

Art Tales

A Unique Contest
for Creative Writers

2011 Contest Winners



Geni Johnson-McMillin



Duane Simstauer



Hanna Lore Hombordy



Robert Engel



Connie Jenkins



Jack Farquhar Halbert

CITY OF
VENTURA
PARKS, RECREATION &
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS
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Third Annual

Art Tales

A Unique Contest for
Creative Writers

The City of Ventura is pleased to sponsor, in partnership with E.P. Foster Library, a creative contest for local writers. The competition invites writers to submit an original short story or poem that was inspired by one of the Municipal Art Collection works of art currently on exhibit on both floors of the E.P. Foster Library in downtown Ventura.

In an effort to make the City's art collection more accessible to the community, the City of Ventura joined with E.P. Foster Library to provide an exhibit space for a limited number of works, which are rotated annually. Each piece in this year's assortment of artwork challenges the viewer to puzzle over the work's meaning and provides an excellent opportunity for students and adults alike to exhibit their written skills while learning about viewing works of art. This contest is a call for imaginative and inventive people to examine a work of art and then write a short story or poem reflecting their unique interpretation.

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FIRST PLACE: YOUTH: POEM



Gerri Johnson-McMillin

Beaded Glory

By Sophia Dufau

Wire Reflecting,
Twine so tight.
Gone are the fish
that once held the light.

Green is the center,
Aqua surrounds.
People are wandering
throughout the grounds.

I wish I could touch it.
It seems so far.
Plastic is covering,
Slightly ajar.

People surrounding
soon are gone.
I am the last.
Second to none.

Walking away slowly,
Longing to stay.
But I'll come back,
again someday.

Inspired by "Caribbean Sun & Giant Green Anemone" by Gerri Johnson-McMillin

SECOND PLACE: YOUTH: POEM



Robert Engel

Tangled Roots

By Alexia Khodanian

On top of the world, looking down on the glass sea
We sit there forever
Viewing a distant summer, burning with colors of the rainbow
Isolation and peace
We sit here forever.
Under the warm earth, our roots are tangled deeply
Our lives tied together.
We are sitting here forever, caged in away from humanity.
The two of us like twins,
Smelling the fresh summer grass
And watching pink sunsets
We'll sit here forever
Undisturbed

Inspired by "From Two Trees" by Robert Engel



Connie Jenkins

My Pond

By Annie Castañeda

I am a rock,
The biggest of all the rocks.
I love my pond,
But I would like to be in different spots.
Maybe at the bottom of the ocean,
Where I will look up
And see shark and fish
And many other sea creatures,
Beautiful, interesting ocean
But I can't even if I was able to.
I must take care of leaves, smaller rocks, or even
The reflection that comes on the puddle.
I am not naïve but very strict.
I am grateful for this.
Beautiful and quenching pond that I love so,
I am in charge of everything,
Even the leaves.
There is a nearby mountain,
This puddle used to be just dirt,
Plain dirt and water
Then a fool walked by and yelled and screamed and clapped,
Then he ran.
I had no idea why,
But then I realized I was a part of an avalanche.
I fell with the crowd and splashed into this quenching pond
And to this day I'm still here, waiting for a change.
Maybe someone will pick me up,
Take me home,
And put me in a pile with a bunch of decorative rocks.
Then take me to the beach,
Leave me there,
And the waves will take me away.
And my dream will come true
And see many creatures, but I am still here
Just waiting for something to happen,
Just waiting in my pond.

Inspired by "October: Waiting for El Niño" by Connie Jenkins



Duane Simshauser

The Not Forgotten

By Antonia Aguilar Cole

In the dark dome of the Earth
Such did her cold heart quench for
Not of thirst but for blood and for hatred...and for love.
Her eyes of red and with a their lifeless tinge
But did mourn for love that may not carry for
The sky did she love
she mourned for the dark gray sky,
As she stood waiting in the dark night
As her heart did freeze
From that long lost love never to come
Waiting in that December gray
In that bitter night she waited by and by
That night went by
And the raven to herself of the one not forgotten
But the one not wanted
But by and by one's heart will die
And die it did in the dim cold night
And the mourn for love will not be quenched
For by and by she is waiting with a heart
Of bitter cold and a hatred for all other's form
The forgotten dream not told
And she still waits by and by
For the love not forgotten.

Inspired by "Raven Reflecting" by Duane Simshauser

Honorable Mention: Youth: Poem

The End of the Rainbow

By Alexis Kost

the dark sky
shining star
fields of corn
a vase of love
the eye of gold
the clock is ringing
from side to side
a fresh orange smell
the green color of grass
the blue color of sky
an egg going to hatch
the red of the sun
the blue of waves
paths for walks
a window for a house

Inspired by "End of the Rainbow" by Hanna Lore Hombordy



Seasons of beauty

By Jeremiah Song

The fall treetops look
like clouds over the sunset
a horizon with a stream of water
leading you to it
The whitened trees
look as if they were bones

Inspired by "From Two Trees" by Robert Engel





A Beautiful Day

by Emily Ward

One sunny day a little birdie named Lenny sat alone in his nest high in an apple tree waiting for his brothers and sisters to come home.

"Are you sure you don't want to try to fly again? It's a beautiful day," said his mother.

"No, I'm sure," answered Lenny. "I'm still dizzy from the last time I tried."

"OK," said his mother, a little worried. "I'll go get us some lunch."

Lenny watched his mother's soft brown feathers get blurry as she flew away. He wondered why everything in the distance was blurry, and everything up close was clear.

Just then, his mother returned with a big fat wiggly worm in her beak. But for some reason, she didn't fly to the nest. Instead, she called to Lenny from a branch below the nest. "Lenny, I have some lunch for you," she said.

"Where are you?" Lenny asked as he leaned toward the sound of his mother's voice.

"I'm right below you. Can't you see me?" she asked.

"Well, sort of. I can only see a brown blur," he explained.

His mother flew up to the nest and said "How about now?"

"I can see you fine," said Lenny.

Just then, his mother realized why Lenny was afraid to fly.

"I know why you get dizzy when you try to fly. You need glasses," explained his mother, excitedly. "Tomorrow we'll take you to the eye doctor."

"Will it hurt?" asked Lenny, a little frightened.

"No. It won't hurt a bit," she answered, as she cuddled him close.

The next day, Lenny and his mother went to Dr. Seesalot to get his glasses. They were silver with tiny white polka dots, just like the spots on the side of his wing. When they returned home, Lenny's brothers and sisters commented on his new glasses.

"Wow!" "Cool." "You're so lucky."

"Now you can fly with your brothers and sisters," said his mother, excitedly.

"I'll try," said Lenny.

As he lifted out of the nest, flapping his wings, he noticed he could still see everyone, even though he was high above them. He also noticed for the first time the soft green grass at the base of the tree, the sparkling blue water in the pond nearby and white fluffy clouds above him.

"Wow!" called Lenny. "Isn't it a beautiful day?"



Duane Simshauser

The Angry Raven

By Sabrina M. Nuno

It was nighttime, and dad said we can't go out because the strange people that wore the fur clothing would hurt us. I didn't understand though. Why would those people want to hurt an innocent raven? I turned my head towards the orange sun setting under the black mountains. I turned my head to where the strange noise came from. It was like a loud BANG. I couldn't identify the sound but I heard the sound many times before. I heard horse hooves clamping on the floor heading this way. He and his mom and dad flew to the bottom to see what they were doing. Dad flew right in front to the horse and scared him. The horse jumped backwards and knocked the person that was on the horse off. All the people were startled that the horse reacted from a small raven. I heard some person yell to the other people.

"Everybody... step away. I heard an old wise tale that ravens give a bad omen to those who come across one. Hurry up and kill all the ravens!" He said stepping back and taking an arrow from his pocket. They all stepped back. The man that spoke settled his arrow and pointed at dad. He released the arrow and the arrow went straight through my dad's body. His body fell to the ground immediately, dead. The man grabbed another arrow and pointed at my mother. Panic arose through my body and I backed away. I turned my head knowing that the arrow killed them both. I couldn't bear to watch another raven die. I flew off dodging all the arrows that were coming for me.

I flew in with a pack of other birds. I was in the back of the pack. I tried to talk and get the others attention but nothing would work. I spread my wings and flew to the front. I started to ask the leader of the pack why no one was talking to me but he spoke before me and said, "You are a burden to all birds. You watched your family die. You didn't even have to decency to stay and die with them." What he said just made my heart drop. All the birds flew ahead while I stayed floating in the sky. All the birds hate me now. I don't have any friends and my parents are dead, and now... Somehow it's my entire fault?

This would have never happened if the humans never came. For what they did they shouldn't be allowed to live. I flew to the mountain's peak and looked across the sky, and saw that there was a small village nearby. I saw the same people that killed my family. They all were outside with their children, running, playing, laughing, and singing songs. I was so mad. Why do they get to be happy with their family if they took mine away? They shouldn't be happy. They should feel awful. They kill animals for a living. I bet they wouldn't like it if I took their family away.

That's it! I thought they all would be so mad and sad if I took what matters most to them, their kids. I waited till they all fell asleep. It was dark out, pitch black almost so I flew across the campground and saw the

smallest child. It was a young little boy with dark skin and blonde hair. I flew to him and grabbed him by the collar. I spread my wings apart and started to fly up. I accidentally woke up the little boy and he started to cry. All the humans woke up in a daze. The boy was screaming bloody murder. I was thinking about letting the boy go since he was so scared but, then I remembered that the humans killed my family and spared no mercy. So I flew up.

"Hey look up there!" everyone looked up at me and some people gasped. The humans started to throw rocks up at us, so I tried to fly fast. One rock missed me and hit the child. The child stopped screaming and dropped his head. The rock had hit him in the head, there was blood coming out the right side. We finally got to the mountain peak where I planned to rest. I convinced myself that the boy must already be dead. I forced myself to come near the boy and tear him apart. I started to peck at his stomach. My beak was so sharp that my beak was already tearing the skin. The blood flowed out of his stomach. His stomach was torn in half. I saw living organs inside all deformed and smashed. I had no use for his body so I rolled it down the hill.

This was the very first time I have killed a living human.

It has been a year since I killed my first human. Every week I would kill another human. The people were starting to get really angry at me, so they sent a tribe to hunt down and kill me. I was getting old and weary; my bones are becoming more fragile and weak. The humans have been advancing in their weapons. I have been caught twice but escaped, almost downed and burned but I was still alive. I didn't want to live with myself anymore. I have killed way too many innocent people, maybe it's time I just quit. I crept up on a child from a different tribe going to steal her. I grabbed the girl by the neck, but someone went behind me and grabbed me. I screeched and squealed but they wouldn't let go. I thought... maybe it's time for me to die.

Maybe this is how it is supposed to end. I stopped screeching and just stayed still. I held my breath because I saw a human running at me with an arrow. I felt the arrow go through me and felt blood spill out. This is the end... finally. The raven that was left alone, the raven that killed humans, the raven that was filled with hatred, is now dead.

Inspired by "Raven Reflecting" by Duane Simshauser

Third Place: Youth: Short Story



A Day to Remember

By Christian Gil

I was at two tree hill one evening this past summer. I was with my friends Jacob and Luke. We were getting to the hill, then, I heard yelling. It sounded awful. It sounded as if someone were being tortured. I turned around to look at my friends and noticed that Luke was missing. I asked Jacob where he was.

"Hey where's Luke?"

"I don't know dude he just disappeared?"

"What do you mean 'disappeared'?"

"Gone! He's not here!"

"We have to find him. I heard screaming past those two trees."

"'Brochacho,' let's go!"

We were running past those trees and it led into a forest, then we heard yelling coming from a cave. We ran towards the cave with precaution. It was Luke! We found him. He was being mauled by a wolf. We panicked, because we didn't know what to do. So we grabbed a stick and stabbed the wolf. It was wounded and scared, so it ran away. Luke survived, but his arm was mauled very badly. We took him to a nearby hospital where they amputated his arm. I still remember this day as if it was yesterday. This is definitely a day to remember.

Inspired by "From Two Trees" by Robert Engel



Gerri Johnson-McMillin

First Place: Adult: Poem

Luminous

By Kimbrough Ernest

Far from the iridescent pools of childhood

The delicate bones of migratory creatures

Recall the fragile tentacles of memory

The summer your sister saved you from drowning

The day my swimsuit was swallowed in the waves

The night our son was lost in a stormy sea

Shadows hovering just beneath the surface

The best of intentions, secrets so vast

Some days only the ocean can hold

Inspired by "Caribbean Sun & Giant Green Anemone" by Gerri Johnson-McMillin



Jack Farquhar Halbert

Four Seasons

By Kimbrough Ernest

Spring

She was in need of a good, hard rain,
one that would wash away this stubborn hesitation
and get the calla lilies to bloom.

What she got was this decadent wind,
wind that stirred things up,
blew the dead fronds off the palms,
and put a wild look in her eyes.

She left the letter under a glass
so it wouldn't blow away,
and held the door so it didn't slam behind her.
She knew she was going to disappoint someone,
but it wouldn't be herself.

Summer

Remember, there was that camping trip
on Lake Evelyn, in the Trinity Alps Wilderness,
our one and only backpacking excursion,
Tarzan and Jane with a French press.

We sat on the flat stones beside the clear
fiercely cold water for hours,
so still the deer came down to watch us.
And when darkness fell, everything tasted so good.

Someone told us that we hadn't actually made it
to Lake Evelyn, but were on the lake next to it—
but that's not how we remember it.
It will always be Lake Evelyn to us.

Fall

All eyes turn,
eager with anticipation,
as she sweeps in
late to the party,
brilliant with possibility.

Too soon,
they have had enough.
She hints at more
than she can deliver,
laughs too loud,
and doesn't know
when to leave.

Back home, alone,
she drops her bright garments
before the mirror,
humbly
reminded
that she is not
evergreen.

Winter

It was the season of blizzards,
and funerals.
Those of us left to mourn
watched the snow tumble about
like restless souls
beyond the frosted panes.
We gathered to hold each other close,
to look for signs,
and offer up a silent prayer:
more time, more time.

Inspired by "Four Seasons" by Jack Farquhar Halbert

Honorable Mention: Adult: Poem



Duane Simshauser

Crow and I Search the Harbor

By Tim Pompey

Black feathered vagrant
grips his talons on a glass ledge.

Both our eyes skim the air
like psychics reading tea leaves.

His robe a solemn shield,
my shirt and hat wind-blown.

Where to go from here?
Bird and human joined in quest.

Toward this end we fly, but I
with rising fear like waters to my neck.

One to another, journeyed by fate,
we both sit still and wait.

Inspired by "Raven Reflecting" by Duane Simshauser

Honorable Mention: Adult: Poem



Gerri Johnson-McMillin

Sea Creatures

By Frances Spencer

Our mother is the sea,
she rocks us in her foamy arms
she comforts us with salty kisses.

We are seed of the sun,
he penetrates her flowing body
with his shafts of light
and we are conceived.

We grow in her womb
protected by the elements
rising and ebbing in the waves.

Here it is calm and serene
as we float in a blue dream.

Since Earth began, we have been floating,
searching for a new form, a new body
to take us out of the water
so we can fly.

We yearn with the yearning of all life
to perfect ourselves,
we have waited a million years
and we could wait a million more.

But our time is running out,
someone has poisoned us
and we know we are dying.
Above us, our sea mother thunders a warning,
she calls to the sun, she calls to the moon,
These are mine,
these are my children,
and I won't let you take them!

Our sea mother cries,
but her tears can't save us,
we don't understand why we must die.
Why would anyone want to destroy us,
what have we ever done to deserve it,
what have we ever done in all our lives
but wait
and float
and dream..

*Inspired by "Caribbean Sun & Giant Green Anemone"
by Gerri Johnson-McMillin*

Honorable Mention: Adult: Poem



Robert Engel

Here

By Consuelo Castaneda

Shush shush shush
The twin trees say to me
The world is quiet here.
Here-
in this moment-
is where I stand.
(on solid earth that pulses with life)
Crisp whispers of wind fan across my face.
It is here
that I understand with clarity all I could not see previously.
Here,
I am statuesque and infinite.
Life courses through my veins, my soul ignites.
Across the landscape the ocean's faraway cerulean merges with ochre skies:
a world both separate and nigh.

Inspired by "From Two Trees" " by Robert Engel



Jack Farquhar Halbert

The Painted Chest

By Kim E. Fuhrmann

Since my father died, I have heard his voice three times. I don't believe in magic or miracles. My father was a scientist, and I have learned from him to regard facts and only facts as trustworthy. Nevertheless, I have experienced the supernatural phenomenon of hearing his voice after his death.

My father worked as a chemist for many years, a job he endured so that he could support a wife and small family. He had a lab at home, and he spent many hours working on his inventions. He invented many amusing devices that delighted our family. I loved the washcloth with a built-in pocket for soap, and I still use the one he gave me. My mother's favorite invention was the sleep talker. This was a round tape recorder you could clip onto the bed sheets that would speak a message of your own making in your ear as you fell asleep, and it would speak this message repetitively, according to a timer. My father saw it as a learning tool— an aid to learning a foreign language, for instance. My mother used it as a sleep aid, and listened to soothing sounds or positive assertions.

The first time I heard my father's posthumous voice was the day of his funeral. It was nine years ago, and I was seventeen. The chest stood under the west window in my bedroom and I was standing in front of it watching the sun approach the horizon. I was alone. I was not crying, nor was I in an emotional state. In fact, I was wondering why I wasn't more upset. My brother had unsuccessfully fought back tears and my mother had wept openly, but I was as dry as a desert ravine. It was true that I seldom cried, but I had expected that at my father's funeral I would be moved to do so. Instead I felt blank. Calm. I touched the chest in a light caress, following the swirly brush strokes, and thought about my father painting it.

Then I clearly heard his voice. "Astrid," he said, calling my name.

I turned automatically before logic returned and I remembered he was dead. Of course no one was there.

At the time, I was not much troubled about an incident I was sure was very common for people whose parent had recently died. I was comforted by the sound of his voice, even though I knew it was probably an auditory hallucination brought on by grief. And I was secretly reassured that it proved I was indeed grieving, even though I had no tears.

The second time I heard his voice was six years later in my apartment in the city. The chest was in my living room, and it was evening. The streetlights had just come on, I remember that clearly. Again, I was not in an emotional state. I was not drinking alcohol, and I don't use drugs. I was not thinking of my father. In fact I remember I was not thinking of anything. There was a thin film of dust along the top of the chest and I swiped it gently with my fingertips.

"It's quiet," said my father.

Again, I turned in response to his voice, but he was not there.

My first thought this time was that it was a trick, a trick that had something to do with the chest. The chest has been something of a mystery in our family. My father had previously fashioned objects out of wood, so that was not unusual, but nothing he had made before could be considered art as this could. Most things he made were utilitarian. But the chest was beautiful. The technique was free and swirly, suggesting a confident style. On each side of the chest was depicted the same landscape painted in different seasons. In summer, there was water in the stream that ran through the woods. In winter, there was

a dry stream bank. A blue sky surmounted the top of the chest. It was peaceful, serene, but it also evoked a feeling of yearning loneliness, as if the viewer was sad, even bereft. As far as I know, it was my father's only work of art.

My brother and I often puzzled over this enigma. Was the chest actually the work of some other person, possibly a lost love? But both my parents confirmed that my father was the creator. Strangely, though, they would say nothing else about it. When had my father made it? Was the scene an actual place? Why had he never painted anything else, when he had such an obvious talent? When we asked these questions, my parents were unresponsive. They didn't act cagey or try to distract us or act like they didn't hear. They simply wouldn't answer.

The most intriguing thing about the chest was its lock. It appeared as if it could be opened if one had a key. However, we could get no answer to the questions about whether it could be opened or if there was something inside. Instead, my father kept it locked inside his lab, safe from our curious hands.

When he died and the chest became mine, my brother and I tried to open it using all manner of tools, such as skeleton keys, paper clips, nail files and the like, but we came to the conclusion that the lock was a subterfuge and not real at all. Did the box even open? We weren't convinced it did. We lifted it together and shook it around to see if there was anything inside, but we couldn't be sure. It seemed heavier than it should be, and there was a sense of things shifting when we moved it, but there was absolutely no sound. We tried to pry it open, but were worried about damaging the paint and gave up.

So that's why I say that the second time I heard the voice, I thought it was a trick. I surmised that what was inside was his sleep talker invention equipped with a special timer that went off at lengthy intervals with pre-recorded messages. That sounded like my father.

The third time I heard my father's voice was four months ago.

My friend Paul was visiting. I was telling him about the chest and the fact that we'd never been able to open it. Like my brother, Paul felt challenged to try to open the box. Perhaps, he suggested, the lock is a kind of ruse and there is actually a hidden lever or button that would release the lid.

I found his reasoning compelling. Neither my brother nor I had ever considered that possibility. Paul and I looked at the box.

"Do we dare?" he said.

I hesitated. I didn't want to damage the chest. My brother and I had looked closely at the joints and we weren't convinced the box hadn't been painted shut, in which case opening it could damage the finish.

Paul was looking at me with amusement. "I thought you were the cool and rational egghead. Are you going sentimental on me?"

"No," I said. "It's just that I don't want to hurt it."

He said nothing and in a few minutes we knelt by the box and began to handle it gently. Paul patted the sides and I moved the palm of my hand along the base. That is when I heard the voice.

"Astrid," my father clearly said.

I moved over the top of the chest and placed my ear on it. I noticed that I could smell the resin in the paint, and the texture of the sky felt good on my face. I closed my eyes and imagined I could see the clouds and trees moving in the breeze.

Paul left shortly after that. He never said anything about hearing a voice and I have never asked if he heard it. But I can tell you that when I placed my ear on the box, I heard no mechanism.

I don't know if I will hear his voice again. I hope I do; I miss him. Sometimes I sit near the box and put my hand on it, hoping that he will come. Does that mean I believe in spirits? I don't know, but I have stopped trying to understand. The chest is here in my home, and in some way it is a piece of him, a thing of mystery and beauty.

Inspired by "Four Seasons" by Jack Farquhar Halbert



Connie Jenkins

Dancing in the Light

By Gerald Zwiers

At the bottom of the long dusty trail, he turned through a break in the dense bushes and his choice of path became a bit more difficult. With an added level of carefulness, he slowly climbed over the boulders, rocks, and brush until he reached his destination beside the beautiful creek.

Here the light was crazy with dancing. Everywhere he looked it leapt and pranced. It swirled gracefully from the sky and spiraled into the tops of the trees where the upper leaves gently unwound the light and divided it into long strands that other leaves broke into hundreds of smaller glowing bits. The wind playfully tossed the bright soft coins of light back and forth from leaf to leaf and then dropped them into the cool blueness of the water below. The cold water froze the light and then shattered it like glass against the wet rocks. The sharp splinters of light flew about piercing and embedding themselves in the damp of the surrounding dark wet soil.

In his younger days, Walter might have felt compelled to take off his shirt and shoes and dance with the light. He would have swayed with the breeze and felt the light dripping like warm honey onto his shoulders, arms, and chest. He would have hopped and skipped across the shards of light, his bare feet rejoicing in the cool leaves and mud. He had been such an open-hearted free spirit, so bright and full of joy back then, and she loved that about him.

He might have burst into song, trying to match the spontaneous quality of the beauty that surrounded him. Twirling and spinning, he would have wrapped himself in sound, singing a song without words or rhyme or meter, a song that was more like wind chimes than voice. He would have breathed deeply of all that was around him and exhaled the pure spirit of music.

And she would have danced and sang along with him. They would have danced and sang so sweetly, and laughed, falling to the ground and rolling in the cool sparkling light. Sweet, sweet, Sally.

It seemed so odd to him that all of time could blend itself so completely. In a single moment you could feel so strongly the entire splendor of the beautiful moment that you were in, and at the same time you could feel all of the great expectations and dreams of the person who bore your name decades ago. He had been a child, a student, a lone-wolf young man, a lover, a father, a champion, a man of business, an athlete, a scoundrel, a musician, an avid learner, a fair cook, a person who attempted good and sometimes failed and tried again anyway.

He had been playful, and sorrowful, and wise, and disconnected, and passionate, and dreamy, and full of hope in spite of the occasional disappointments. He had been all of these things and more. And all of these things were undivided elements of this very moment. There were layers and layers, like the chapters of a book or the acts of a play, simultaneously integral and independent. It was a curious feeling to be imbued with so much all at once, all these many forms and qualities living inside of a single form in a single moment.

The sweet damp fragrance was almost intoxicating. He inhaled deeply. He could smell the wetness of rotting wood and the aroma of plants trying to begin their new expansive adventure in the world. There

were the sounds of birds and breezes, of the water splashing in the creek, and the sound of his own breath. How many times had he heard these types of sounds without paying much attention to them? They often played like a background music score in a movie, adding color and emotion and flavor to the script, but staying in the back shadows.

Now, however, he felt aware of everything. Every sound, every scent, and every movement, called for his attention. He turned his thought from sparkle to sensation, from fragrance to feeling. In this great abundance of sights and sounds and he felt a huge fullness. Everything was so full and beautiful and complete that he wanted to just let it grow and grow forever. Maybe if he drank in enough of it, Walter thought, it could even fill the one empty spot that was deep inside him.

He set down the package that he had been carrying tightly in his arms and settled beside it. For a while he just settled into this amazing long moment. If he could do it some magic thing just right, he thought maybe he could melt everything together, every beauty, every memory, every hope, and every dream. He waited. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do now, but he could afford to be patient and wait. The light was still dancing. The surrounding air was still full of fragrance and beautiful sound. And Sally was still gone. It was peaceful and comfortable here. Walter was in no hurry.

It was in a wooded area, similar to this spot, that he and Sally had shared their first kiss. It seemed so recent; could it really have been so long ago? Their life story had been full and special, at least to Walter. Of course he knew that every life story was perhaps equally full and special to the person who lived it. But it was their story. It had been made up of romance and passion, hopes and dreams, children and careers, joys and disappointments, vacations and friends, community service and taxes, schools and sports, graduations and weddings, health and sickness, and finally, Sally's death. Chapters of their life stories had been written apart, before they met, chapters were written together, and now Walter felt a page was turning, and he would be writing his next chapter alone. But the light was still dancing. Walter was in no hurry.

In this long moment of no-time he slowly became aware of a growing coolness in the air. Looking up he noticed that some of the dancing light had moved away from him and was now dancing on the other bank of the sheltered ravine. Had hours passed? He wasn't really sure. He felt a little stiffness as he stood up and slowly straightened.

"Well girl," Walter said, stretching out his arms as if they were wings, "I guess it's time." He looked around carefully studying the area around him. His eyes settled in on a large flat angled rock close to this side of the stream. Turning to the package he had set on the ground beside him, he carefully picked it up and unwrapped it. Gently removing the contents he carried them the few short strides over to the edge of the water and cautiously stepped onto the flat angled rock. Stepping up he tested his balance.

Walter opened the elegant container that held what was left of his sweet Sally and looked inside with a sense of peaceful loving wonder. He smiled and then looked around the gentle area. "Ok, my sweet, I think it's time for us to fly," he said. Careful not to lose his footing, he turned the container over and swung his arms together, outward in a giant circle. The ashes took wing and flew about in the cool breeze. Some fell to the dark wet earth and some into the blue of the swirling water. Some dusted the flat rock beneath his feet.

And some flew all the way across the water to the other shore where they caught the last of the sun's rays and danced in the light with joy before they settled to the ground in their brand new home.

Inspired by "Waiting for El Nino" by Connie Jenkins



Duane Simshauser

If Birds Could Talk

By Sheri Ward

When I was a kid, more than anything else, I wanted a dog. From the time I could talk I asked, I begged and I pleaded every May near my birthday and every December at Christmas for a puppy. I guess my parents figured that once the novelty wore off, they'd be the ones taking care of it, so they put off giving me one in hopes that I would quit asking. But I didn't, until my tenth birthday. By that time my parents must have been sick of my pleading because much to my surprise they got me— a parakeet. I guess it

was their way of easing me into taking care of a pet, and I was OK with that because I figured by the following Christmas there would be a puppy-sized package with holes in the box under the tree. I mean, how hard could it be to feed a bird, right? Anyway, I ended up killing all chances of ever getting a dog that year, or any year of my childhood for that matter, because I ended up killing the bird. I didn't mean to of course, and to this day I'm not exactly sure what happened.

I named the bird Ritz due to its love of crackers. At first I had grandiose ideas about teaching it to talk, but my brainy sister informed me that parakeets don't talk, so I figured I would teach it to climb onto my finger. That would impress the folks; I could smell the kibble now. Unfortunately, my plans to prove myself puppy-worthy ended late one summer night when, while my sister and I lay reading Judy Blume's *Forever under the covers* with a flashlight, Ritz bough the big bird cage in the sky. For reasons unknown, he suddenly started squawking and fluttering around, banging against the cage, bouncing from side to side. Then he let out one final cry and dropped to the bottom of his cage. By that time my dad came into the room, half asleep, to see what all the noise was about because when Ritz started to freak out, so did my sister and I. After we told him what had happened he stood before the cage for a moment, perhaps waiting for a sign of life, or wondering what to do. Then he lifted the cage from my dresser and turned to leave the room as he mumbled something that sounded like, "I'll take care of it."

The following day I woke to see a bare spot on my dresser. All that was left was the folded faded beach towel Ritz's cage once rested upon and a box of bird seed. Beneath the dresser, on the wood floor, lay the kernels of empty seed that used to stick to my feet. I slipped out of bed and grabbed the small broom and dust pan next to the dresser. I bent down and pushed the last of the seed remains onto the dustpan and emptied it into the Archie's trash can next to my sister's desk. Then, sitting on the desk, I noticed a small bundle of tissues wrapped around what must have been Ritz's tiny body. I went to my closet and evicted Ken and Barbie from their shoe box car. Then I carefully picked up the bundle of tissue and gently placed it in the box.

After breakfast, instead of going to the movies with my sister, I went to the neighborhood 7-11 store and bought a root beer popsicle. It was the kind that always breaks in the wrong place when you try to split it in half to share it with someone, but I didn't try to split this one; I ate the whole thing, and when I finished it I put the two sticky popsicle sticks in the back pocket of my flowered cut-offs and pedaled home on my stingray.

Next, I tied the two sticks together to form a cross and, after digging a hole among the weeds in the arroyo behind our house, I put the makeshift casket in the ground and covered it with dirt. Then I stuck the cross onto the mound and said good-bye to my bird, and to any chance of ever getting a dog. I never told my family about Ritz's funeral, especially since my sister had lost her retainer, which at times she wrapped in tissue, that same week. Nor did I ask my dad what he had done with Ritz; some things are better left unsaid. The funny thing is, nobody ever mentioned Ritz again, especially not me. The following summer we adopted a stray cat who hung around because my sister fed it bologna. I think she ended up calling it Oscar.

Inspired by "Raven Reflecting" by Duane Simshauser



Duane Simshauser

The Raven Box

By Tamara Starr

I never met my Uncle, and never wanted to. The only picture I ever saw of him was a yellowed snapshot from the 50's. In the picture he is outside in Nebraska at the farm he grew up on, leaning casually against a split rail fence. There is an ancient oak tree in the distance behind him and a blurry forest behind that.

The sky is heavy with rain clouds, and perched on the fence near

him is a wind ruffled raven. Both of them, the raven and my uncle, are gazing directly into the camera's lens.

My family thought the picture was strange and funny, but I didn't. There was a deep coldness about the image. Intensely symbolic, the picture felt dangerous as though it was a cosmic sign foretelling a catastrophe.

He was my father's older brother. His real name was David but everyone called him "Fill," short for fillet, because he could fillet a trout faster than anyone west of the Mississippi. Everyone loved Uncle Fill. My father spoke often about his magnetic personality and sharp wit. And although my aunts thought he could be shockingly cutting, cruel, and self-absorbed, he was at the same time so funny and charming that they couldn't help but adore him. And, although he had much attention from the ladies, he never married.

"So why aren't there more pictures of him?" I asked one day.

"Oh, he hated cameras -wouldn't allow his picture to be taken...except for this one here."

I listened to all the stories of him - larger than life, Paul Bunyan sort of accomplishments - but could only shake my head. I just couldn't see what they saw. All I could see in the picture were icicle eyes, a hard confident posture, and an apparent friendship with a devilish raven.

Then, the winter of my 16th birthday, Uncle Fill died mysteriously - an accidental "something" no one would ever talk about. My parents, my aunts and I traveled out in early spring to clear out the old farmhouse and put the property on the market. It was April but the ground was still frozen and the trees still leafless. It was so strange to finally see a place I'd heard so much about. I wanted to explore the place but I felt an anxious knot in my stomach, an ominous queasy feeling that left me unsteady and giggling nervously.

"Go pack up the photo albums in the living room," my aunt said handing me a cardboard box and giving me a little shove.

I took the box and crossed the threshold of what I was sure was a haunted house. The walls of the living room were covered in old flowered wallpaper that curled at the edges. It was not just a dusty room; it was downright filthy. I didn't want to touch anything. I could see the old albums tucked in a space between the bottom board of the bookshelves and the floor. I pulled out one and blew the dust off. The cover was

made of green velvet with a little oval mirror in the center. Carefully, I opened the old book expecting a grimoire of spells, pentagrams, and secret invocations but finding instead soft sepia images of people I didn't recognize with names smudged and faded away. It seemed sad that these people had lived long lives and that there was nothing left of them but a picture in an old dusty album. I placed the album in the cardboard box and then pulled out the other albums, checking each one carefully for black widows before placing it in the box.

I felt sheepish and guilty for thinking the worst of this dead relative. But then I saw it - a loose floorboard. My curiosity driven adrenalin surged. It was a secret hiding place. I looked over my shoulder to see everyone whispering in the kitchen, absorbed in their own secrets. I turned back to the floor under the shelf. What could be in there? Money? Secret adoption papers? Civil war bonds? Silently, I wedged my fingernail between the loose board and the floor and lifted the splintered old wood. There was dark space and a little silver box inside. Jewels? A locket with a picture of his girlfriend? Microfilm of a nuclear bomb plant? Careful not to touch a spider much less a spider web, I lifted the little box out. It was heavy and tarnished. The top was embossed with a raven and there was a little, unlocked latch. A treasure map? Gold nuggets? The raven image didn't get passed me, so vibrating with fearful anticipation I opened the box.

At first I was disappointed; it was full of hairclips. It was just a disappointing box of old junk. But then I started wondering why anyone would hide such a thing. The barrettes were old fashioned and for little girls. There was one with a little silk rose attached to it. I lifted it up to the sunlight streaming through the window and could see several long strands of fair hair still tangled in the clasp, as though the little clip had been ripped out. Thoroughly creeped out, I dropped it back in the box but then noticed that some of the other hair clips had hair in them as well. And, at the bottom of the box was a lock of dark hair tied with a blue ribbon.

Suddenly, a horrible knowing swept over me. I knew what it all meant. I didn't know what to do. I sat frozen unable to decide if I should hide the box again or show it to my parents and my aunts. It would hurt them so much to know, it would break my heart. But then maybe there were families still waiting to know the truth. I truly did not know what the right thing to do was. Maybe no one would believe me. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I misunderstood. Then, I felt a stillness in my heart and a buzzing in my ear that turned into a distant child's cry and suddenly I knew what I should do.

Inspired by "Raven Reflecting" by Duane Simshauser

The City of Ventura

Municipal *Art* Collection

In May of 1999, the City Council established the Municipal Art Acquisition Program to document the history of visual art in Ventura through the annual purchase of important works of art created by area artists. The collection provides increased access to art of the highest quality and of distinctive merit through its display in the public areas of City Hall and other municipal buildings. Featured artworks must be created by artists residing in Ventura County or who have made a direct contribution to the history of art in Ventura County.

The Municipal Art Acquisition Committee, a sub-committee of the Public Art Commission, oversees the purchase of works in a variety of artistic media. The Public Art Commission plans to expand the collection in future years.

Ventura's Municipal Art Collection is exhibited in City Hall, 501 Poli Street, in the downtown Cultural District during regular business hours, closed alternate Fridays.

For more information visit www.cityofventura.net/publicart or call 805/658-4793.



Hanna Lore Hombordy



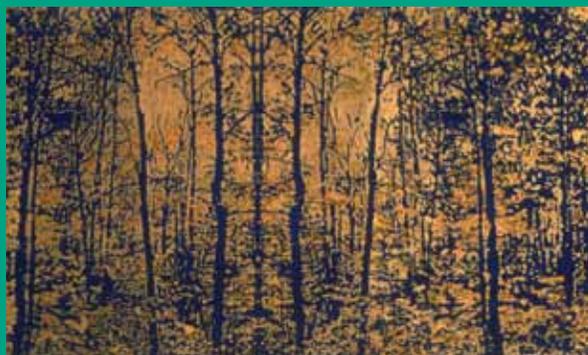
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Teal Rowe



Chloe Murdock



Richard Amend



Gayel Childress