

Art Tales

I
2008
Contest
Winners

A Unique
Contest for
Creative Writers



CITY OF
VENTURA
COMMUNITY SERVICES
Cultural Affairs

2009 Art Tales Winners Anthology

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Adult Story – First Prize: Two by Gerald Zwiers

Chapter One – **Two**

There should have been two. There were always two. When Sarah opened the door she always saw two, both of them there, sitting side-by-side. Balanced. It was the way they were meant, in a perfect world, to be. There had been two when she first moved in thirty-eight months ago, and she'd had no intention of ever moving them. But now there was only one.

Chapter Two – **Discovery**

It had taken Sarah nearly four long and tiring weeks of deciding and sorting and boxing and carrying to carefully move her entire life up the seventeen stairs to the second floor of the beautiful, old Victorian near the eastern edge of the downtown area. The smells of cheese and garlic from the small Italian restaurant, on the corner forty-one steps north, had drifted softly through her open windows the first night, and she fell peacefully asleep listening to the continuous white noise blending of traffic and distant voices.

The next several days were busy. Forty-four hours mostly spent cleaning and repainting the kitchen and larger bedroom. The woman who lived there before her had a definite affinity for busy patterns. Wallpapers with ornate flocking and every detail of molding carefully painted in different colors. It was as if nothing were appreciable unless fully and extremely decorated. Sarah much preferred simplicity.

She had taken long walks through the surrounding neighborhoods, exploring the diversity of her wonderful new life. Shops with bright colored doors full of treasures that catered to the tastes and highly unique interests of the rarest of clientele seemed to be hidden in every block, just waiting for either the surprised discovery of a casual wanderer or the return visit of members of some highly informed secret sect. There were people scurrying about with obvious purpose, and she wondered about their destinations. There were the sounds of children seen and unseen. And best of all, the smells. The smells of trees and plants and diesel trucks and wet pavement. Perfumes of women passing by, and distant scents of things being cooked in homes and restaurants. Almost a block away, two hundred and twelve steps to be exact, there was a bakery that started working in the very early darkness of the pre-dawn morning, filling the cool air with the warm aroma of cinnamon, flour, and yeast.

It was eight days before Sarah felt completely ready to settle in. When she finally started to unpack the fifty-one boxes containing her own belongings in the smaller room off the entry she found a small wooden box on an upper shelf, toward the back. Too small and far back to be seen from the floor, it had obviously been missed in the moving of an earlier tenant. Inside the dusty, but beautifully ornate carved and polished box were thirty-four old photographs. A woman with very curly hair appeared in nineteen of the photos, and Sarah assumed that she must have been a prior resident of the flat. In one image she was smiling at the photographer, wearing a blue flowered dress of another fashion era. And behind her it clearly showed that, yes, even back then, there had most definitely been two. But now there was only one.

Chapter Three – **Dilemma**

Some people don't care about numbers. If you ask them "How many?" they will answer "Just a few" or "An awful lot!". If you ask "When?" they will say "Soon" or "In a little while". Sarah was not one of them.

The patterns of things mattered to Sarah. The whole universe had a perfection in its order and design. Movements and rhythms and numbers all seemed to have symmetry and importance. There were always seven days in a week, not just "some" or "several". A face has two eyes, the night sky has one moon, the United States are fifty-two, the number PI starts out 3.141592653 and continues forever, never ending and never repeating itself. If you divide a dozen eggs equally into two baskets, they will each contain six. Divide equally into three baskets, they will each contain four. Divide equally into four baskets, three. But if you divide a dozen eggs equally into fifty baskets, you only get a complete mess of useless eggs and baskets that will require hours of cleaning. Numbers matter, and there are definite right and wrong numbers for everything.

Even in the selection of her home, the correct numbers had played a critical role. She had seen that the attractive place was available for several weeks, and liked the location of it very much. But it was the absolute perfection of the address that had sold her from the start, 3456. Four numbers in perfect sequence. The first two totaled 7, a number of spirit and good fortune. The second two totaled 11, a powerful number of intuition and strength. And all four combined and reduced to 9, the number of completion and new beginnings. A perfect place to begin the exciting new phase of her life. But now Sarah was faced with a dilemma. There should have been two. There were always two. And now there was only one.

Sometimes one is the right number. A face has one nose. A true/false question has one right answer. Maybe she could just move it over and center it. Or take it away so that it no longer was a constantly nagging reminder of imbalance. Two? Or one? Or zero? She thought about it for two full days. There should have been two. There were always two. And now there was only one.

Chapter Four – **Solution**

As the early morning sun came through the eastern windows of her flat on the third morning, Sarah quietly realized that it was her gift to be both burdened and blessed with her acute sense of correctness. She alone was faced with the awareness of the dilemma and the privilege to set things right. No one would ever even know that she, Sarah, had fixed an infinitely small part of the great perfection. And she pondered whether perhaps the beautiful fabric of the entire universe might not be held together by an infinite number of such small choices stretching off into the distance like the never ending, never repeating numbers of PI. Excitedly Sarah zipped her vest to brace against the crispness of the cool morning air, and walked briskly onto the sidewalk to scour the shops of the city in search of a replacement for the missing one.

Inspired by Walking the Dog by Chloe Murdock

Adult Story – Second Prize: Intrusive Thoughts by Marsha De La O

Heat languished in the canyon, laying over the contours of the land like a sleeping giant with relaxed flabby muscles. Sarah felt the long even heaves of its breathing, walking down towards the pavilion that overlooked the dry stream bed. She couldn't stop herself thinking What if he dies and putrefies? I'd be the only one to know....She stole a glance at her companions, fellow clerks at the William H. Carrington Library and Botanical Gardens. On Friday, they were allotted an hour and fifteen minutes for lunch. This was the first time she'd come with the Bible Study group. Somewhere a sprinkler whirred and buzzed like a repetitious insect.

They sat on the benches overlooking the fern-sprouted canyon. A young man with a beard peremptorily commanded Ruth to lead the group in prayer. Ruth bent her long freckled neck and began a prayer of thanksgiving. Sarah listened absently, eyes open to the canyon, the lunch bags, foodstuffs scattered on the bench. Thank the Lord for the philodendron, the hard-boiled egg...she thought vaguely, and stopped. The murmur of the prayer had focalized on her, now they were thanking God for her presence. She felt them bend their minds towards her, soft, slippery, probing...A metaphysical tentacle...She couldn't help it, imagined herself dressed in white, carried on their outstretched hands above their craning necks, floating off, slowly turning, whirled into a luminous sphere. Looking down, she would see their tiny figures beneath her white light glowing. Stupid thought!

The prayer was over and they set to, Swiss cheese on rye, cantaloupe, a plastic bowl of cherry tomatoes, celery, chunks of green pepper. Sarah ate slowly in silence, chewed like a mare, listened to the insides of her mouth working. If I never finish this sandwich, maybe they'll never start...

The man with the beard signaled his companion. "I'm Daniel," he said, looking straight at her. Of course, everyone else knows him, she thought.

The other young man who carried in the bones of his face the delicate sculpture of a deer, spoke in a slender voice, "The text for today is 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me...'"

Daniel cleared his throat, "But I am a worm and no man...despised of the people..."

What was he talking about? She searched his face for possible clues – thin bloodless lips. A beard like a hedge. And behind the hedge, what? His mouth is a bird in a thicket, a timid quail. She leaned forward and stared at his eyes. Daniel shifted his thighs against the bench uneasily. He coughed, and Sarah pulled her gaze away from him. She sat up, silently warned herself, if you don't listen better, we'll sit here forever until our skin molds and falls off in strips. She focused on the words, tried to picture a worm, flesh stripped of its covering, helpless, exposed, writhing. Dust stuck to its moist surface. What did he mean?

"I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint..." Daniel paused and glanced around the circle. "The consequence of crucifixion is dislocation of the bones." A hard, even emphasis on each word. He flicked his wrist as he spoke, eyes glittering like mica. Sarah gulped. Daniel went on, "A battered mound of flesh, bleeding profusely from the hands,

feet, and side. Think about it! He'd fallen into the dust, which adhered to the blood and sweat. All the skin had been flogged off his back."

Sarah tried to chew, Swiss cheese like rubber in her mouth, growing larger. She'd never be able to swallow. Daniel popped a cherry tomato in his mouth. The deer-like boy read another verse. The images were coming too fast for her now, He's pleading profusely, fallen into thorns, among dogs, the brutes and enemies of God...

Daniel ate a piece of green pepper and offered the container to all, especially attentive and gentle with her – green pepper like salvation, like mercy, she had only to lift it to her lips and finally, she'd be free. Sarah shook her head.

Daniel held an olive absently and began to speak again, a jeering populace, a bleeding man, filthy rags, the hill of skulls, a strange thickening glow in a sky torn by lightning. Ruth coughed and Daniel looked down, surprised by the olive. He ate it, hesitated, his fingers combing warily through his beard. Sarah watched his hand, Five pink fellows, no, a rodent, searching a nest, the egg unguarded...Sweat burst in tiny bubbles through her skin, formed a thin film across her upper lip and under her eyebrows.

Daniel inclined his head in an attitude of prayer. "I don't like to bring in my personal life," he said slowly, "but there was a girl." His eyes flicked across at Sarah, swift as a lizard. Entreating or accusing, she didn't know. "I put her above God." He spoke each word as if it were stabbed, held twisting aloft on the end of a fork, and then discarded. Sarah thought perhaps he hated her. "And in that instant and that sin, I denied God." His voice was thick with anger. "Yet I still wanted her, who had already thrown me away like a filthy rag." Again his eyes flicked sideways at Sarah. She felt dirty, looked down at her hands. To her horror she discovered crescents of grime behind her uneven nails. She bent her knuckles. Was anyone looking at her? Daniel was still talking, "I couldn't stand the pain. My life was unbearable. Friends were worried about me, but they couldn't help."

Sarah kept her knuckles bent, ape-like on the bench, horror revolving inside her. At any moment she might begin a high whistling giggle and be unable to stop.

"Until I called on Jesus..." his voice broke.

The image formed in her mind without permission. Jesus whistling in on his broomstick, his torn and battered body, Daniel whimpers and falls before the thin awkward ghostly figure, and presses his thin lips against the wound in the long sensitive yellowed hand.

"And Jesus took away my pain," he said, and smiled mildly.

Her fingernails were pressed into her palms, the skin beneath inflamed in red arcs. Around each arc a patch of white. Sweat gleamed across the base of her palm. She hated him, wanted to draw a smile on his face with her fingernails.

There was a silence. "Are there any questions?"

Sarah raised her hand slightly, her knuckles leaving moist patches on the wooden bench. "Could God really have forsaken him?" Each word sank into the profound waters of the heat and silence like a drop falling down a dark shaft.

Daniel looked at her with eyes that shone like mica. "God is not good," long portentous pauses between each word, "God is holy."

Heat languished in the canyon as the group gathered up scattered picnic items and walked back in silence to their various departments. Somewhere, a sprinkler whirred and buzzed like a repetitious insect.

Inspired by Intrusive Idea by Parmlee Gomez

Adult Story – Third Prize: Family Secret by Howard W. Smith

Everybody thought Rectus had left his wild ways, now that he had the responsibilities of a new wife. But that didn't happen so fast.

There is a place called Grace, a small village in Minnesota that is my hometown. A farming community of a few thousand people, divided into sixty or so families. Besides schools, we also had a movie theater, three churches, a weekly newspaper, several stores on Main Street, a railroad station, and a county park by the Mystery Lake.

This was a pretty staid environment for growing up, and things could be boring if you didn't like picnics, ice cream socials, trips to Saint Cloud, movies and occasional dances at the high school.

The people were as plain as the environment, unless you happened to look into the past of some of the more prominent sons and daughters. We had cousins of Dalton Gang members, a cousin of Ma Barker, and even a distant relative of Jesse James. There was also my great aunt Bea – Beatrice.

My aunt's wedding pictures – tin types they were called in 1905 – showed a pleasant faced young woman, slightly plump, whom any man of the region would have been proud to call wife. Married at seventeen within a week of high school graduation, she and her new husband, Rectus Croft, set up life on a farm, complete with a mortgage, two horses, one cow, chickens, pigs and a lot of work facing them over the years. I didn't quote the number of chickens and pigs because, as any farmer can tell you, that number can change by the hour.

Everybody began the wait for a pregnant Bea and a baby. But that didn't happen so fast either.

Honeymoons usually consisted of a few days at home without visitors. After, Bea set right into joining local society by going to gatherings, helping at the county fair and cooking pies for church events. Rectus worked the farm, putting in crops and taking care of the animals.

Husband and wife were well on the road to family bliss, it seemed, when two months into the marriage, Rectus was caught jaybird naked in a neighbor's barn. He'd gone there ostensibly to borrow a plow, and ended up borrowing the neighbor's daughter, a former sweetheart. A day later, several hundred people knew the facts plus major embellishments, and Bea was humiliated beyond reason and tolerance. The general consensus was that a man strays because his wife doesn't take care of him.

Within a few days, Bea was taken to her doctor with serious problems, and that night she lost the beginning of her family. The doctor's opinion, that stress had been the underlying cause, was no secret either.

Two weeks later, Bea packed a bag of clothes and left the area. The ticket agent at the train depot said she'd bought a fare to Chicago, several hundred miles east. Husband Rectus went there to look for her and so did her father, my great grandfather, but not together. He had little use for his son-in-law before the marriage, and they hated each

other after the embarrassment. Neither man found Bea. Rectus made do with the farm, his former sweetheart left to live with relatives a hundred miles away, and the world kept right on spinning. No one heard from Bea by letter or sight. This was before telephones had become common, traveling was done by salesmen, and most roads were muddy during the fall and spring. Rectus surprised everyone by remaining celibate after Bea left, or maybe he had developed enough sense to cover his tracks better.

Two years later, my aunt Bea showed up at her parent's house, fashionably thinner, dressed well and looking quite pretty. Rectus sent a note asking if he could come to her mother and father's home to talk. Bea answered affirmative, and her husband came immediately, hat in hand, dressed in his best suit. They talked for a while and decided to go back together as a trial period of reconciliation. The trial lasted fifty-five years, producing eight children along the way. She never said where she'd been or what she'd done in the two years time, ignoring questions on the matter. In a small town with gossip being the main entertainment, one can imagine the curiosity.

"The two years are over and gone," answered Aunt Bea whenever asked. "After all, I've not asked anyone else what they'd been doing during that time, and it's none of my business." Not known by most people was that my aunt returned with a sum of money sufficient to pay off most of the farm mortgage.

I've always thought Aunt Bea was somewhat malicious about her silence. Telling a plausible story, like she'd worked for a wealthy family, would have been charitable and easy whether true or not. I think she had in mind punishment in the form of speculation.

Bea's older brother, my grandfather, worked part time as a stringer for the local newspaper. His friend, the editor, asked him to investigate the background of a bank robber who'd lived near Albuquerque, New Mexico Territory. In those days of few telephones, some telegraph and computers at the stage of crude adding machines, he had to go to New Mexico and search the files. All newspapers gave this courtesy to visiting reporters, helping them as needed.

In Albuquerque, the newspaper office directed the visiting reporter to the archives, but except for a few relevant dates provided by local men, there was no index of subjects. Albuquerque was getting quite large about then, and had hopes of the Territory becoming a state in a few years. Local politicians and merchants were out to improve the city's Wild West character to something more sedate.

While going through the recent issues, Grandfather happened to see a photograph and story of a local bawdy house being raided. There looking back from the page was a face very familiar. The granular printing of photographs at that time made it hard to be sure, but the woman being led to a patrol wagon had a mole on her neck in the same place Bea had her mole. As usual with such stories, there were no names, but some follow up work produced dates and other sordid evidence.

For the next several days and nights, my grandfather searched his soul for some guidance on what to do about his discovery. Was it possible that his sister was just working as a maid or housekeeper for the proprietor? But the amount of money she'd brought home

didn't support that idea. How right was it to expose someone's past, particularly his sister's. However, was it wrong not to tell Rectus or Bea's parents?

A few weeks later, during a family dinner at our house, my grandfather casually mentioned having a very interesting and informative time searching records in Albuquerque. He left out the word 'enjoyable.' Aunt Bea's eyes flickered at her brother only once, giving an impression of little interest. But later, as everyone was leaving, she ran after him with a slip of paper.

"It's the reference you asked me about. Remember?"

He had not asked about any such thing, but he took the paper anyway, which contained a few lines from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice.

*The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed;
It blesseth him that gives, and her that takes.*

The quote is accurate, except for the last pronoun 'her.' The actual line reading '- - and him that takes'. My grandfather did write up one hundred words on the band robber, and five hundred more about the trip to New Mexico, due to join the union in a few years. But he never wrote or talked about his biggest story.

Inspired by the untitled painting by Christine Brennan

Adult Poem – First Prize:

Interpretation of “Life Self-Portrait Study I of II” by Joan E. Day

- I. You appear to take yourself in stride, comfortable down to your white T-shirt. How have you become the person you are?
- II. Your eyes call me to stop as I walk by. I am amazed at your freeness to give yourself away to others; a strong shoulder here, a commanding look there, your eyes, holding a small glint in the hope that I will discover the softer side of you hidden behind the chalk dust of a furrowed brow, determined chin.
- III. Smart to show lips full with the generosity to hold your tongue, yet leave enough emphasis of shading to allow me to catch the years in your life without apology.
- IV. Ah, and such a good idea to chisel nose, sketch high cheekbones and maintain a stoic expression as an illustration of how your machismo, your pride have seldom allowed you to let your guard down.
- V. And the slight hint of a rebellious hairline as to not be considered outdated, out of touch in this new generation of high tech art, while your glasses and the of shadows under your chin keep the secret of your mystery.

I am afraid and cannot ask if you have been bruised, burned, blown up by the experience of standing too close to fire, or rewarded by a lifetime of living on the edge with such a creative soul.

Do you know what a precious gift you have been given?
Layers of tissue to be gently discovered, unwrapped sheet by sheet, appreciated, until the essence of you radiates the room?
Sure there must be others that delight in you, your work,
I stand back, rewarded by the strong presence of you on paper.

Inspired by Life Self-Portrait Study I of II by Paul Benavidez

Adult Poem – Second Prize:

Crashing by Donald Sommerfield

Not enough just to survive
Not enough to allow the indifferent engine of chance slip through
Stain darkened fingers like so many grains
Of gritty sand – with my chest hollowed out
My ribs aching
My craggy face with lines etched on top of lines –
But it is good enough to listen, eyes open and locked
On the simple waves crashing
Against the shore of a beating muscle –
I feel it I hear it
I am the city sea urchin clinging
To the shell that is my humble car
The Hotel Hyundai
I am my own religion
A four-wheeled shepherd of the night
With all
That rages beneath my skin

Not enough damn it just to survive:
Homeless but not aimless – I hold the universe before me – with all
Its cookie crumbs, unwashed clothing, cold food and plastic spoons,
A soft version of hell
Those unsettling stares
From the wound-tight Marine in the corner muttering to himself
From the Mexican homeboy ready to pounce
From the old woman with the daughter that never calls
From the young good ol' boy with his strapped-on hunting knife
That his unsteady little boy fears –
I hold in my throat
The curses, the yells upon deaf ears, the tears of shame and loss
The constant wondering why – the big "W" that berates me
Chases me, crashing against my skull, over and over until the will to win slips
And falls away – my faces shattering in all directions
I can hear that thunder of hurt that does not let go!
Feel each star in the dreamy night caress me
Personally mine – but losing you
In the astounding shame of losing me,
Blasting the endless tide pools of missed opportunities
Pulling and shoving even now
And wouldn't you know, startled all that was us –
But maybe at my tender age,
Diving into my own wreck,
Maybe
I once left the funny insistent me behind in some roadside diner
Never validated the core of me – never gave me a decent chance

To grasp the meaning, the electrical current of "why?" in all its blinking
Intangible neon
As generational ghosts watch on cajoling –
The past and future eyeball to eyeball
And here we are on the cusp of something big and great and beautiful
Just as the treachery others embrace seems inevitable
Yet you are the floating memory that eludes me
Converging with the crashing of breaking waves along
My evening's unbroken shoreline
So rife with possibilities undiscovered and uninjured
And the white stillness of the open – cratered – moon

Inspired by Life Self-Portrait I of II by Paul Benavidez

Adult Poem – Third Prize:

The Observer by Teresa Pena Hibberd

You ooze into my studio, as casual as you can be,
Outside...
noise,
pollution,
chaos
An artist's studio
An intimate place of refuge where I dwell
Where all forms of worldly practicalities are uncertain
A restful place for you to appreciate...my creations,
My art.
Beware,
Deep currents of tumultuous energy flow
...underneath the surface
Barely noticed
Almost palpable sensitivities
That guides your roaming through my world
Wondrous appreciation of an artist's work
Rest assured of hidden truths,
Rest assured of intimate storms
The body of evidence undisclosed
Hidden
Far in the depths where no one can decipher
...my pain

Inspired by Life Self-Portrait I of II by Paul Benavidez

Youth Story – First Prize: Sadness by Brodie Shore

As their ship dropped, the two aliens got their crash suits on. SHRUMP!!!! The ship hit the ground. The tall male alien looked out the window. They had landed near the top of the mountain. The male alien named Fralax stepped out. When their baby died they went to Earth to start a new life. They had only their ship and it was crashed. Luckily there was a nearby golden shack. It was from their father who also traveled to earth a year ago. The short, female alien, Qualaz, was heart broken. She had lost everything. That night, she died of sorrow, in her human clothes. Fralax lived a lonely rest of his life. This story is dedicated to Qualaz who we hope is living a happy life up in heaven.

Inspired by the untitled painting by Christine Brennan

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Youth Story – Second Prize: The Departure by Sofia Felino

Paul stretched out his arm, "Anna, I listened to what you said. Please don't make me leave you."

The woman in the blue-and-yellow-speckled dress, called Anna, wrapped her arms around herself. She had felt that surge of love toward her husband fade, for true, and it was settled in her heart. If they did get a divorce, it would not be sad. She no longer loved Paul Beandark.

"I am sorry, my dear Paul, I do not love you any more."

"Anna, I..." the horrified man exclaimed. But the short lady shook her head. She realized the sun was shining on her but not on her husband.

"It's no use," she whispered softly. "The sun has refused to shine on you because of what our child has grown up to be. He is feared by many and he has learned everything he knows from you. The other night you mentioned that a life away from our golden home was all you wanted for Christmas, which falls tomorrow. So that is my gift to you, darling. I may have loved you long ago, but never will again. Whether you accept my gift or not, you and our child of terror may pack your bags and I will have a better life. Goodnight."

And with that, Anna Beandark went to bed on a terrible Christmas Eve.

Inspired by the untitled painting by Christine Brennan

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Youth Story – Third Prize: Praying Aliens by Natasha Urban

One day two aliens waiting to pray and contemplate set out on search for a synagogue or church. Oh, they were lonely so, so far away from home on Mars. At night the aliens found a place to stay not too far from a deserted church. The two were cozy and contented so that they found what they had sought. The next day the aliens worked and labored until the sun had set. When they finished they ate worm stew and went to bed. The next morning the two found themselves at the church hiring an alien as a preacher. As the days went on more aliens came to pray. The two aliens walked home in silence feeling happy for what they accomplished. The end.

Inspired by the untitled painting by Christine Brennan

Youth Poem – First Prize:

Walking the Dog by Annanlee Isabelle Chang

Click clack, pat pat.

Stripes and squiggles

Straight and curved

A lady walking her dog by the curb

The sound is click clack, pat pat.

Inspired by Walking the Dog by Chloe Murdock