

# EarthSpeak Magazine



Issue 4

Summer 2010

EarthSpeak Magazine  
Issue 4: Summer 2010

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## Christy Effinger

Christy Effinger teaches college English in Indianapolis. Her work has appeared in *Southern Indiana Review*, *All Things Girl*, *elima*, *Word Riot*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Dark Sky Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is the past recipient of a prize from the Academy of American Poets.

Upon Visiting the Grand Canyon

Standing  
at the edge of earth  
between the time-torn chasm  
and a broiling sky,  
my skin prickled cold  
in the desert heat  
as I learned what those first natives  
must have known  
when they, too, chanced upon this  
canyon of rock and wind and wonder.

We were all children there—  
the ancients and I—  
afraid of falling,  
even as we wondered  
how falling might feel.  
We held our breath  
and peered into the world below us:  
a world of empty space and indifferent stone.

Then we saw the river  
resilient, carving its path  
across the canyon floor  
like the veins of life  
through the ages:  
flourishing amidst resistance.  
And somewhere in the river  
we found ourselves immortal,  
for human nature  
cannot face eternity  
unbelieving.

## Casey FitzSimons

Casey FitzSimons has poetry in *Fresh Hot Bread*, *flashquake*, and *Defenestration*, and forthcoming in *The Stray Branch* and *Instant City*. She taught art in San Francisco for many years, published her studio drawing manual, Serious Drawing, with Prentice Hall, and reviewed many exhibitions for *Artweek*.

## Day Without Horizon

I look down, navigating disturbed earth  
studded with non-native plants brought here  
by immigrants homesick for blue flowers,  
unwilling to do without mustard plasters.

Now they are fast-growing super-seeders  
tending to monoculture, predator-free.  
No use to native animals or insects,  
interlopers in a closed accord

of symbiosis, prosperity, and death,  
identified by committee for extermination  
line-item-funded by the city. This  
habitat under purge will not return

to equilibrium predating Europeans  
who packed their seeds as hedge against their own  
fear of failure to adapt, their own cultural  
entropy, even with the work of zealous

volunteers whose mission goes unchallenged.  
Who fights for iceplant against the stalwarts of futility?

## Had I Not Seen

Had I not seen the darker green spot  
appear on the leaf, at first indistinct,  
becoming more definite and shrinking,  
gaining resolution, I would not

have realized that raindrops, as they fall  
in dim sun, cast shadows warning that impact  
is imminent. But other things attract  
me, so I should have noticed. After all,

a leaf casts its shadow on one beneath it  
or sends it running down to shade its own ground,  
drape its own stem, its sine qua non,  
to reassert that dominion that claims it.

In perfect bull's-eye, they come together.  
Drop and shadow merge, lay claim to each other.



## John McKernan

John McKernan is now a retired comma herder. He lives – mostly – in West Virginia where he edits ABZ Press. His most recent book is a selected poems Resurrection of the Dust. He specialized in depleted semicolons and the repair and recovery of derelict exclamation points.

HYMN FOR DORY

Light strikes out  
When it meets you

When it meets your  
Bright blue eyes

When those eyes open  
To stare at a sad dream

When those eyes  
Watch the music vanish

That's what the fishing lanterns  
Are for To replace the darkness

To spread a flower of light  
Across the bay's dark water

So you can breathe easy again  
Open your gorgeous eyes

And say "Look out there  
Here comes the sun again"

Not with a guitar backup  
But with the solid feeling

It is Light Enough for now  
To put the Dark Night to sleep

## Joan McLean

Joan McLean is a self-employed wetland ecologist living in Silk Hope, a small farming community in central North Carolina. Her first chapbook, Up From Dust, was recently released from Finishing Line Press. Her poems have received a variety of awards in regional contests.

## Passing Through

There you are again, hovering  
over your life  
skirting its edges  
like some ungainly  
prehistoric bird trying to land  
against an updraft.  
You struggle to bring  
force and substance to bear,  
circle and approach again  
only to waft and billow.

In your garden  
the herbs and flowers  
have taken root.  
Hydrangeas, spicebush,  
beauty berry, and ginger lily,  
even the balloon flowers  
all hold fast to the soil,  
taking up what they need  
through thick tough roots.

In your house  
you've made altars -  
stoneware cup, iron candlesticks,  
a goddess figure  
settled on broad thighs.  
You've cooked up hearty soups  
in deep black pots,  
baked dense breads  
full of pungent herbs.

And still you float,  
drifting from room to room,  
out among the flowers.  
Now in your middle age  
fatigue is getting the best of you.

Your eyelids are heavy.  
A heady mist slips up behind,  
curls an arm around your waist,  
tugs you up and away.  
You reach down  
for the grasses in the field  
grasping at them to pull yourself  
back to the world  
or the world to you.  
But the stems come away,  
straws in your hand.

Too Little, Too Late

Last summer  
was the one  
when thunder heads

rose every afternoon  
cleared their throats  
but turned away South

and dust,  
arrested, transfixed in air,  
was not inclined to settle.

But it's this summer  
that the trees  
are dying of it.

The weatherman's report  
of 'average' rainfall  
is spit in the wind.

Too little,  
too late.  
The trees are dying

and I'm headed for the woods,  
sloughing whatever comes loose  
– *skin, lashes, eyelids*–

leaving them strewn on the porch  
– *nails, nose, teeth* –  
and across the yard,

– *hands, then arms* –  
to lean belly and cheek  
against a trunk, cool and still.

I want to go along, easy now,  
sag and slump into the duff  
with the souging of rot.

Ah, to escape, to finally foil  
the pitch and drama  
of strident human exit.

donnarkevic

Weston, WV. MFA National University. Recent poetry has appeared in Anthology of Appalachian Writers, *Sangam*, and *Main Channel Voices*. Recent short story publications include *Colere* and the anthology, Seeking the Swan. In 2005, Main Street Rag published Laundry, a poetry chapbook. Also in 2005, The Interview, a play, won 2nd place in the Playwright's Circle competition. The full-length poetry book, Service Entrance, is under contract to RockWay Press.

Light: A Variation  
*for Chelsea*

Golden speckles flicker  
like fickle stars between  
dappled grass and slate sky.

To a circle of trees my daughter runs.  
Under their shadow she squats  
silent as an edible mushroom.  
I stoop beside her. She points to  
fireflies, intermittent lighthouses.  
As she rises in pursuit, I follow  
in a fog of twilight. Our arms  
move in slow motion like Kabuki,  
our bodies poised for contact.

Her hand snaps shut. She shrieks.  
Turning to me, the jar carrier,  
she opens her fingers like petals  
of nightshade, revealing her captive.  
Luminescence stains her palm.  
Shaking off the dead trophy,  
she wipes the gore on her  
shorts and cries.

As dusk dissolves  
into darkness we gaze,  
motionless astronomers  
intent on distant light,  
temporary as time  
and as everlasting.

## Michael Karl (Ritchie)

Michael Karl (Ritchie) is a Professor of English at Arkansas Tech University, where he serves as advisor to the undergraduate literary magazine, *Nebo*. He has had three small press chapbook publications and work published in various small press magazines, including the *Arkansas Literary Forum*.

## Heliosphere

A hydrogen ribbon ties  
Our universe together  
In a protective bubble  
Against solar radiation.

Wrapped up like a gift  
We surge with the tides  
And baste with the mud,  
More fragile than crystal,

Harder than salt,  
Forgetting where we came from,  
Naming everything  
As if that would make it ours.

## K.R. Sands

K. R. Sands is creating a collection of short fiction inspired by the displays of pathological human anatomy and other medical exhibits at the famous Mütter Museum in Philadelphia. Her fiction has appeared/will appear in *Joyland*, *Inkspill*, *ShatterColors*, *Wanderings*, *Fringe*, *Literary Mama*, *Milk Money*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Camera Obscura*, and The Tangled Bank: Love, Wonder, and Evolution. Her major nonfiction publications are Demon Possession in Elizabethan England and An Elizabethan Lawyer's Possession by the Devil: The Story of Robert Briggs. A recovering academic, she has taught literature and writing for ten universities, including Temple University, the University of Arizona, and the University of Maryland. Her nonacademic jobs have included dog groomer, animal laboratory technician, zoo keeper, and environmental regulation writer. She has lived in Arizona, Scotland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.

## Do Not Feed

Damn. Brad hadn't cleaned the room after they killed the dogs last night.

Erlinda uncoiled the huge hose from its reel on the wall and began washing down the double-decker rows of stainless steel cages. Because the dogs had fasted for a day before their fatal sodium pentobarbital injections, most of the cages contained no vomit or feces, just the odd tuft of fur or puddle of urine.

She was glad the gastro experiment was over. Abdominal surgery was pretty hard on the dogs. They worried and fussed with the big black sutures across their bellies, sometimes ripping them out. Erlinda's worst experience on the job had happened with one of the gastro dogs, a pretty little white Spitz. When Erlinda had walked in on the morning after the dog's surgery, the dog was standing in her cage, shivering with cold and fright, her teeth chattering. Erlinda blinked, processing what she was looking at. During the night, the dog had somehow torn out all her stitches. Her entire incision had unzipped, and her wet intestines lay mounded like spaghetti on the cage floor.

Erlinda had quickly prepared a lethal injection and raced to put the little Spitz out of her misery. As the dog sank to the floor of her cage and expired, Erlinda had felt her own breath explode in relief.

Now she hosed and squeegeed the floor and wiped the sink down. Finally the room was clean, ready for the new experiment, something to do with lead poisoning. The dogs for the experiment--all puppies this time--would arrive this morning. Erlinda mentally rehearsed the intake procedure as she carried the cleaning equipment out of the room.

Stan up on the loading dock would take the carriers from the shelter's van, stack them in the freight elevator, and send them down to the basement. Erlinda, Tony, and Lollie would remove the cages from the elevator, stack them on the dolly, and roll them to the intake room. There, Lollie would open the cages one by one. Tony would remove and restrain each puppy while Erlinda injected him. When the sedative took effect, Erlinda would use the electric clippers around the pup's anus, mouth, and ears. Lollie's little hand would plunge into the pup's throat to cut its vocal cords with a biopsy punch. And Tony would clamp its left ear in the tattoo pliers. Finally, Erlinda and Tony would lift the sleeping pup, submerge it momentarily in the pyrethrin bath, and put it back into its carrier. Lollie would swing the carrier back onto the dolly.

The intake procedure usually went pretty smoothly. There was only that one time when Erlinda had underestimated the amount of ketamine needed for a big red dog, long-nosed and prick-eared. The dog had awakened while

submerged in the tick bath and had clamped onto Erlinda's arm in fright. Tony had immediately labeled the dog a biter and wanted to put him down right away. But Erlinda had intervened to save him, so he'd been assigned to the arthritis experiment room. Later, she had secretly taken him on as her special favorite, giving him extra exercise and food. In her mind, she called him Zorro, the fox. They weren't supposed to name the lab animals. Avoid emotional attachments.

When all the pups were processed, they'd be taken to the new experiment room (now clean, thanks to her) and unloaded into their permanent cages. They'd sleep for a few hours, drying in the heat from the vents, and wake up to fresh food and water. Today's process would be easier than usual because the animals would be pups rather than adults. Not only were puppies more lightweight and submissive, they adapted to cage life more easily than adults.

Still, it was a hard thing to think of puppies living their whole lives in cages, under fluorescent lights. Never seeing the sun. Never running full tilt across a vacant lot to jump and catch a Frisbee in midair. And God knew what the experiment would do to them, but Erlinda didn't. She didn't know much about lead poisoning.

Ah, well. They'd have a better life here in the lab than in the streets. Well, safer, anyway.

But of course safer wasn't the same as better.

Still, it was a lot. And people would benefit from the medical research.

Erlinda shook her head. Get on with it.

As she was putting the cleaning equipment away in the hall closet, she heard a voice: "Linda? Linda Tapia?"

Turning, she blinked and registered the tall white lab coat, the generously made-up black eyes. The woman seemed familiar, but Erlinda couldn't place her. "Yes?"

The tall woman grinned and stuck out her hand. "Ceci Ortiz. I used to help your brother work on that Chevy Impala. Did he ever get that thing running?"

Now she remembered. Skinny Ceci, Leo's friend. Mom had called her the bottomless pit because she was always hungry. She had been at their house nearly every day after school for a couple of years. Mom had occasionally mended her ripped jeans. Nice kid, quiet. That must have been--what?--seven or eight years ago? Yeah, that's right; Ceci had come home with Leo the day school let out early when Kennedy was shot.

They shook hands. Erlinda said, "Yes, it runs. It's gorgeous. Beautiful hundred-spoke rims that he paid a fortune for. Not that he ever drives it." They

laughed. Low riders were for the occasional stately parade, not for mundane transportation. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm the researcher for the lead toxicity experiment." Erlinda glanced at the name tag on the lab coat and felt her eyes widen: *Cecilia Paz Ortiz, M.D.* She had heard that Ceci had gotten some kind of scholarship but hadn't known about med school. "I was told you would be my lab tech, so I wanted to come and talk to you about the experiment. Can I buy you lunch today?"

Erlinda smiled. No other doctor had ever done this. "Ceci, researchers are supposed to treat lab techs as peons, not as colleagues. You don't ask me; you order me."

They laughed again. "Okay, I order you to have lunch with me today. Noon in the cafeteria?"

Erlinda smiled and nodded.

"Great. See you then." Ceci turned and walked away.

A barrio chica who had finished med school at twenty-five. Impressive.

\*

"Linda, por qué está mi azarcón en la basura? Lo necesito para el empacho." Mom picked the plastic bag of bright orange powder out of the trash can.

Erlinda, on all fours, kept pulling things out of the under-sink cupboard, quickly dividing them into piles on the kitchen floor: keep, toss, ask Ceci. She didn't look up at her mother as she worked. "Speak English, Mom. You know you need the practice. And put that junk back in the trash. You can use something else for your indigestion."

"But my sister--"

"Don't care what she says. Look, I know you've got some aches and pains. So stop smoking. Stop drinking coffee. Stop eating chiles. See a doctor. But I won't let you swallow that poison anymore."

Mom sighed, dropped the bag back into the trash can, and looked around at the mess on the kitchen floor. "What are you doing?"

"I'm getting rid of all the lead-based crap in this house. Old paint cans, old newspapers, Leo's old fishing sinkers. And these!" Erlinda held up a handful of Bolirindo lollipops, the sweet treats that Aunt Rita always brought for Leo's twins when she flew in from El Paso. "Mom, these things are death on a stick!" She hurled the candies into the trash can. "Disgusting!"

Mom smiled slightly, turned to leave the kitchen, and said, "Okay, mi Linda. You go right ahead and save the world. I'll go dig some weeds." She headed for the back door.

Erlinda looked after her. “Oh, Mom! Don’t be like that. This is really important. Ceci says--“

Mom’s voice sounded distantly from the back door: “Ceci says, Ceci says. Ceci the big shot doctor. Ceci the bottomless pit.”

Erlinda pursed her lips and returned to her important work.

\*

That weekend, the after-dinner activity at Mom’s split into the usual factions. Erlinda’s brothers, Leo and Lorenzo, went out to the back yard to smoke and talk about cars, jobs, and sports. Mom chattered away with Leo’s wife Valerie as the two of them worked in the kitchen, washing the dishes and wrapping up a mountain of leftovers to go home with Valerie and Leo. In the living room, Erlinda played and sang with Leo’s boisterous twins. Occasionally Valerie yelled from the kitchen, “Keep it down to a roar in there!”

Deanna and Teresa had been babbling and stringing sounds together long before their first birthday. By their second birthday, they were making complete sentences in English and Spanish (and Spanglish, which Valerie tried to discourage, though Erlinda thought it was funny). By their third birthdays, their vocabularies had exploded into hundreds of words. Now, at four, they sang songs they learned from the radio and wickedly mimicked the speech of adults behind their backs. Like their parents, they had spoken both languages from the beginning, so switching was no harder than walking from one room to another--probably even easier, since they often did it unconsciously. They knew large hunks of several children’s books by heart: *Horton Hears a Who* and *Horton Eschucha a Quien*, *Danny the Dinosaur* and *Danielito el Dinosaurio*, *Stone Soup* and *Sopa de Piedras*.

Tonight they were doing English tongue twisters from a new book that Valerie had given them. Erlinda read each one aloud slowly, and then the twins raced through it as fast as possible.

Erlinda said, “Okay, next one. Soldiers’ shoulders shudder when shrill shells shriek.”

Simultaneously, Deanna shouted, “Shells don’t shudder!” while Teresa began, “Soldier’s shoulders shudder while--what?--I forget what comes next.”

Erlinda laughed and said, “Not that kind of shell. Not a beach shell. A war shell.”

Deanna yelled back, “That’s stupid! Wars don’t have shells!” while Teresa said worriedly, “What’s shudder?”

Erlinda shouted over the din, “Again! Soldier’s shoulders shudder when shrill shells--“

Deanna interrupted. "Oh, yeah! Soldier's shoulders shake when shrill--" and was herself interrupted by Teresa, who yelled, "No! Not shake! Shudder! You idiot!

From the kitchen, Valerie's voice said sharply, "Hey! Language!"

Erlinda collapsed helplessly on the floor, giggling. The twins danced around her, stage-whispering loudly. Soldiers' shoulders shake while shoppers shoot ships. Shells and shutters show shirts to shrimps. Silly soldados separate señores y señoras.

Erlinda laughed so hard her stomach hurt.

\*

It didn't take long for the new pups to begin showing clinical signs. Ceci had given Erlinda a list of what to expect: gastrointestinal disturbances, anorexia, behavior changes. But anticipating these signs in the abstract was quite different from actually cleaning bloody diarrhea and bloody vomit off the cage floors, out of the water and food bowls, and off the puppies' faces, feet, and hind ends. The explosions got so frequent and so fierce that Erlinda began coming in an hour earlier every day to give the room an extra cleanup. She frequently found pups with dried feces and vomit clumped in their fur. At first, she tried to cut the clumps out but leave the coat intact. Soon, though, she began shaving the pups. It saved time in the long run.

The diarrhea and vomiting were ugly and smelly, but they were manageable. More distressing were the behavior changes, which got much worse during the second month of the experiment. A few formerly friendly pups became aggressive, growling and snapping at Erlinda or at each other when she had them on the floor for cage cleaning and exercise. One little guy got so dangerous--barking and snapping so violently that foam sprayed from his mouth--that Erlinda decided she could no longer take him out of his cage. She felt bad about hosing down his cage with him in it, but she had no choice.

Most of the pups went the other way in their behavior. Some cowered in the corners of their cages, trying to hide, shrieking hysterically when Erlinda gently tried to pick them up to weigh them, to record how much they had lost. Others lethargically stared into the distance, looking at the fresh food she put in their bowls with indifference. She tried to tempt one tiny pup with warm canned food--more aromatic and juicy than the dry puppy chow--but he showed no interest at all. She tried another pup with the canned food. Without getting up from his lying position, he sniffed it and licked once or twice. But eating seemed just too difficult, and he gave up.

When Erlinda called Ceci to report pups suffering from dehydration or starvation to ask if she could put them down, she was told no. Ceci said doing that would skew the data. She wanted the natural death dates recorded.

The husky black Newfie was the first to go. When Erlinda found him in the morning, he was already cold. His shaved body was covered with bloody feces and vomit. He'd probably had a seizure before he died, thrashing and rolling to spread the mess around.

Erlinda didn't have to clean him up. It was a waste of time and therefore poor procedure. But she did. She washed him slowly and carefully before sliding him into a bag and putting him in the big freezer. He'd be picked up for incineration on Thursday.

\*

Somehow, Ceci found out that Erlinda had requested permission to switch maintenance responsibilities with Tony or Lollie for a couple of weeks. She needed a break from the dogs. But her request had been denied.

Ceci suggested that Erlinda accompany her on a visit to meet a little boy with lead poisoning. She said, "It's not fair for you to see only the depressing part of the experiment. Wouldn't you like to see one of the people that the experiment is designed to help? See the human face?"

A good idea. Might help, couldn't hurt.

Ceci explained the situation to Erlinda. Mrs. Castillo, worried about her four-year-old son's speech delay, had taken him to the local pediatric clinic run by the university hospital. The pediatrician had found no structural defects in the child's vocal or auditory organs. His hearing tested okay, though not great. He tested positive for mild anemia. But the alarm had sounded when his blood test revealed a level of lead at 48 micrograms per deciliter. The pediatrician had reported the case to the health department, which had ordered a home inspection and family consultation. Ceci, who had gotten herself certified as a lead inspector for the sake of her research, had been assigned to the case.

Erlinda said, "Forty-eight what? I don't have any sense of what those numbers mean."

"Well, the trigger number is ten--ten micrograms of lead per deciliter. At ten or anything above it, you've got lead poisoning."

"So this kid has a level of lead that's nearly five times the trigger level? How could he accumulate so much in just four years?"

"Oh, he was probably born with plenty. If his mother had elevated lead levels while she was carrying him, the umbilicus would

have funneled huge amounts of concentrated lead to his undeveloped brain and nervous system.”

“So does the mother have elevated lead levels?”

“She doesn’t show any clinical symptoms that I know of, and she hasn’t been tested yet. But an adult can tolerate a lot more without impairment than a fetus can.”

“How serious is this kid’s speech delay?”

“Pretty serious. He’s never made a sound.”

“He doesn’t speak at all? No sounds at all?”

“Nope. Nothing. Nada. Nunca.”

“Wow! Why did the mother wait so long to get him to a doctor?”

“I dunno. Her first child. Maybe she didn’t realize anything was wrong. Or she thought he’d outgrow it, or she didn’t have the money, or she was afraid. Or, or, or. You know.”

“Yeah, I know. But it still pisses me off.”

“Well, you can stop being pissed off. She understands now.”

A child who had never uttered a single syllable. Erlinda tried to remember some famous quotation she once heard about how language was what elevated humans above other animals.

Deanna and Teresa. So full of words.

\*

Erlinda drove the hospital van slowly down Valencia Road while Ceci looked for house numbers. Finally, she said, “This must be it.” Erlinda parked in front of a small adobe block house, once painted a bright blue, now faded by sunlight to pale grayish-white.

As they walked between the two scruffy mesquite trees flanking the entrance, Erlinda said, “How old are these houses?”

Ceci said, “I think they may date back to the 1880s. A few still have their original ceilings made of saguaro ribs.”

A young woman opened the door.

Ceci said, “Mrs. Castillo? I’m Doctor Ortiz from the university hospital. This is my colleague, Miss Tapia. We’re here for the lead inspection. Would you like us to speak Spanish?”

The young woman said, “No, English is okay. Come in.”

As Erlinda entered, she surreptitiously glanced at the ceiling: saguaro ribs. Too poor for new ceiling tiles.

After some brief pleasantries with Mrs. Castillo, Ceci took her clipboard and began the walk-through. While she did this, Erlinda sat in the living room and

talked with Mrs. Castillo about the weather, family, and so on. Finally, Erlinda said, "What's your son's name? May I see him?"

"Eduardo. Eddie. I'll go get him."

Eddie was pretty small for a four-year-old. He sat on his mother's lap, sucking his finger, not looking at Erlinda. Not looking at anything, apparently.

Erlinda didn't want to ask him a question that needed to be answered orally, so she said, "Hi, Eddie. I'm Miss Tapia. How old are you?" He could just hold up the correct number of fingers.

Nothing.

Louder: "Eddie? Cuantos años tienes?"

Nothing.

But his hearing had tested okay. Did he ever respond to a human voice? Thunder? The smell of food cooking? Warm bath water? Anything?

She asked.

"No. Nothing."

So this wasn't just a speech delay. This was serious brain damage.

Erlinda watched Mrs. Castillo stroke Eddie's hair away from his forehead. Watched her put her arms around him to keep him secure on her lap. Watched her kiss his cheek.

Watched him do nothing. Watched his dull, changeless eyes staring at nothing. Staring at his nothing future.

Erlinda had come prepared to provide Mrs. Castillo with referrals to the local Head Start program, to speech therapists, to private tutors.

But she didn't mention the referrals. She looked down at the papers on her lap, pretending to read.

Just then, Ceci came into the living room carrying a ceramic bean pot. Every Chicano kitchen in the Southwest had a bean pot. Erlinda's mom had a plain brown one that she had brought with her when she left Cananea. But the pot in Ceci's hands was no ordinary pot like Mom's. It was a glorious thing, covered with flowers and leaves of green, red, yellow, and orange over a vivid black and white checkerboard background. The rim of the pot and its lid were glazed a brilliant cobalt blue, as was the knob on the lid.

Seeing the pot, Mrs. Castillo smiled--for the first time since they'd arrived. Erlinda felt a stab of anger and sadness. Her child didn't make her happy, but this stupid pot did.

Ceci asked, "Is this Talavera work?"

Mrs. Castillo smiled all through her answer. Yes, made in Puebla, her family's home. Yes, she really did use it to cook beans, at least twice a week. Beans and tortillas were pretty much all Eddie ever ate. He didn't like milk, fruit,

or green vegetables. It had been a wedding gift from her parents, who were now dead.

Ceci praised the pot's beauty and stepped into the kitchen to put it back where she had found it. As she returned, her eyes met Erlinda's for a second.

Suddenly, Erlinda knew what was coming. Knew but didn't want to hear. Not after seeing Mrs. Castillo smile. She excused herself and went outside to wait for Ceci in the van.

It wouldn't take Ceci long to tell Mrs. Castillo that she must never again cook anything in her beautiful, tainted pot.

As Ceci got into the van, Erlinda said, "How'd she take it?"

"She's pretty shaken, but she didn't protest. I told her that someone from the health department would have to take it away for sampling."

"Did you tell her that she'll have to destroy it?"

"No. The health department guy can tell her."

Erlinda started the van, pulled away, and drove silently for a while. Ceci was annotating the case, writing down details of the inspection and interview while they were still fresh in her mind. Finally, Erlinda said, "So now what?"

Ceci continued to make notes as she talked. "Well, I'll write up the case and submit my report to the health department and the examining pediatrician. Then I'll add the case numbers to the data base."

Erlinda said, "No, I mean what will happen with Eddie?"

"Oh. I guess the pediatrician will recommend that Mrs. Castillo start Eddie on intensive chelation therapy, probably with EDTA."

"What's that?"

"Ethylene diamine tetra-acetic acid. It bonds with the lead in the blood-stream so it can be eliminated in urine."

"How is this stuff administered?"

"Intravenously. It's a hospital procedure. Each session will probably take about four hours."

"Each session? How many sessions will he need?"

"Well, considering his lead level, I'm guessing that it might be as much as a hundred sessions. Maybe twice a week for fifteen months or so."

"Man! That's a lot of needle time for such a little boy! And his mother will have to figure out some way to get him across town to the hospital twice a week. For over a year."

They were stopped at a light. Erlinda looked over at the clipboard on Ceci's lap and noticed that Ceci was no longer writing but doodling, filling in her zeros and eights with delicate cross-hatching. Ceci said, "There are buses."

“She’ll have to take a lot of time off from work. She doesn’t get paid if she doesn’t work.”

Ceci continued doodling.

“But after this treatment, he’ll be okay? Do you think he’ll ever speak?”

“Oh, I dunno. Depends on a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

“Well, that house probably has so much lead that abatement might not be possible. The health department may order it condemned.”

“So they’ll have to move. What else?”

“Um. Let’s see. His diet will have to change pretty dramatically. The lead from the cooking pot that’s been leaching into his beans has made them taste sweet. That’s probably why he doesn’t like other kinds of food. His mother will have to figure out some way to get him to eat a wider variety of nutritious foods.”

Erlinda was quiet for a minute. Beans were cheap. Fresh fruits and vegetables were expensive. Then she said, “Anything else?”

Ceci concentrated on her doodling. “Well, chelation therapy sometimes has side effects. It tends to remove essential minerals as well as lead. Calcium, for instance, which might lead to bone damage. Or zinc, which might lead to cancer.”

Erlinda exploded. “Wait a minute! I thought you wanted me to see one of the people who would be helped by your experiment. How is Eddie being helped by all this?”

Ceci said irritably, “Linda, I didn’t mean Eddie specifically. I’m hoping my research will help people like Eddie in the future. And maybe reduce the frequency with which Eddie’s problem gets replicated in the population.”

After a minute, Erlinda said, “Yeah, I hope so, too. But as far as Eddie’s concerned, he’s just up the creek, isn’t he?”

Ceci shoved her clipboard into her bag and said, “Maybe. Oh, Linda, I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to mislead you about Eddie’s future. I know his situation is really sad.”

Erlinda inhaled deeply and concentrated on driving. After a few minutes, Ceci said, “Oh, hey, here’s that issue of *Scientific American* I was telling you about, the one on environmental pollution. Lots of good stuff about lead. Want to borrow it?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

They drove the rest of the way back to the hospital in silence.

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Erlinda lay in the dark, her brain fixed on the image reproduced on the cover of the magazine Ceci had loaned her.

Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Children*. A raw image, rough, dark. Saturn, a crazy-eyed, lank-haired, red-faced giant, clutches a small naked body, his fingers biting deep into its back. The child's head and arms are already gone, presumably down the giant's black maw. The stumps of the child's neck, right shoulder, and left elbow run with gore. The giant's face expresses a bottomless hunger, a wolf in the stomach so ravenous it will never sleep.

Insatiable.

Saturn. The planet ruled by lead.

She thought of the leaded gasoline fumes that Leo inhaled every time he gassed up his beloved Impala. Or sat in traffic or used a drive-through window. That his wife and kids inhaled if they were riding with him.

The water that pumped through the old lead pipes in Mom's house. That she cooked beans in. That she drank. That seeped into her skin pores when she bathed.

The lead-based paint that coated the inside and outside of Mrs. Castillo's house. Flaking and chipping into invisible particles picked up on shoes and clothes, tracked through the house, floating and settling on cigarettes and dishes and glasses and silverware and food. On things that went into Eddie's mouth.

The bare dirt around Erlinda's old duplex. Full of lead particles left over from its construction. From the welding, sanding, painting, plumbing, soldering, stripping, cutting, and grinding. Blown in on the ever-present dust through her swamp cooler, blown into her nostrils and mouth.

The lead-based home remedies that Aunt Rita used. Azarcon. Greta. Alarcon, luiga, rueda. That she recommended for arthritis, infertility, upset stomach, menstrual cramps. For colic in babies.

The lead-sweetened candies that Leo's kids loved. Tamarind and coconut rolls. Chapulines, grasshoppers. Chaca-chacas.

The lead in Valerie's extensive collection of herbs and spices. From crops contaminated by pesticides, exhaust emissions, metal particles from the grinding process, soil residue, drying over open fires. Chiles. Cilantro. Oregano. Garlic powder. Black pepper.

Erlinda's lead-based crimson lipstick. Worn for the first time at her quinceañera party six years ago and reapplied several times daily since then. "The average woman ingests six pounds of lipstick in her lifetime." Mom's raven hair dye, Ceci's black mascara.

The lead-based paint on the family crib, carefully stored in Mom's shed for when Erlinda had kids. The paint already chewed by three generations of children.

Infuctuoso. Inservible, ocioso, vano, inútil.

Futile.

\*

Erlinda usually enjoyed her drive to work. Leaving home well before the roads clogged with morning rush-hour traffic, she focused on the silhouette of the mountains as she drove. That's how she had learned to navigate. The flattish undulations of the Rincons showed her when she was headed east. The fringed scalloped points of the Santa Ritas, south. The gentle humps of the Tucsons, west. And, as she drove north to work at sunrise, the sharp peaks and rock pillars of the Catalinas. She hated to drive in other cities because she got hopelessly lost without the mountains to guide her.

Today, though, she couldn't focus on the mountains. She drove robotically, turned inwards, steeling herself against the moment when she'd have to face those lead-poisoned puppies again.

Why now? She'd been dealing with dogs as lab specimens for three years. She'd defended her job again and again to people who couldn't understand why she did it. The arthritis experiment, for instance. Each of the dogs in that room had its right hind leg pinned up, bent and useless, so the induced arthritis could freeze the leg in place. But nearly all of the dogs had adjusted well to functioning with three legs. Like big foxy Zorro, her favorite, who had as much spirit and energy as any four-legged dog. He didn't even seem to notice his useless leg. And the experiment was really helping people. The researcher, Dr. Guzman, had told Erlinda that medical science had made a lot of progress in controlling arthritis, that he actually expected they'd discover a cure soon. When Erlinda thought about being a part of that cure, she felt good.

But lead poisoning was different. The pups in Ceci's experiment hadn't--couldn't--adjust. They were miserable. And now, after learning about the pervasiveness of lead in the human environment, Erlinda didn't believe that Ceci's experiment could possibly accomplish anything. It was a fantasy.

Consciously shifting focus, she forced herself to look at the mountains as she drove, at the patches of pink-gold morning sunlight dissolving the indigo shadows.

But a few minutes later, her mind was back with the pups. Misery and futility.

This morning, when she walked into the arthritis experiment room, she froze. Every cage had a “Do Not Feed” sticker on it.

Zorro. She forced herself to turn, to look at his cage. Like the other dogs, he ricocheted back and forth between his steel walls, yipping breathily in the manner of devocalized dogs, ecstatic to see her. Oblivious to the deadly orange sticker on his cage door.

Do not feed. The lab animals never got a last meal. They died empty. Less mess for the lab techs to clean up. The arthritis experiment was over. Brad and Dr. Guzman would kill the dogs tonight.

Zorro would die tonight.

And she'd clean his empty cage tomorrow. All the empty cages. For a new batch of dogs. For a new experiment. For some researcher to use as a professional stepping stone. To write papers on. To deliver lectures on. In the interest of science. For the benefit of humanity.

While Erlinda hosed down the shitty cages and waited for the dogs to die.

She opened Zorro's cage door a few inches and stuck her hands in, grasping the big dog's red ruff, scratching his neck with strong fingers. He shoved his wet black nose against the inside of her forearm, nuzzling and licking.

A moment of fantasy: steal him! Get him out of the building before anyone else arrives! Put him in the car and drive away fast!

The cold wash of reality: a crime. The steel pin surgically attached to his leg, the ear tattoo, the severed vocal chords--clearly a lab specimen, readily identifiable, obviously stolen. She probably wouldn't even get him across the parking lot before being caught. She'd have a felony record, and Brad would kill Zorro right on time.

She gave the dog a final scratch, gently pushed him back inside his cage, and left the room.

Not thinking, moving automatically, she walked to the locker room. Took the name badge off her lab coat and dropped it into the waste basket. Took off her lab coat and dropped it into the laundry bin. Exchanged her lab-owned rubber boots for her street shoes. Got her purse out of her locker. Walked to her supervisor's office. Wrote a note telling him to call Brad in today for a double shift.

Saying she wouldn't be back.

She stood outside the hospital at the top of the long flight of steps leading down to the parking lot. The steps glared bright white in the mid-morning sun.

Head empty, she put on her sunglasses and began to walk down the steps.

## Michael Spring

Michael Spring is the author of 2 poetry books: blue crow (2003) and Mudsong (2005). His poems have appeared in numerous publications, including: *Atlanta Review*, *DMQ Review*, *Dublin Quarterly*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and *The Oregonian*. A group of poems from Mudsong won the 2004 Robert Graves Award. Michael Spring lives in rural Oregon. He is a natural builder, martial art instructor, and poetry editor for *The Pedestal Magazine*.

In the Redwoods

one threadful note  
from some giant bird  
falls through my body

as bulbous faces  
from the base of a redwood  
trumpet and slur  
into each other

I fantasize giving up  
on everything  
material  
when I walk  
away from my car  
and come across  
a hollow tree

I could begin again  
in this grotto  
chewing the juices  
from roots  
and digging for wild  
nutrition

my hands would toughen  
into primitive hands

I'd go into town only  
for rare occasions  
(and now the idea falls apart –

I know I would have to  
give up on everything  
including old friends  
and the café  
and even the internet)

I'd have to start  
with smaller steps –  
this moment for instance –  
yes, I will begin  
with where I am

a single spore floats  
past my brow  
to a an outstretched fern  
until breath –  
perhaps my own –  
pushes it deeper  
into the forest

Poem for my 44th Birthday

he is leaning over graph paper  
building the interiors  
of our house

I am near the straw  
that I will scatter  
over the wet soil  
and mix with my feet

and when it's cob  
we will sculpt  
the walls and hearth and benches

we will slide our hands over the muddy contours  
as if they were hip or thigh or shoulder  
sculpting book shelves and niches for cups or candles

a bird in the darkest tree  
begins a song

the forest stretches our silences

and swells in the surrounding trees

I am a bridge  
between the graph paper and the wall

I swing the pickax for another mix –  
it plunges into the stony ground  
and finds a vein of red clay

### The Living Roof

There is a ladder in every masterpiece.

Imagine gripping the rungs of one  
and climbing.

Perhaps you could find a door in the clouds  
or slip into the body of an ancient song.

Our mud house with the living roof  
has a such a ladder.

I believe it appears most often  
when the trees are singing.

I should let go of the ink pen and leave  
the blank sheet of paper for tomorrow.

At this moment the roof is creating  
an ocean with the colors  
of wheat grass and crimson clover.

## About EarthSpeak

EarthSpeak is a newly-founded online literary journal that hopes to open up a small but honest space where writers of various persuasions can pursue a dialogue concerning one of the most crucial issues of our times, namely the fitful relationship between humanity and the natural world.

It also hopes to support an array of different conservation/restoration organizations through its Donation Program, which aims to funnel some of the magazines modest proceeds into organizations which exhibit a strong sense of environmental stewardship and integrity.

EarthSpeak is interested in essays, stories and poems that explore a wide gamut of different issues and experiences as they pertain to nature and our own place within it. Submission deadlines follow a seasonal rhythm, further information for which can be found on the website's submissions page.

All submissions and inquiries may be sent to:  
[submissions@earthsspeakmagazine.com](mailto:submissions@earthsspeakmagazine.com).