2000 Literary Achievement Awards

Golden Key is proud to announce the winners of the 2000 Literary Achievement Awards. The four winning selections were chosen from more than 1,000 entries and are featured in their original forms on the following pages. Golden Key is proud to sponsor this program, and we congratulate the winners as well as the other members who participated in this year's creative challenge. We would also like to express our deep appreciation to the honorary members who adjudicated this year's program.

Winners ($1,000 Award)

Literary Achievement Award for Excellence in News/Feature Writing
Guilan Siassi
University of California, Berkeley

Literary Achievement Award for Excellence in Poetry
Melissa S. Oulavong
Northwestern University

Literary Achievement Award for Excellence in Fiction
Jennifer M. Hines
University of Washington

Literary Achievement Award for Excellence in Non-Fiction
Teresa Carrion
Florida International University

2001 Literary Achievement Awards

Golden Key National Honor Society is proud to announce the 2001 Literary Achievement Awards. The purpose of this scholarship program is to recognize and to encourage our members' literary talents. All members are invited to submit works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and news/feature writing. The entries are judged based on originality, creativity and clarity, and the winners are selected by a panel of honorary members in the fields of English and/or journalism.

Rules:

- Only Golden Key members may submit entries.
- Entries will be accepted in the following four categories: fiction, non-fiction, poetry and news/feature writing.
- Each entry must be accompanied by a separate Literary Achievement Awards application form. The form is available from the Golden Key International Headquarters, or you may download it from the Golden Key web site at http://gknhs.gsu.edu.
- The applicant's name or other identification must not appear on any page other than the application.
- Each entry must be an original composition. Previously published works will not be accepted.
- Only one composition per member, per category will be accepted.
- Any entry that does not adhere to all rules of the Literary Achievement Awards will be disqualified.

The winner in each category will receive a $1,000 award, and the winning entries will be published in CONCEPTS.

Please send all entries to:
Literary Achievement Awards
1189 Ponce de Leon Ave.
Atlanta, GA 30306-4624

All entries must be postmarked by April 1, 2001.

Material Mysticism?

How a Thirteenth Century Poet is Making a Comeback at the Dawn of the Third Millennium

By Guilan Siassi
University of California, Berkeley
Winner–News/Feature Writing

"Rumi is about humanity, at its best, at its highest, at its more evolved form. This is what every human being who has a little sense of consciousness, a little sense for adventure, for growth, is looking for."

Back in 1244 AD, in the deserts of the Persian Empire, a small crowd of disciples gathered, awestruck, as a man's heart was literally set aspin. Filled with longing for his lost, beloved "soul-mate," the man began whirling around on his own axis, unfurling, without pause, hundreds of lines of musical verse. In the next thirty years of his life, the poet's voice would find, for companionship, the plaintive melody of the reed flute and the entrancing rhythm of tambour drums. Thus it was that over 70,000 lines and six volumes of poetry were born, as Jelaluddin Balkhi transformed himself from religious scholar to the mystical artist known in the West as Rumi. Or so the story goes.

And more than 750 years later, this time in the desert of Palm Springs, CA, The legend will continue: On New Year's Eve, new voices will be chanting Rumi's elusively alluring songs and participating in his dizzying outpouring of love. Only, this time around, the mystical experience will include a cocktail reception, a lavish three-course dinner, and televised inspirational messages from world leaders, including the Dalai Lama. This time, the crowd will consist of 300-600 well-dressed men and women from around the world and the poet's lonely reed pipe will be replaced with a full orchestra band. This time, Rumi will be the only one not whirling as world famous musicians and performers lead the audience in "dervish dancing" instead. Oh, and of course, this year's love trip will cost a trifling $495—not a bad price to pay for an enlightened and uplifted soul.

For whatever it's worth, Deepak Chopra, America's biggest mind-body-soul guru, will be featuring "Rumi's Ecstatic Journey" as the highlight of his gala multimedia Millennium Event. And what a journey indeed, if not for the New Age mystics of today then certainly for the 13th century Sufi poet whose soul has somehow seeped through the dry sands of the East into fertile American soil. Today, Rumi's words are reaching more ears and receiving more attention than ever. And though Chopra's New Year's Eve extravaganza may be the most elaborate, it is only one of many events that have been organized around the country to celebrate Rumi's passionate poetry.

Born in 1207 AD in Balkh, Afghanistan, Rumi is both sensuous poet and religious thinker, whose insight into the role of the soul in physical existence conveys a unique vision grounded in Islamic mysticism, or Sufism. Up until the age of thirty-seven, he was primarily known as a popular religious scholar and teacher. But his mystical transformation took place when he met the wandering dervish, Shams of Tabriz in the fall of 1244. Of this experience, Rumi writes, "What I had thought of before as God, I met today in a human being."

But more important than his discovery of God on Earth was Rumi's separation from that God. When Shams disappeared (possibly killed by

Rumi's jealous followers) in 1248, Rumi sought in vain to find him again. Then one day, he had a revelation that would shape his vision of divine love—an existential world view that lies at the heart of his spiritual philosophy:

> "Why should I seek? I am the same as
> he. His essence speaks through me.
> I have been looking for myself!"

Out of this mysterious connection to the Beloved grew Rumi's poetic message of oneness with God, of the unity of being, and of the essential human connection to the Divine.

Today in America, the buds of Rumi's message are sprouting once again as people like Chopra sow the seeds of his non-sectarian, universalist spirituality and as more and more people eagerly reap the fruits of his wisdom. Dozens of web sites are currently devoted to the poet and this past October, a 3-day festival was held in his honor for the second year in a row. Moreover, in the past decade alone, an unprecedented number of Rumi translations have been published and sold.

Coleman Barks, who is considered the premier translator and populizer of Rumi today, undertook to rewrite scholarly and literal translations twenty years ago when fellow poet, Robert Bly, urged him to "release these poems from their cages." Today, his fourteen books have sold over half a million copies and his Essential Rumi (1995) even appeared on the West Coast bestseller list at #5 in 1996. This in a country where books of poetry, in general, suffer notoriously low sales.

Last year Chopra also put forth a book of love poems (selling over 80,000 copies to date), as well as a spoken word CD on which Madonna, Demi Moore, and Goldie Hawn, amongst others, recite erotic renditions of Rumi's poems over the palpitating, percussive beats of synthesized "ethnic" music. And the rest has been icing on the cake: A renowned documentary by filmmaker Haydn Reiss has put Rumi's story onscreen, while fashion shows by Donna Karan and a new opera by composer Phillip Glass have put Rumi's poetry to music onstage.

The most immediate causes of Rumi's popularity can be summed up in very non-mystical terms: good publicity and mass marketing. Barks' plain-talk versions have undoubtedly made Rumi's poetry accessible to a wider public. But only recently, when he was featured in a one-hour Bill Moyers PBS Poetry Special, did Barks' twenty-two years of work receive widespread attention and his books started selling in the hundreds of thousands.

Chopra has likewise contributed to the growing readership, citing the poet's penetrating, inspirational verse to elaborate his own self-help discourse. Moreover, Chopra and his famous friends have taken a somewhat "easy-sell" angle—by treating "love poems" that expose Rumi's erotic and sensual bent —which doesn't hurt either. In fact, when Chopra's "Gift of Love" CD came out last year, Rumi's place in the pop culture was sealed as Newsweek Magazine dubbed him a "Persian love machine," and "the hottest dead Sufi poet in Hollywood."

But what is it about the so-called Hazrat ("saint") Moulana ("master") Jelaluddin Rumi ("from Roman Anatolia") that appeals to a public who would have more trouble pronouncing his full title than reciting one of his beautiful quatrains? Perhaps, as Barks imagines, Rumi offers his readers a fresh perspective on universal truths that have been underplayed in this largely secular culture. He speculates, "His poetry nourishes something. Maybe it's that he's saying a truth that has been sort of muted in Western civilization. Which is, form is ecstatic! Just to be sentient and shaped is a kind of rapture."

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Others cite the spiritual hunger felt by people who, disenchanted with organized religion, still seek direct, personal experience of God. Lindy Hough, director of marketing at North Atlantic Books, a small-scale publisher of "alternative thinking" books and long-time carrier of Rumi-related titles, believes that Rumi responds to people who want to define a personal spiritual system.

"Rumi is popular now not because he's a poet but because his ideas tie in with American Buddhism and Christian Gnosticism, which is very popular now." From this perspective, Rumi's appeal is not surprising. Americans disconnected from traditional religious values and dogma have been looking to voices from other cultures to guide them on their spiritual paths for many years. Other Eastern poets like Khalil Gibran have also exalted love as a transformative power and explored the divine nature of sensual experience. Like Rumi, they have also enjoyed their share of popularity in the 90's.

But for some reason, Rumi is still going strong. "People really do seem to be reading [Rumi's poetry], not just buying the books to be part of some fad," reflects Barks. Perhaps it is because Rumi's very existence was so filled with passion, because his own life exemplified the ecstatic vision he expresses in his poems, that he continues to fascinate and keeps people's interest today.

Shahram Shiva, Iranian Rumi devotee, award-winning translator, and performance poet who will be teaching "the whirl" at Chopra's millennium celebration, says that Rumi's poetry attracts individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds and from every walk of life because there is something inherently personal and uplifting in his message. "People are not buying Rumi because it's poetry. People are buying the poetry because Rumi comes through in the poems and touches them."

At a poetry workshop he conducted this past summer at the 2nd Annual Rumi Festival in North Carolina, Shiva asked, "What is it about Rumi's poetry that touches you?" Many people in the group admitted that they don't even like poetry but that they enjoy reading Rumi. The group was attracted to Rumi's very personal way of expressing a universal vision and all were impressed by the many levels to his poems. Above all, readers find Rumi's poetry to be "non-intellectual"—that is, they feel that his poetry speaks to the heart, not to the mind.

Still, it seems somewhat odd that a thirteenth century Persian sheikh should be resurrected at the end of the 20th century as the disembodied voice of America's poetic and spiritual consciousness. Although Rumi and other Persian poets of his stature are traditionally honored as sages and, to a certain extent, as messengers of divine truth, in the East, it is highly unusual to see such popular commemoration of a poet in America.

U.S. Poet Laureate, Robert Hass explained why poetry is not as strong a force in the American popular tradition: "Poets play a different role in cultures that have a unified religious tradition. So it is easier to see a poet like Rumi as a central cultural figure in the East." Moreover, he adds, Americans have traditionally been distrustful of European elites and of the social, political, and intellectual values associated with such elitism. A hesitancy to fully embrace these cultural traditions has consequently fostered a different attitude towards poetry and learning in general, in America. "The idea of the poet had to be reinvented here to some extent," says Hass.

But despite (or perhaps, because of) this streak of "anti-intellectualism" in the populist tradition, poets like Walt Whitman have been honored as creators of new cultural values, as revisionistic voices of democratic ideas unique to this country. In a way, Hass says, the passionate expression of self that Rumi conveys—and those Barks captures in his free verse translations—echoes the very spirit of Whitman's poetry. He specifically compares the mystic poet's exuberant exaltation of the human body and soul to Whitman's sensual celebration of his unique poetic identity in "Song of Myself."

In much of Rumi's poetry, Hass says, "You'd find a figure familiar to Americans of the ecstatic and the dreamer who is urging you not to cut the world up with an intellectual understanding but to grasp it whole." So Rumi's ecstatic spiritual vision is not one altogether unfamiliar to American

readers. In fact, Rumi's exaltation of the self, of the soul, and of the human experience—fits quite well into America's popular poetic tradition. And oddly enough, his positive, forward-looking ideas—whether religious or secular—lie at the heart of the American spirit.

Though Rumi's message is not at all simple, it is particularly accessible to the public in these Whitmanesque translations. In the original, the poems are sung as lyrics and the songs are built upon an intricate internal design which includes alliteration, assonance, puns, and a series of repeating end-word rhymes, which add an auditory dimension of mystery to the poems and complement their metaphysical meanings.

In his versions, Barks ignores the complexities of song form and the intricacy of design in the originals and translates the poetry into plain 20th century American speech. "The very things we find extremely beautiful about other parts of Persian art are also in Rumi's poetry, but you don't' see that in the American translation," says Hass. "So in that sense, it's cultural translation from one aesthetic to another, but I don't think that it falsifies the spirit of Rumi which people find so attractive." The poetry, Hass says, provides both spiritual seekers and the general reader looking for wisdom with "a model of how to be in the world, how to express their ecstatic sense of being alive."

Although Rumi's message goes beyond any single religious doctrine or ideology, the popularity of his poems has nonetheless sparked a new interest in Sufi spirituality. For instance, there has been a growing interest in the practices of the Mevlevi order of Sufis, which was inspired and founded by Rumi. Known as the "whirling dervishes," their trancelike, dancelike ritual of revolving around on one foot while reciting the name of God has influenced Western artists like Phillip Glass and Maurice Bejart.

Hass finds it "weirdly contradictory" that so many people are attracted to the mystical tradition of Islam in the same society that most often perceives and portrays Muslims as fanatical terrorists. It is interesting to see how, as Hass describes, "All the bad guys in movies and cartoons have vaguely middle-eastern accents and no one has any sense from the newspapers of anything but a bunch of bearded men yelling in the streets." And yet these very accessible translations have somehow taken Rumi's Sufism out of that cultural context.

Rumi's poems ultimately convey Mohammed's teachings of kindness, compassion and tolerance, and so can expose the breadth of Islamic philosophy. Still, as Shiva says, "If Rumi came across as a Muslim, he would not have been popular." If anything, Rumi's poetry has become a sort of cultural and religious bridge. For instance, Shiva recalls speaking to two young Muslim Americans who said that being associated with Rumi made them feel more comfortable with their religious identity.

As Americans begin to learn that "dervish" means "door," that the act of whirling is symbolic of opening the door to one's heart, and that Sufi means "open-hearted person," some people, like Hass, hope that many popular misconceptions about Islamic cultures will be cleared up. Others, like Shiva, expect that Rumi's words of wisdom could even inspire people to adopt the poet's own open-minded, open-heartedness.

In any case, Rumi exudes an energy that has become contagious. And though it is perhaps only a pale reflection of the ecstatic enlightened life he, himself, led, his poetry elucidates the spirit of passion and calls on people to follow their own spiritual path. As Shiva says, "Rumi is about humanity, at its best, at its highest, at its more evolved form. This is what every human being who has a little sense of consciousness, a little sense for adventure, for growth, is looking for. This is what Rumi is tapping into." ●

Landscape in November

[Ban Houayxay, Laos, 1971]

by Melissa Oulavong
Northwestern University
Winner–Poetry

The rains have finally stopped.
Fresh, monsoon has washed the village:
the trails, smooth like strips
of hide laid out in sun,
perfectly cool and nearly dry enough to tread;
every leaf and branch swollen
behind eager fruits—
the guava, mango, and coconut,
green, pale-green, and raw;
the bamboo leaves, hand-woven and matted,
glossy yellowish brown atop a frame
of fastened poles and rooftop thatch;
sodden but clean.
Behind the house, the harvest waits—
never forgotten, never quite enough: it is
rice-noodle, rice-cake, rice-paste;
a smell that sticks to fingers and chins,
inherent, thick, and vast;
a smell thicker than muck dragged from the Mekong,
the daily bath and sink,
and sweeter than the white Dauk-Haum-Duhk
at midnight, in awakened bloom,
planted in hollow metal shells
with their blanked placards, and lined
along the paddies, a memorandum
of the years passed, vague yet distinct—
a subtle summer breeze. ●

The Waves

by Jennifer M. Hines
University of Washington
Winner–Fiction

My cousin Jeremy died a month ago. He committed suicide by walking off the high cliffs outside my aunt and uncle's New England home. After the funeral, my Uncle Howard disappeared. No one in the extended family knew where he'd gone, and everyone was afraid to ask. Mom sent me to New England from our house in Iowa, saying that she and Dad couldn't leave because they'd lose their jobs and we needed the money, and since I just had a temp job at an accounting firm, they decided I had nothing to lose. She told me to help pack up Jeremy's room and try to take Auntie's mind off the empty house.

I'd argued with my Mom over being drafted like I was in the army. I wasn't in the mood for three months of awkwardness. I always felt uncomfortable being in my aunt and uncle's rich household where I was supposed to act with well-bred manners; I was used to the plaid couches and Mac'n' Cheese dinners twice a week at our house. Mom said if I didn't go and help put our family back together, she would force me to, as she said, "move out and stop loafing off us." I couldn't afford a place of my own, no matter how meager, so I packed a bag. I don't think I was much in a consoling mood.

"Shelly! I'm so glad you made it! How was the flight? Did they feed you?" Auntie guarded a pale blue handkerchief in her tired hands.

"Yes, they fed me, if you count those dumb bags of peanuts. *How are you?*" Neither one of us wanted to address the suicide. Our tight smiles indicated we were both unhappy at our present predicament, me being forced to be a caretaker, and her being forced to take assistance.

"Fine. I'm fine. I'm really glad you're here." She smiled weakly and hesitated. "You know, I've taken up knitting."

"Knitting? Sounds like a nice way to pass the time." No more baking cookies for Jeremy's soccer team or attending PTA meetings. No more mending prep school uniforms or buying school pictures.

"I've made an afghan already. I put it in your room." She continued speaking in small talk, acting like a child who doesn't want to admit that everything's not okay. She was annoying me already; I didn't want to hear about the weather or the colors of her afghan, I wanted to finish this whole episode so I could go back to Iowa where it was comfortable and familiar. I already felt out of place.

We walked to the baggage claim carousels, I picked up my suitcase, and we walked to the parking garage where she had parked the Buick. She babbled helplessly in the car on the way back to the house. The three-story house was beautiful and spacious and at least a hundred years old, made of old weathered wood carved with trellises and balconies. The windows upstairs were all different shapes, circles and diamonds and moons, and since her house was on a point, almost every window faced the Atlantic Ocean. The house was greyed from the strong salt winds that gush in from the sea and seemed to sag in its own grief, a lonely dog without its master.

The house was greyed from the strong salt winds that gush in from the sea and seemed to sag in its own grief, a lonely dog without its master.

She quickly walked up the little stone walkway to the front door while talking carelessly of her drive to the airport and the last Jeopardy episode.

When she unlocked the door, she dropped her keys twice in the process. I would have helped but I was still holding my suitcase.

"Just make yourself at home, Shelly." She hastened to the kitchen to make me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and glass of milk even though I am twenty-four. I told her she didn't have to go to the trouble, I was fine, the peanuts tided me over, but she insisted to the point where it would have been rude and a hassle for me to refuse.

I ate in silence and looked at the expensive nautical knickknacks around the room, the ships and compasses and precious shells, while Auntie watched me with lifted eyebrows, her hands moving continuously with that darn handkerchief in her lap. Her wide eyes inspected the shadows in the room trying to find something to talk about to fill the silence around my gummy chewing. The moment I took the last bite, she picked up my plate and rumpled napkin and took them into the kitchen.

"Thanks for the sandwich, Auntie."

"No problem. You know you're always welcome here." Her artificial hostess-mode had always bothered me; she acted like we were best friends when I knew that both of us wanted me to hop back on a plane to Iowa this very minute. "I put you in the room upstairs. Your mother and I used to fight over who would stay in that room when our grandmother lived here. We always thought it was something like the tower room in a castle. But your mom always won because she was older and had longer hair. Well, that was her argument anyway. I guess she thought that entitled her to the fairy tale."

My room was on the third floor, almost at the attic. It was small and stuffy, but slightly charming with a patchwork quilt and Auntie's newly knitted afghan folded neatly at the foot of the twin bed. I unpacked my suitcase and noticed the silence, broken only by the crash of the water beneath me. If I stretched my body far out the window I could see the mossy cliffs and ghostly waves below.

I laid down on the bed facing the ceiling. The room was quaint, a suitable place for an extended visit, even if I was just here to do housework. My mother used to talk of this room—she said she would climb on top of the faded brown dresser and lean out the window with her long blond hair like Rapunzel. When her grandmother had died of a stroke when she was ten, my mother had cried and cried because the house was left to her uncle. He was like a giant, with a terrifying bristly beard and large feet, who barked when he spoke. Whenever the family visited, he made Auntie and my mother share the sofabed downstairs and had turned the room into storage.

"Shelly! Good Morning! Although I'm not sure if eleven o'clock is still morning. Would you like some breakfast?" Auntie poured me a glass of orange juice.

"Yeah, sure."

"How did you sleep?" She handed me the juice in a short glass with beveled sides.

"Not good. I kept hearing things. Did you hear anything last night?"

"What do you mean? Hear what?" She looked frazzled by the question.

"Noises. Like footsteps or something."

She sighed. "You know, Shelly, I like having you here. The house feels full when you're here." She stopped and her face hardened. Then she shook herself and looked up at me with a forced smile. "Would you like a bowl of cereal or something?" I declined and we sat in strained silence until I got up to do the dishes.

The television was up just a little too loud. I'd turned up the volume of the Jeopardy episode when Auntie had left the room; I figured she would talk less if she was forced to raise her voice. She didn't like to yell. In fact, I'd never heard her yell. She always spoke in the same high-pitched tone that grated on my nerves and made me long for Iowa.

"Would you like me to make you lunch, Shelly?" Auntie smiled and clicked away with her knitting needles. She said she was making another afghan, this one for me to take home to my parents.

"No, I'm okay. Thank you though."

"Who is Sigmund Freud?" She rattled off the answer before the contestant had a chance to buzz in. And of course she was correct. She was always correct.

"What is Pride and Prejudice?" I barely knew who Jane Austen was. Click click, those knitting needles moved in and out, in and out, always busy.

"What is ochlocracy?" Buzz. Yes, we have a winner. Click click.

"What is a nuclear reaction?" I stood up abruptly, trying to hide my annoyance before it erupted.

"Where are you going? Aren't you going to watch with me? You might learn something interesting." She sounded almost condescending, but I think it was my imagination. She actually looked a little scared at being left alone. She put down her knitting needles and tensed her hands.

"I think I'll go try to make some headway on Jeremy's room, okay?"

"Oh. Yes, I guess that needs to get done." Her eyes looked hollow. I felt sorry for her; living in her son's shadow and trying to pretend everything's normal. Just a fragile old woman. I tried to ease down my annoyance.

"Why don't you call me when Jeopardy is over and we'll have lunch together." She nodded like she was in a trance and turned back to the show. She actually missed responding to one of the questions.

Packing up Jeremy's things was my main job in the beginning weeks. My aunt couldn't bear to walk down the hallway to his room. He still had a teddy bear above his bed and comic books on his shelf. I packed those first; I couldn't handle seeing the things that reminded me of how young he was. His clothes came next, then his Hardy Boys book collection, then the submarine models he'd built from scratch when he was eight.

I felt uncomfortable being forced to go through Jeremy's things, to pack up what was forgotten and left behind. It was strange, feeling him here and remembering what he'd said the last time I'd seen him. Seeing the expression on his face that night on the cliffs was enough to understand, enough to tie my heart up in knots when I heard about his death. I felt I understood him in a way I wouldn't allow myself to fully grasp, not here. There was no way I was going to reopen the wound, that horrible gash I had taken so much effort to seal up. Someone had to keep the order in this place. Someone had to be the rock that everyone could lean on. I couldn't let my aunt's grief infect me; I was here to stay sane, to keep up, like a tree in the wind.

Seeing the expression on his face that night on the cliffs was enough to understand, enough to tie my heart up in knots when I heard about his death. I felt I understood him in a way I wouldn't allow myself to fully grasp, not here.

Auntie called to me from the living room for lunch. "Coming!" I yelled. I got up, brushed off my knees and went out to the kitchen to help start the soup.

September 17, 1999

Dear Mom, I've started packing up Jeremy's room and Auntie is having a hard time dealing with his absence. All she does is sit in that rocking chair all day watching television or the ocean. She likes to cook for me, but I have to watch her—she left the stove on the other day and almost burned down the kitchen. I still haven't seen Uncle Howard. I haven't been sleeping well here—I miss home. Give the dog a hug for me. Shelly.

There was only one time when I really felt I knew Jeremy. It was the last time I saw him, when my mother, father and I had come to visit here in October two years ago. After dinner, Jeremy and

I had gone outside and left the clamor of dishes being washed and family arguments back in the house, the echo wiped out by the waves crashing into the ragged flinty shore below us. His unusually small frame was standing next to me on a platform near the cliff's edge. I spread the sand and pebbles out in a half-moon with the toe of my shoe, listening to the gentle scraping sound.

"It's quiet here."

"Yeah. I like coming out here and watching the waves." His gaze never faltered from the movement of the water. The waves seemed to pull his wound-up heart directly into their dance like knotted string.

"You come out here a lot?"

"I sort of view this as my place." The trees were just starting to turn yellow and orange in the first of autumn's color. They hugged the edges of the cliff and seemed to spread down to the water like tentative hands. "I get frustrated sometimes, and this, the sound of the waves, calms me down. Sometimes I just need to get away, you know?"

I don't think I'd ever talked to Jeremy this intimately before. We lived too far apart and only saw each other at the occasional family reunion. In this one moment, as he was describing the waves below, I understood. He was a labyrinth of grown-up stuffed into a small child package.

"Escape from what?"

"I just don't fit in around here, at school or at home." I looked at him in the semi-darkness and saw his hands drop and start to fidget with the zipper of his jacket. The jacket was something his mom had picked out at the Macy's in town—it was a dark grey old-man coat that was about three sizes too big. Auntie had probably justified it with "You'll grow into it." It was not something a socially adjusted fourteen-year-old would pick out for himself. The jacket made him look helpless and far away, very lost in a world that didn't quite fit him.

"Mom and Dad just don't understand that. They always nag me to attend birthday parties and football games. But no one likes me, no one invites me. None of the kids are really that mean to me, they just pretend I don't exist."

October 11, 1999

Dear Mom, I finally finishedwith Jeremy's room. His things are packed in boxes, marked with a permanent marker and set to mold, fearfully undisturbed, in the attic. Auntie seems a little better, but she still needs help doing even simple things like bills and grocery shopping. She can't seem to concentrate on anything more intense than Jeopardy. I have no idea when or if Uncle Howard will reappear. Please send a little money, any you can spare. Bills are due in by mid-month and Auntie hasn't been able to bring herself to go to work since the funeral. Hopefully, I'll be home in around a month. I miss you guys. Shelly.

On our visit two years ago, we went on a tour of four local lighthouses and my mother bought a postcard of each one to put on our bulletin board at home. By the time we got back to the house, we were exhausted and all of our feet hurt from hiking down to the coast from the parking lots, but Auntie was unstoppable. She fluttered around the kitchen wearing a blue and white ruffled apron making a dinner of pork roast with pie for dessert to celebrate the family coming together. She loved playing hostess.

She sent Uncle Howard to the store to pick up the whip cream and green beans, which, believe it or not, she had forgotten. My uncle was an orphan. He grew up in this strict little boarding school in Western Pennsylvania. I think he was so used to being alone, he never really learned how to be in a conversation. But I loved him, his disjointed stories and intellectual jokes no one laughed at. He had a huge heart and was always smiling, which made people think he was mocking them and quickly made them end the dialogue. His smile was this toothy smile that engulfed his entire face and lifted his bushy grey eyebrows up like a marionette string, and his laugh was infectious and nonsensical, bouncing in between my eye sockets, making me close my eyes and smile. That's what made me love him.

When he returned from the store, his face was wiped blank, hard like stone. He didn't smile or tell any jokes. We sat down at the table quietly; his solemnity was infectious just like his smile. He cut the roast and passed down slices without commenting. We ate without speaking, even Auntie had no commentary. Uncle Howard frowned and spoke deeply, making us all tense.

"So, Jeremy, how was school yesterday?"

"Fine, Dad. The usual." Jeremy shoved a bite of meat into his mouth and looked down at his plate, not meeting his father's gaze.

"I talked to Mr. Stalinski today." Jeremy's head rose and his eyes focused on his father. "I saw him at the supermarket. He asked me how I was doing. I said I was fine. He said that I'd had a miraculous recovery from the pneumonia I was struck with just two days ago, which was why my son was unable to turn in his homework. Nursing me, you see."

> *But then I saw him, my uncle, one night during his ritual. He went to Jeremy's room, then circled the house to arrive at the cliffs outside. I could see his moonlit back facing the unrelenting sea that had swallowed his son too early for him to save.*

Jeremy's eyes circled the table and looked at all of our faces that wished we were somewhere else eating a jovial meal. We all examined our pork roast and potatoes and shifted in our chairs, unable to do anything other than remain quiet.

"Would you like to explain this to me son?"

"No sir." Jeremy's voice was quiet and strained.

"Nothing at all? No confessions or apologies or groveling at the dinner table?"

"No sir."

"Well, since you have nothing to say, you will be punished, and with my disappointment. You'll learn to regret the day you made me ashamed to have you as my son."

"But you don't understand!" Jeremy burst out, making us all jump. "I didn't want to lie, I didn't! I did my homework, and I tried to make you proud, I always try, but I lost it somewhere, and Mr. Stalinski said if I missed one more assignment—"

"That's enough of your excuses. I thought I taught you to take responsibility for your actions, to stand tall and be a man of virtue and honor. Lying is not part of that honor, or part of this family. Remember that in the future."

The rest of us stared at each other wide-eyed across the table and looked at the pathetic slumped shoulders of Jeremy. He looked up at me and his eyes looked like hollow pits of misery, waves creasing his face until it was almost ready to collapse. I swallowed like there was peanut butter in my mouth and chewed a tasteless bit of carrot from my half-empty plate.

The noises at night got worse over the months. I thought the place was haunted, that maybe Jeremy was roaming the halls searching for his things I had packed away. The visions in my mind of Rapunzel draping her long hair out the window had been replaced with images of white shrouded ghosts with light like moonlight falling from their grey skin. Sometimes I would lie awake and listen to the shuffle of the slow pace and creak of the floorboards.

But then I saw him, my uncle, one night during his ritual. He went to Jeremy's room, then circled the house to arrive at the cliffs outside. I could see his moonlit back facing the unrelenting sea that had swallowed his son too early for him to save. I was afraid to open

my door and look out when I heard him in the hallway; I thought he might turn on me in deranged grief and hug me and tear my limbs out of their sockets trying to pretend I was Jeremy for just one moment.

I discovered he slept in a small sun nook in the corner of the house, away from the main living area. I only heard him emerge at night. It was always locked; I had assumed it was storage.

The next morning, I made the mistake of asking Auntie about him. “He blames himself. For not noticing, you see. He was there when Jeremy jumped.” She swallowed hard. “He just sleeps. Sleeps and walks. I need him here, but he’s already gone. He’s left me alone to deal with the leftovers.” Her voice rose and she began to sob uncontrollably in her rocking chair. I reached out and took her hand, waiting for the episode to pass, and absently looked around the room at the doilies and lace table covers that had slowly replaced the nautical decor since I’d arrived.

November 4, 1999

Mom, Is there anything left in savings? I never knew electric bills for these old houses were so expensive. I’ve spent most of the last few weeks cleaning up the house and trying to get the finances in order. Jeremy’s funeral really took a chunk out of Auntie and Uncle Howard’s money. I’m getting tired of being the caretaker, can’t I come home? Shelly.

It’d been nearly two months; the money was almost gone and my Aunt didn’t seem at all close to being normal. I felt disjointed, away from home and a job, with no sense of order other than to clean up after a grief-stricken woman who had nothing better to talk about than Jeopardy. There was no one around me who was normal or sane. I hadn’t been sleeping and I was always cold, even under Auntie’s homemade green and blue afghan.

One night in mid-November, at around nine o’clock, the sky clouded over and the trees started blowing in the rising wind. I could feel the coming storm in my bones. The wind wailed like an old arthritic grandfather, crying out in pain. I couldn’t sleep. I stared at the ceiling. Finally, I gave up and clicked on the light to search for something to do, but my room was empty, had no bookshelves or anything. So I was forced to just lay there with my thoughts. I thought of Jeremy, that night on the cliffs. Lately I had been having a hard time pushing that image out of my memory banks. He’d just looked so alone, we all felt so alone!

My room no longer seemed like the magical fairy-tale place my mom had described, or even the quaint little room I had gotten used to over the last few months; it was a cell where no magic could penetrate, where only grief could grow and multiply and never be fully erased, like memories. I wanted to let down my hair, to be saved from this rotten house full of solitude and heartache. I was trapped into grief and trying so hard to resist it, to be strong and to keep a clear head, to forget that last image of Jeremy, but I couldn’t anymore. My branches snapped, I fell in the wind.

His wild grey hair was blowing like kite tails in the wind and I could feel the tension of decision in his stance. His step got nearer to the edge; his glance hovered over the rocks that inevitably claimed his son.

I walked to my door and listened, heard nothing but the wailing wind, and slipped out into the hallway and out the back door wearing nothing but flannel pajamas and wool socks. The moon was out, silhouetting everything in a pale grey like black and white television. I heard nothing—the crash of the waves drew me like a conveyer belt to the edge where Jeremy said goodbye.

I looked down at the water, circling those rocks hugged by white foam that glowed in the moonlight. My hair swirled in a frenzy around my head, a whirlwind, a signal, a halo, and I cried. I cried for everything: For Jeremy, for the blood on the rocks below that a lifetime of waves, what Jeremy would have known, could never wash away. I cried for my Aunt and her handkerchiefs, her prune-like hands magnified in my imagination, desperate for busy-work, desperate for what is now absence. I cried for myself, for being so sterile, so inhuman, for pushing way everyone’s grief, including my own, and for remembering that back when I was in high school, I too had thought I was so incompatible and frightfully unique. And I cried for my uncle, for his unrelenting grief that I could do nothing to appease.

I don’t know how long I stood there, hugging myself in the shadow of the house and watching the serrated waves reflect the night. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and turned to return to the warmth of the house. I stopped abruptly. My uncle stood like an anchor, just twenty feet to my left, oblivious to my presence.

His wild grey hair was blowing like kite tails in the wind and I could feel the tension of decision in his stance. His step got nearer to the edge; his glance hovered over the rocks that inevitably claimed his son. I thought he was going to jump. His slippers slid mournfully close to the edge and he leaned slightly forward. After about five minutes, he looked back in anguish and retreated towards the house to commence his pacing of the hallways again, night after night, until his grief, spread out over miles like tire tread, was finally worn out.

Dominoes

by Teresa Carrion
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Winner—Non-Fiction

The wooden box sits on my desk now, as I write this, acting as a bookend for my dictionary and thesaurus. Occasionally I'll slide the top open, pull out a domino and clutch it in my hand. It soothes me.

In another piece, I hear my father tap his delicate fingers on the fichas. He orders another cafecito while he debates when Castro will fall. My father is laughing.

My father won the dominoes, along with a trophy, in an amateur tournament in California, in 1974. At the time my father was working as a driving instructor and trying to decide if he should go back to school to get his license to practice dentistry in America.

He'd left Cuba and his profession, and emigrated to Venezuela in the late fifties, where he reinstated his practice and met my mother, who had just emigrated from Spain, when she came to his office with a rotten molar. After three years of marriage I was conceived.

In 1966, my Tio Gustavo, who had gone straight from Cuba to New York in the early fifties, convinced my father to move to the states so that I would be an American. My parents arrived at La Guardia two months before I was born.

My father drove a cab for a while, learned English and eventually became a social worker. Then, following my Tio Gustavo again, we moved to Gardena, California when I was four.

In our clunky gold Dodge Dart, in the heart of winter, it was a long trip but I remember how clean and bright California appeared, compared to New York. Everything seemed to glow with freshness.

We lived with Tio Gustavo, Tia Maria, and my cousins Gusi and Angie until we found a small house in Huntington Park, a suburb ten miles South East of downtown Los Angeles.

My father was reluctant to go back to school. Already in his fifties, he feared discrimination, but he wanted me to have a good life. It was the reason they came to America in the first place.

I remember him sitting up all night, hunched over at the kitchen table, wearing yellow, plastic magnifying goggles, staring down at a false gum line and sculpting teeth with shiny silver instruments. Sometimes he would let me sit with him and help by rolling pink wax into little balls that he then heated over the sharp blue flame, softening them enough to place in the false gum line and set the teeth in place.

My father didn't have much free time during those two years at USC and UCLA, but he managed to get in at least one domino game on the weekend at La Cofradia, the neighborhood social club where the men gathered to play and discuss politics while their wives gossiped in a separate room.

Chu Chi, Josie, Rita, and the rest of us kids were allowed to roam, unsupervised, through the maze of halls. We'd kick off our Buster Browns, up towards the endless cathedral ceiling in the main hall, and slide across the slick wooden dance floor like Olympic ice skating hopefuls, crashing into the burgundy velvet curtains that hung cinched against the gothic archways like giant bows. Thirsty and panting, David, Maritza, Hector and I would race to the kitchen where we'd debate over tamales with ketchup (in perfect first generation American Spanglish) why Pepsi is better than Ironbeer, until our mothers came to scream at us about ruining our

socks. By the time they were done collecting dozens of stray shoes, our sugar crashing bodies would collapse into their arms. I had my first crush on a Cofradia boy, danced my first paso doble with my dad under the sparkling teardrops of the chandelier, and on Halloween, I helped create the Haunted House and touched dry ice for the first time.

The Cofradia eventually shut down due to money problems. Other social clubs like the Horguineros and El Santiagero took its place, but it was never the same. The buildings were more modern, with demeaning drop ceilings and blaring fluorescent lights. The charm was lost.

After my father graduated, he continued to play dominoes, but left his championship set at home, perhaps as an attempt to preserve them. He placed the box on the shelf of the den between his Jose Marti books and my new set of Encyclopedia Britannica. Tired of the gossip and cigar smoke, my mother stayed home and knitted countless doilies in the shape of stars which soon lined every tabletop in the house. She became a loyal watcher of Mexican soap operas and often cried along with the leading ladies.

My father set up an illegal practice in the garage, while he worked with various dentists throughout town, to earn extra money while he planned the opening of his own office. He did simple extractions, fillings and cleanings, mainly on the Mexican illegal aliens who couldn't risk or afford going to an established dentist. This secret unnerved my mother as she always expected that my father would get caught and lose everything he had worked for.

She tried to keep me from going to visit him in the garage, saying the neighbors might get suspicious seeing me come in and out so often. But I loved to watch my father work, his thinning hair curled behind the ears, his thin, steady fingers balancing the silver instruments like chopsticks over a stranger's gaping mouth.

I was sprawled out on the den floor one afternoon, watching TV and doing my math homework, when I decided to inspect the dominoes. The Brady Bunch was in Hawaii, sporting fake tans and fighting an evil taboo (Bobby's fault of course), when I got up and took the box off the shelf. I kicked my math book out of the way and spilled the pieces onto the linoleum floor. With my hands spread wide, I rolled the dominoes around and around in circles like I'd seen my father do a thousand times. I picked one up, squinted and eyed it like a jeweler inspecting a rare stone.

The face was pearl white with chiseled onyx dots and the backs were red as rubies. A thin gold band divided the dominoes into halves and a tiny rivet protruded from the center. I propelled the pieces around like tops and stared at the muted colors that vibrated like hummingbird wings.

I remembered reading in the Guinness Book of World Records about the official sport of Domino Toppling. Some boy spent weeks and weeks standing up thousands of dominoes on a gymnasium floor, somewhere in Chicago. Long rows of dominoes swirled into spirals and strange zigzag patterns that reminded me of the DNA chains I'd seen in a science book. Gently tipping over the first domino started a symmetrical cascade of color and sound whizzing through the room, ending with the final domino's slap against the wooden floor.

If just one remained standing it wouldn't count and the boy would have to start all over again.

Apparently, this kid was a genius. I imagined that when he wasn't toppling dominoes he locked himself in his room with a chemistry set or homemade telescope and strove to become the next Isaac Newton. I wondered if he was an only child, like me.

Inspired I began building and toppling. It wasn't dramatic enough with only one set of dominoes. I needed more. My mother complained constantly because the noise was driving her crazy. She'd peer in through the doorway from the kitchen, an apron strapped to her waist, and wave a wooden spoon, urging me to get back to my homework.

He shuffled the tiles around, his freckled nose crinkling between his arching eyebrows. I watched his reflection in the dominoes.

I lost interest in the toppling when my father sat me down at the dining room table and decided I was ready to learn how to play. He began with the basics, held up the double zero and double nine, the beginning and end, the A and Z of the domino alphabet.

"First thing is to memorize all the pieces." He shuffled the tiles around, his freckled nose crinkling between his arching eyebrows. I watched his reflection in the dominoes. His face stretched and blurred like in a fun house mirror.

"Once you know each piece's value ... it's all chronological, so you can keep track of what your opponent's move might be according to what you have in front of you and what already has been played." He made it sound so simple.

"The idea is to control both ends of the longana, the open ends of the dominoes on the table, so the other players have to pass and then you can dominate the game."

My father divided up the fichas, as he called them and I sat there staring, trying to sort out the numbers in my head, but after a while the dots on the fichas started to remind me of fractions. Two dots over four dots, four dots over six dots—I hated fractions. By the end of the lesson and my first real game, I was convinced my father must be able to see through the dominoes. That's it, I thought. That's why he is a champion, not just at dominoes but at everything he does.

During the second game I concentrated, focusing hard on the backs of my father's dominoes, straining my eyes until they began to burn. Nothing happened. I realized I didn't posses x-ray vision. Superman and my father had the power, but they were both men, and maybe, because I was a girl, I could never learn to see through anything. My father let me win a few times to encourage me to keep trying. He'd laugh and pat my head when I looked at him suspiciously. I didn't want him to make it easy for me.

As a teenager I learned that dominoes are made out of a material called urea and that the rivet is officially called a metal spin. Webster's defined urea as the chief nitrogenous component of urine in animals. No other definition was offered. My dominoes were made out of urine? I wondered, are bowling balls and dice also made out of urine? Could the whole world be going around cradling piss in their hands? It didn't make much sense. I told my friend Nivi about it that night on the phone.

"You're crazy." She said, "They're made out of plastic, stupid, just plastic, like Duuuh, gross-out and like, gag me with a spoon and like ..." Recently afflicted with the valley girl syndrome made it difficult to talk to Nivi seriously about anything, plus, she lacked imagination in the first place. I told her forget it and hung up.

Plastic? Well, polyurethane is plastic, I thought. Could urea be a hip, shorter version of that? It must be some kind of indefinable, exotic material, I told myself, refusing to accept that it was "just plastic, stupid." Polyurethante, in my opinion, just sounded ugly. Much worse than urine.

I considered using my dominoes to make art. I would make a clock with the appropriate number piece as each hour or maybe a sculpture with Dadaist influences.

I tried to glue them onto the inside of the archway at the top of the stairway, like a mosaic, but the glue wouldn't hold. A domino dropped, bounced down the gold shag, carpeted stairs and landed on the wooden floor of the foyer. My mother, armed with lemon Pledge and a rag, came in from the dining room, stepped on the domino and slid across the floor liked she'd stepped on a banana peel. She grabbed onto the wrought iron railing saving herself from the fall.