when no one else came swooping in to rescue me either, I stopped looking. I wasn't sore. What had I expected him to do? What could he have done?

It was a Catholic church. I had only ever been to the Church on the Green. This one was grander, but gloomier, or maybe that was only the effect of the darkness that had by then entirely blanketed the houses and lawns of the town. There was no one inside it, neither priest nor parishioner. My mother's muttering echoed and reverberated throughout the chill vastness of the high-ceilinged chamber, a chamber empty of people, of God, of salvation.

"You sleep in there," she muttered, pointing to the cramped confessional that was to be my bed for the night. "I'll be in the other one."

I crawled inside the narrow box, sat down with my knees curled up to my chin, sat silently and listened for a break in the silence and waited. I did not pray. I waited until the church bells chimed the hour and then waited until I thought it must be almost time for them to chime again and still it was silent. And then I jumped up and ran.

We collided at the exit, those powerful hands with the long, well-manicured nails at once finding a firm grip on my wrists, both of them this time, slamming me hard against the heavy double doors so that my breath caught in my chest.

“This is a safe place!” she snarled through gritted teeth, barely raising her voice, knowing that shouting was unwarranted and unnecessary. “And you’re not going anywhere!”

She was right. Safe or not, I wasn’t going anywhere.

It's been more than two decades since that night that will remain forever etched in my memory, carved indelibly upon it like the drawings of the stained glass windows in the church in which we slept, my mother and I. I finally did find my freedom. But after all these years, I'm still searching for my safe place. I hope that, in the end, my mother found hers.

Bio- Lori Schafer's flash fiction, short stories, and essays have appeared in numerous print and online publications, and she is currently at work on her third novel. Her memoir, *On Hearing of My Mother's Death Six Years After It Happened: A Daughter's Memoir of Mental Illness*, of which "A Safe Place" is a segment, is being released in November 2014. You can find out more about Lori and her forthcoming projects by visiting her website: <http://lorilschafer.com/>.

Silos and Skyscrapers

by Lois Greene Stone

Eclectic. I thought that was mismatched furniture given a classy definition in my apartment after marriage. 'Familiar' New York was left when 'Miss' became 'Mrs.' Okay, today's woman rightly cringes at the very sight of 'Mrs.' in print, but we're products of the decades we're born in; I'm of the 'silent generation', so this may almost be a history lesson. But is it? Is personal acceptance and growth incompatible with today?

Three children, and five moves later, we settled 400 miles from family. Lake Ontario was the nearest body of water. Definitely not the Atlantic Ocean. We rented a house directly across from a 3,000 acre cattle farm. Acres of mooing sounds. No buildings were in view except the owner's farmhouse; no sidewalks nor streetlights. Feed, fertilizer, or just sweating cows caused an unpleasant odor. Windows had to be opened because there was no climate-control in the house; rooms reeked of cows' waste. For four years, family assumed our views were idyllic as they heard honking horns and walked among concrete structures. I so missed public playgrounds, sidewalks, noise that didn't utter 'moo'.

We'd saved for a down payment to build our own house. Affordable, available lots were in a nearby town of sprawling farmland. I'd already adjusted to being without sidewalks, streetlights, public transportation in walking distance, and no longer needed to attempt to push a carriage in this snowbelt part of the country. My 3rd child was now four. An undeveloped once-farm, now builder's tract, had large lots that backed up to Erie Canal. Select? We'd be the first house. At a colleague's party we heard about a child's backyard-pool drowning death. Frightened, we chose a lot with a treed backyard, across the street from the canal plus the furthest distance we could get from water. The area was lonely until some neighbors filled the builder's spec homes, but I was lonely across from 'moo' for four years.

Having farmers everywhere, I took their old milk or cream cans, scrubbed them, filled holes with liquid steel, sanded, painted, then drew pictures on the fronts. I gave them as gifts to hold umbrellas. I found I actually liked doing that! Horse farms dotted the area. They were pretty with triple-railed white fences and manicured areas. Many farmers were food sources and I noticed field rotation with sunflowers, wheat, corn, and such. Silos seemed to swirl upwards in contrast to the roofs of barns. Corn mazes became autumn entertainment. The small village fairs strangely didn't seem hokey as years accumulated.

Decades passed. Seems impossible. While farmers have continued to sell land, and strip mall shopping is a mile away (by car, still no sidewalks/transportation/street lights), developers currently cram as many houses as possible into parcels. My expansive lawn hosts wild turkeys and they don't mind the deer constantly nibbling on berries and such on our property. Some people backing down driveways might have to look for traffic; I have to watch out for deer. The night's quiet is disturbed only by the sound of an occasional freight train a mile away. It always makes me

remember how I once liked rail travel, how many rails I was on during my commute from my childhood Long Island house to grad school at Teacher's College, Columbia University, and how many piles of calendars are behind me.

Country. I now like the deer, the 4th of July parades and fireworks, the quiet of the day and night. I accept the rabbits eating even the grass, the squirrels constantly climbing trees visible from my kitchen window. I look forward to corn mazes and sunflowers as I try and figure out which fields will grow those huge flowers, and often guess incorrectly. People ask me why I have a lot so far from the Erie Canal when I could have had any one in this whole area. I guess, when we're young, we don't imagine getting older and are locked into our then-fears or then-comfort zone. I never thought, with aging, that traffic sounds could be jarring, or Times Square make me feel closed-in-by-crowds. Would I have ever imagined that the sight of deer eating right next to my window could make me smile?

My furniture, many pieces from family members no longer alive, makes my living room still eclectic. That's about all that stayed the same.

Bio- Lois Greene Stone, writer and poet, has been syndicated worldwide. Poetry and personal essays have been included in hard & softcover book anthologies. Collections of her personal items/photos/memorabilia are in major museums including twelve different divisions of The Smithsonian.

Hold My Hand

by Cara Hornung

Sirens blaring through the midnight silence. Lights flashing causing what I'd imagine is epilepsy. City Line Avenue. A large stone hawk looming nearby. Eyes piercing through the scene at metal bent in unforgivable ways. Police step aside as they spew conjecture after conjecture about the man. His eyes glazed over. Nicotine patches peek out from under his sleeves. On closer inspection, they run up and down his arms like leeches stealing his sanity. *What a waste.* I keep walking. No compassion for the damned. No compassion for the foolish. The next car's door is open. Her wrist dangles lifelessly against the door frame. Unconscious. I watch her chest—it

miraculously rises. *One less thing to worry about. Thank God.* Sternal rub: no response.

I can no longer hear. Sirens, horns blaring. *How fast must we move? Remember, take notes. God forbid you forget a single detail in the report later.* Dark brown curls fall heavy over her languished face. No sign of bleeding. At least, externally. God only knows how roughed up her innards are. *F&*^.* *It's got to be worse than it seems.* Her car is pinned between the Nicotine man and a light pole. And still no response to verbal commands. Blur of movement, the ripping of velcro latches correctly into place, neck stabilized. Police, fire, and EMS attempt a gentle relocation of the woman to the stretcher. But it's awkward bending our bodies around the car door frame to get her out. Body boarded. Side bars snap up into place. No rolling away today. Truck doors slam closed behind us.

Speed. *Must move with speed.* Patches placed strategically across her chest. Bells and whistles chime in to our conversation of stats and numbers. A fresh green pattern emerges on the black shiny screen.

In another world, another frame of mind, you'd see Tinker Bell whizzing up and down across a sky of black abyss crossing from Neverland to our world to steal small children away for her lover, Pan. A flurry of green light ricocheting across the dark, flitting up and then down and then straight and then down again. Her direction would suddenly illuminate with sound—a quick, hurried bell. Although her light would not die, the pinging would break your ear drums as she suddenly drops into a horribly boring straight line. But as you zoom out...Tinker Bell's beautiful green light would suddenly take its true size and the black abyss would only create a frame to the measurement of life. The upward flight of Tink would suddenly fade into the height of her heart beat. And any stagnant flight would surely mean death.

I stared at the screen of the heart monitor begging it not to change. She was consistent. Her heart rate was stable. But even the slightest unseen knick in an artery or vein or any type of internal bleeding could cause an eruption of chaos inside her and outside of her. I'd no longer be focused on maintaining my balance in the cab of the ambulance as it swayed back and forth swinging in and around traffic trying to defy time. Instead I'd be focused on repositioning the electrodes properly on her chest and preparing to shock. Or steadying her arm for the medic to increase whatever liquid lifesaver could cause her to stabilize her heart rate.

But she was stable. And there I sat watching Tink flicker up, down and over the screen. *Keep movin' Tink. Keep movin'.* I glanced back at the woman's face. Still unresponsive. Her face was a hollow shell with her mind somewhere lost far behind it. Completely alone. *Did she know? How could she? Could she hear the blaring of sirens pushing busy bodies out of the way at rush hour? Where does the mind go at times like this? When life or someone else steals time away from you in this world?* Hopefully, she is floating on clouds in her subconsciousness or unconsciousness.

I place the oxygen monitor on her finger and set her hand back onto the crisp white sheets, but I can't let go. I look up at the Commanding Officer and check where her gaze is placed. Eyes forward, screaming her complaints about the traffic to the driver. I slip my fingers around the woman's and stare at her wondering when she'll come back. When she'll return from the abyss that that jackass smashed her into back there. Although I'm seated, my body bounces in and out of place on the maroon bench. I force all my energy into my feet to remain somewhat upright. My thoughts are racing non-stop in her direction. Even my agnostic reformed mind lets out a silent prayer. *Does she have a family? Do they know where she is right now? Do they know what happened? She is not alone. I won't let her be alone.* I pray to God someone else would not let me be alone.

The blaring sounds diminish. The lights of the city infiltrate the cab of the ambulance as it pulls to a rest. The back doors click to unlatch and swing wildly out. I hop out and grab the handles of the bed, sliding the woman back onto the street. Doors upon doors slide open from our presence. We pass through eerily quiet halls as if no one exists here. And then suddenly, we are blinded by white light and short, quick commands from surgeon masks and green scrubs. Bodies lay in the open with their skin flapped to the side. Metal gnashing against metal delicately pulling shards of fractured bullets out of other men's flesh.

And so I left her. No name. No memory. I was never even there. So whether my hand in her hand actually provided comfort I'll never know. But I hope, if I'm ever in that position, that someone will hold my hand.

Bio- Cara Hornung graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a Bachelor's of Art degree in English Writing and then a Master's of Education degree in Special Education from Arcadia University. She is in her 5th year of teaching and currently teaches 8th grade mathematics at Hill Freedman World Academy in Philadelphia. In her spare time, she

continues her education in the graduate program at Saint Joseph's University. This is her first publication.

Separation

by William L. Alton

Age falls on me like water from a faucet. It weighs me down and wears me out. It steals my body from me, and my mind. My knees ache in the cold and my feet hurt. I can't see the things I used to see. I shake.

My memory is shot through with holes. Things pass through my mind without purpose or reason. Shards and fragments of my life grind themselves to dust on the walls of my skull. Anything requiring more than a moment's concentration is beyond me.

I fear that I won't get done all of the things I want to do. I walk, but I'm out of shape. I smoke too much and am completely self-indulgent. I am in love, and that's something, but my lover has fallen away.

My ex and I sit together in her kitchen. We discuss the separation papers. We build an agreement. This is the first real conversation I've had with her in weeks and I don't want to have it. The boys are in the living room. I want to sit in my chair and fade into the mindless noise of the television with them. I want to be comfortable in my own house, but even when I'm home it's like wearing someone else's skin. I am a guest in my own apartment.

I sign the separation papers. It's real now, official. We are separate, just one step away from divorce. I wonder if I'll ever be able to come back. No matter what happens, my ex will never see me the same way. Her hands will never feel the same when they touch me. Having gone through this, we have changed ourselves. There will always be the possibility of just ending everything.

My ex takes the papers and says she'll file them later. She drives me home. All the way, we're quiet. There's a weight between us now. Back at my place, I stare out the window and wonder when my life spun out of my control. It's been a year since my ex and I lived together. It's been a year since we spoke of anything other than the boys. She lives her life and I live mine.

Downstairs, there's a woman on morphine. She's in pain, but she's poor too. She needs cigarettes, but she needs her pills too. It's been nearly thirty years since I've used. I go down to the woman's apartment. I have ten bucks. Maybe she'll sell me a pill. Maybe she'll just give me one. That's all I need. I stand in the hall and imagine the narcotic sleep. I imagine the easy, warm high. Ten minutes pass. The dog in the woman's apartment yaps at the sound of my heart beating. I can't do it. I can't give up. Back in my apartment I smoke a cigarette. Thirty years ago, I said I'd kick or die. I didn't die. It's amazing how close history sticks to you, even when you've walked as far from it as I have. My ex never understood my addictions. This is just another way of showing her that I am not the man she thinks I am.

Bio- William L. Alton was born during the 60s and started writing in the 80s while incarcerated in a psychiatric prison. Since then his work has appeared in *Main Channel Voices*, *World Audience* and *Breadcrumb Scabs* among others. He is a poet & storyteller with three sons and has been writing and performing for nearly thirty years. In 2010, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He has published one book titled *Heroes of Silence*. He earned both his BA and MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon. You can find him at williamlalton.com.

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