the MEADOW 2011

the Meadow *2011*

Truckee Meadows Community College

Reno, Nevada

The Meadow is the annual literary arts journal published every spring by Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno, Nevada. Students interested in the literary arts, graphic design, and creative writing are encouraged to participate on the Editorial Board. Visit www.tmcc.edu/meadow for information and submission guidelines. Look for notices around campus, in *The Echo* student newspaper, or contact the Editor-in-Chief at meadow@tmcc.edu or through the English department at (775) 673-7092.

See our website (listed above) for information on our annual Cover Design and Literary and Art Contests. Only TMCC students are eligible for prizes.

The Meadow is indexed in *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*.

Our address is Editor-in-Chief, *The Meadow*, Truckee Meadows Community College, English Department, Vista B300, 7000 Dandini Blvd., Reno, Nevada 89512.

Meadow Fiction Award: Tim Dickerson, 1st place.

Meadow Non-Fiction Award: Angelo Perez, 1st place.

Meadow Poetry Award: Jake A Martinez, 1st place; Kay Doss, 2nd place; and Meghan Bucknell, 3rd place.

www.tmcc.edu/meadow

ISSN: 1947-7473

Table of Contents

Girl in a Country Scene

by Nathan Slinker

In the iron trough—lone remnant of the sheep
that once grazed here—a thin sheet of ice

covers molasses, and a girl, because no one
has told her of a better use for hands, breaks it.

In the next gasp of light, as some sweet history
dissolves on her tongue, she finds herself

walking where long afternoons of barbed wire
dream of letting whole herds loose, and a gang of lazy clouds

hangs around the corner store of mountains,
feeling at empty blue pockets.

In a few hours or years, her mother will call her in
to help set the table, help father with the tomato cages,

help father with the rolling over, fetch the priest
a cup of coffee, empty the family jar of tears.

But now, she lets the scattered sunlight
remove her shoes, barely trembles as she sews

seconds into breached flesh: making the moment
live in her. Now, frost only sweetens broken wheat;

wind blows through her skin as if through a damp sheet.
And this must be the bright winter of her childhood:

a long time will pass before cold feels so good again.

Sand Dunes, Northern Nevada

by Nathan Slinker

Washing before work, I digress into cracked porcelain,
begin to drain… then turn around, once, twice: see myself
serving vodka and water to the only woman at the Sundown Bar.

She's riding frantic bones, hard drink a mere distraction.
Half the bar's cleaning supplies in this week's high, a solution.
We go in the back room.

Unbranded animals wander off, them who brew and tweak
limp out the broken tavern door. Her lips: bruised glass.
I steal twenty dollars on her breath and a bottle for later.

Seven major dunes surround our shivering—aberrations
on a dull pane of dirt. They are remnants of water fable,
left to dry and crystallize, a subsistence since replaced.

Emptiness of sagebrush, miles tripping over themselves—
the desert is easy to traverse when the drug is right.
A dumb glow below eastern hills and one hawk, hunting.

Her name is grey, almost real. We hike the beige lumps
sinking with each step, as if into old skin.
I am doll with shaking body. She is blown to shadow by sun.

Wild horse gallops violet, an oppression of hoof and mane
violent against dawn. And something in the air around it,
a rider of sorts, dwarfed by numb, too distant to see.

Love, Alaska

by Lindsey Neely

Her voice on my answering machine
pushed air around my kitchen.
I sat at the table, in a dark corner
that goes backward with time.

You would love it here.

I remember her like August—
Late summer heavy in our mouths,
exploding like firecrackers on our skin.
Our skin that clung like static in hair.

We looked up on a sky partly starless,
Our twin god of a moon hung in a trance.
Sing our truth, she whispered,
We have come so far from need.

Now, it is almost winter here.
A whole autumn gone
and I don't know one new thing
about you.

Your mail shows up like a stranger.
I pass it for days, glaring—
Is that really you in there?

I know it will be winter there, soon.
Alaska, you are still charcoal and ash.

How many stars can you count in your sky?

What does the moon look like without us under it?

Correspondence

by Janann Dawkins

Sometimes your eyebrows.
Sometimes your fingers

ran like buffalo
along a plane of paper.

Often words were there.
Sometimes intelligible. Birds

hunkered into verbs as though
the sentence were a pad of rice

and eventually your bones
would bear out meaning.

Pretty Girl

by Angelo Perez **First Place Non-Fiction Award**

My family moved to Buffalo, New York at the end of summer in 2006. We lived in the lower section of an old Victorian duplex that was located in South Buffalo—the Irish Catholic part of the city. Above us lived my aunt Vickie who owned two cats I couldn't care anymore for than I would a crack on the sidewalk, but would occasionally feign ardent interest in if I needed to use the computer upstairs. Vickie had a mullet so needless to say she was from my stepdad's side of the family. No one from my mother's side would ever sport such a horrendous hair cut unless that one was looking to get snubbed off the will. When my hair grew too course and thick, en route to making me feel like my head would survive a Russian winter, Vickie offered to take me to get it cut, which was kind of a given because she was the only one inside the house with a car. I neglected to do my research of salons in Buffalo, but I figured Vickie would take me to a reputable place that was filled with pretty girls and their pretty clients, the air thick with Tresemme and top 40 hits. I don't know why I had this notion. I assumed Vickie was aware that I was gay, and that when it came to aesthetic matters, I would not settle for anything that didn't scream, "Fabulous!" or "Fresh!"

One can only imagine the horror I felt when we pulled up next to a pole with a helix of red, white, and blue. "We're here, kiddo. Let's get your hair cut!" We walked into the shop, and my aunt greeted Lou, an elderly barber with a gray handlebar mustache, thick spectacles and a pot belly that looked to be suffocating underneath his white apron. This was not the place I imagined. Where were the pretty girls with the cute bobs and floral tattoos? In their place were old men who could've been the stand-ins for the cast of *Cocoon*. Where were their pretty clients with their high end ensembles and Blackberrys? Instead the shop was teeming with run-of-the-mill, football enthusiast fathers with their sons. I bet if I looked into one of the drawers, I'd find a copy of a hunting magazine instead of thinning shears. And what was that awful smell that lingered in the air? After shave? Or something that was collected from a sweaty underarm mixed into a container with Listerine and passed off to customers as bacteria killing liquid for nicks and cuts? The only familiar element was the ample amount of large mirrors, which I thought was placed in the shop for the client's discretion in the off chance that your barber might slice your throat open.

Lou, the barber my aunt acknowledged, was too busy refining his client's sideburns with a blade to notice another victim had walked in. In films and television, this procedure did not look menacing at all, but as I witnessed its manifestation in front of me, it became very unsettling especially when my hair-cutting experience has been comfortably limited to getting a refreshing spritz of water on top of my head and gossiping about

moms featured on the TLC network. "He's not going to use one of those machetes on me, is he?"

Vickie was too preoccupied talking to a man wearing a Buffalo Bills cap to answer my earnest question. Although I'm sure if she had heard me, she would've tossed her head back and laughed, her repulsive Kentucky waterfall draped between her shoulder blades. I kept thinking about how out of place I must have looked: a 16 year old Filipino boy in girl jeans and a plaid shirt set against the Americana background of a barbershop. Here he sits next to his chain smoking, overweight aunt from god-knows-where-that's-on-the-map, Oregon while he awaits his hair cut from a man who probably refers to any Asian as a "Jap." I envisioned that as the narrative for a photo inside a local newspaper. I also envisioned the headlines of something more macabre: "Filipino teen dies in freak barbershop incident."

I was desperate to create any excuse I could to avoid getting my hair cut and leave. At this stage, I was willing to let my hair grow like a Chia pet and be made fun of at school. Emotional turmoil caused by inner city school thugs seemed like a better fate than what I deemed to be my last day on Earth if I sat on that barber seat. "I could pretend to have a stomach ache," I thought. This would've been a good excuse, but I was afraid someone would tell me there was a bathroom inside the shop, and that I could "shit in there until I felt better." I thought of pretending to receive an emergency phone call from my mom about the house burning down, or much to Vickie's terror and my enjoyment, one of the cats getting hit by a car, but I didn't have a cell phone, and it was entirely impossible to get an incoming call from the barber shop's telephone.

"Are you ready, Angelo?" This was posed to me by Vickie as I hoped the Mayan prophecy of 2012 would come six years prematurely. I couldn't process a response to her obviously rhetorical question, and I knew there was no way out of this so I quickly hopped onto the seat with the approach that if I prolong any more negative thoughts I would only be making my fear much more formidable.

"Such thick, black hair," Lou said as he ran his fingers through my hair. I'm pretty sure his hand got stuck half way through his examining. If a certain ineffable dark wizard needed a location to hide a Horcrux, my hair circa 2006 would be his best option—or any screening of a Jennifer Lopez movie. Lou asked me a lot of standard, perfunctory questions: where am I going to school? where am I from? do I like Buffalo? how about them Sabres? I hadn't the slightest idea who the Sabres were so I evaded the question by telling him it was my first time inside a barber shop. "Your first time?! Get outta here!" Oh believe me, I would've done that the minute I walked in, but I don't think that would be very tactful of me. "Where do you get your hair cut, usually?" I answered that I usually get my hair cut at salons, and at that, Lou laughed in a condescending manner. "Salons? With the pretty girls and blow dryers? I bet you just like getting your hair done there 'cause you like looking at the pretty girls." I actually did enjoy looking at the girls, but Lou's implication was that I was straight, and that was not the case. If anything, I would've been more

interested in checking out Lou's grandson if he had one. More questions were thrown at me about school. From what classes I was in to what subjects I enjoyed the most. I succinctly answered each of them. Only seconds before Lou brought out the blade did I realize I was not asked what kind of cut I wanted. I saw Lou's ominous reflection in the mirror, blade poised to tear, pierce and carve my flesh. I braced myself for the end, closed my eyes, and prayed to God I had a rosary with me so I looked all the more convincing as a Catholic. A few sudden abrasions down my neck, and before I knew it, I smelled the familiar and pleasant aroma of baby powder.

"All done." He postioned my seat so that I could take a look at myself in the mirror, and I was most surprised at how well the hair cut turned out. It was clean and precise, very similar to what I look like whenever I leave a salon. I was happy with what I received and felt stupid for thinking this man didn't know what he was doing. I gave Lou a tip of five dollars, and he told me he hoped to see me back at his shop the next time "the jungle grows on top of my head again."

Vickie and I walked back to her truck, and she lit up a cigarette and complimented how nice I looked as we drove off home. "See. You don't need them salons. You go to Lou, or any of these barber joints and they'll take good care of you. Salons are overpriced. And besides, who needs them pretty girls anyways?" I didn't bother acknowledging her banter because as I glanced at my reflection in the side mirror, I myself felt like "a pretty girl."

I Float Like It's Nothing

by Nicole Navarro

I walked on clouds decades ago
because a net will always save me
as I fall into
my daily dreams.

The chop sticks waltz behind me unnoticed.

Vocabulary is bundled in spindles,
waiting to be unwoven.
But still,
crying birds cannot find a word to speak.

I created a mate to stare
at your empty plate.

His eyeglasses rim robotic stares
for he is
mentally noted,
not challenged.

Trees are dramatic.

Language is a representation
of the capacity the brain lacks.

Nature Channel

by Wendy Barry

It's two a.m. in the hospital
and the sharks are swimming
in the television. Hammerheads.
Their perverse silhouettes are congregated
for an unknown purpose.
The camera sees them from below
as though it were resting on the ocean floor
and the light of the
sky is dim
beyond them.
I watch them changing space with one another
Just the hush of the plastic balloons on my legs
filling and expelling
sharp and sweaty, tubes everywhere,
the morphine button under my thumb.
Silently, the sharks swim
above my head.

The Insomniac Speaks in Winter

by Maya Jewell Zeller

Night is my balcony
where the new sky
drips as it will drip
the rest of my life but not
the way it used to pull soft from itself
and wrap me like a scarf.
Twenty seven years
I've slept lighter and lighter.
The nasturtiums are still brown
with winter.
Winter
still holds the tulip bulbs
and keeps the garden dirt
soft and sodden,
but the clod in my chest
is heavier than this
because last summer's drowsy nodding
was cut away
with the cherry tomatoes,
the yellow beans,
with the last roots pulled
and chopped for compost.
Tomorrow my love will hold me
and show me the orange
glow of morning,
show me the sungleam
sparking the river.
I think that I will want
to go there
and walk into those waters
where trout float like bees from the darkness.

Bayard Avenue

by Scott Tucker

Michael knew the people up one side of Bayard Avenue and down the other. He knew them from stories. He knew they were good people. Some of them were in the room with him now, or crows, or the rain drumming down hard. Or Toom.

The smell of strong tea and disinfectant wrapped its arms around his bed. A bone bracelet he knew rattled. "Delmaine has always wanted to sleep with you," he warned his wife. "Don't go near him in the pool, or walking."

"There is my life to think of, too," she said. "And trust."

"Only speak to him outside in the yard."

Or so it might go.

The lion helps the lioness on a larger kill but otherwise he isn't much use to her. "Do your fighting in the street," she told him. "I will call you inside when I need you."

. .

What I wish for now is Peace, he said to the new stone fountain in front of the last house on Bayard Avenue. The fountain brimmed with watery optimism gurgling out of its top center dish, and over, and over, and down, to the cold round basin at the bottom.

Coyote scent marked hedges and fence posts from the fountain to the ravine below, spooking small dogs out on early morning walks with their masters who held stainless steel coffee mugs, retractable leashes, and clear plastic bags for picking up dog scat. Michael suspected the coyotes drank from the fountain during the dry season. Lost Cat posters appeared in July and August at the stand of mailboxes in the middle of the block, illustrating the larger problem.

It's good, Michael thought, the fountain drawing predators farther up the hill. Something is needed to control the rat and mice population in the city if house cats won't do the job.

"Mom, I want to go around once."

"Okay."

"What about two?"

"Okay."

There aren't many children anymore in the city, Michael thought, although our daughter Emily is ten years old now and a good soccer player, but not a good reader yet.

. .

"How is he?"

"There is still brain activity, so there is hope."

Yes, Michael thought. There is brain activity and hope. There is the illusion of God, and of one nurse being the same as any other.

. .

Emily wanted a kitten quite a lot and her mother said no because of the coyotes.

"An indoor cat then."

"Cats need to live outside to be happy," she said.

"I don't understand life!" Emily yelled, and her mother laughed because it was such a big thing for a small girl to say.

Emily is the sort of child, Michael thought, who will grow up and be kind to strangers and it will cause her great trouble, but the good kind of trouble. He could see her as a young woman standing beside her car with an unreliable engine and a driver's door that jammed and she would curse at it until it opened, in such a way that it lifted the spirits of everyone around her, and this is how she would meet her husband.

. .

In heaven, Michael thought, I will watch the entire movie of my ancestors' lives, from the Stone Age to the Unnamed Wars to the Slave Trade, to the survival of my own grandparents and their grandparents. Which of them came to the Chobe River first? With eternity, I will have time to learn. And then—to see how my own life has added to that long story of hunger and work and hope and lost hope. To see the movies of the other lives I have changed without realizing the good or bad I have done. This is what he hoped heaven would be.

Although—he thought again, these will not be movies. I will somehow know, inside my head, what they knew inside theirs. He learned in school, early on, that the word Religion came from an older word, which meant to Re-link. He learned English from a missionary named Abner Wellington who suffered in the heat and used the Bible and a book of great quotations as his textbooks and was later killed by rebels for his faith.

Sin is geographical.

—Bertrand Russell.

For instance.

The school dried up and closed after Wellington's death. Some years are like this, he learned, and you walk away with your own people and look elsewhere for what you need. Some years the Chobe River does not deliver its water to the Zambezi at all.

Lekgoa, they called their teacher, which meant "White Foreigner" and was an insult. Wellington took away Michael's original name, Mogami, which meant "One Who Milks," a reference to the cows and the goats kept by villagers.

A language is a dialect that has an army.

—Max Weinreich.
For instance.
Or Abner Wellington.

. .

A very old and heavyset man with ruddy loose jowls came walking up Bayard Avenue each morning to collect the mail delivered to his box the day before. On colder days, he wore his painting gloves and a baseball cap with felt flaps to cover his ears. His coat had a fur collar, worn down the way a hallway rug wears down at the edges. The wallet pocket of his pants had a hole worn through it the size of a child's thumb. With bad eyes, he bent forward to read the details of the faded Lost Cat posters, and he walked home with his mail in both gloved hands, shuffling carefully along as if he'd fallen there before, as if the dry pavement could ice over at any moment in the shade.

The clouds some days don't know which type of clouds to become, wispy, mixed together with solid, building darkly into rain but cottoning back out into blue sky again.

Like the very old man, Michael thought, with the ruddy loose jowls—slight and strong at the same time. Like the polished stone of the new fountain and its gurgling water, in front of the last house on Bayard Avenue.

. .

"I've seen them," he told his neighbors, who didn't believe him.

"How do you know they aren't dogs off leash?" he was asked.

"They keep their tails low and hunt at night. In their scat you'll see the fur and the small bones of rodents." Or housecats, he failed to add.

Reward! She is older and longer than pictured here. Her name is Mittens. Please call!

The coyote eyed him and moved off steadily when Michael approached it. Knowing the landscape and the yards of the neighborhood, it jumped a fence when it needed to and disappeared into cedars and rain. It was all for the best, Michael thought, as he didn't want his neighbors to fund an eradication program, and they voted instead to spend their money on a new cabana for the lower playground.

. .

"How is he?"
"There is still brain activity."
"When will Jillian return?"
"She's looking for Toom. Then we can decide."
"Who is Toom?"

. .

"Where I grew up," he once told Emily, "the children moved into their own huts at seven years old, one hut for girls, one hut for boys." These were like bedroom huts, he explained, so a family might have three huts. "We went to the bathroom outdoors in the bush, not in a single place but anywhere far from the village—much like the animals." It returned soon enough to the soil.

Mothers walked all the way to the Chobe River for water. Then the new government dug wells and built a school. Life became better.

"In the old days, it wasn't very expensive to live," he told Emily. "We knew if we met a lion on the trail not to turn our backs but to look it in the eye and move off steadily. It's when you turn your back, they think of you as food."

Michael was of the Tswana tribe. In their language, Bo referred to the country and Ba referred to the people of the country, and so in 1966 they named their new country Botswana, which was more or less equal to the Kalahari Desert. The nearest town to Michael's village was Kasane, an outpost of 7,000 people plagued by troupes of baboons marauding through kitchens and yards, and by herds of ellies pushing over the acacia trees to get at the roots and milling about under baobab trees they could not push over, near the airport, as if they were waiting for their own flights to depart.

"Once I walked to work and found a large bull elephant asleep under the Ba Ba Bololang sign," he told Emily. "We had to poke at him half the morning to get him to move."

The airport was two miles out of town and very much a part of the elephants' world.

"What is the Ba Ba Bololang sign?" she asked.

"It means 'Departures,'" he said.

. .

Emily loved to hear the story of how her parents met in Bo-tswana. Her mother had arrived for an overnight stay at a tourist camp where Michael worked as a guide, an hour's flight from Kasane by bush plane. She planned to leave in the morning for a month of field research concerning hyenas in the Okavango Delta during the dry season, to prove they were hunters as well as scavengers.

But her team did not arrive the following day as planned. So she waited. At the morning campfire, she drank strong tea with Michael to keep the chill away. He fed the fire with one long log, moving it into the center as it burned. They had no communication equipment that reached as far as Kasane except a radio the pilots used. There were no paved roads. It was a waste of money to try to pave the Kalahari. Her team, as it turned out, was hung up at the border crossing at Kazungula, a notoriously congested and chaotic place where four countries met—Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Botswana.

"You need to stay in camp," he told her. "No walking—even between

tents—without me." He touched the rifle on his back. "The lions are right out there, in the taller grass." He pointed, and smiled, to be polite.

She smelled strongly of Citronella, a popular insect repellent.

"No Citronella," he said. "It attracts the elephants. They like fruit, and will push the tents over to get it."

She didn't mind learning from him, although usually she bristled at a man telling her what to do and what not to do. "What else can you tell me?" she asked. She knew she had to learn quickly. She was a young white woman from Seattle doing graduate work in a place without a fence for a thousand miles in any direction. Most importantly, without a fence around her immediate encampment, and so nothing to separate predator from prey.

He was a good-looking man, after all, thin and handsome in his pale green uniform, his face and hands as dark as any skin on the planet, his smile as bright and easy as any she'd ever seen.

"That is it," he told her. "You hear it? Like an engine trying to get going. Then the full howl. That's the hyena."

"The dogs have made a kill?" she suggested, and he looked at her for the first time as a woman who impressed him.

"Yes," he smiled widely, his real smile. "Probably impala. The wild dogs are the most efficient hunters in Africa, with a 90% kill rate."

"Do you ever see the hyenas hunting?" she asked.

"Only if the pack is big enough. Here the packs are not big enough."

"Did you say your name was Michael?" she asked him, pretending she had forgotten.

"Yes. Did you say your name was Jillian?" He smiled.

Two days later, the wild dogs passed by camp and everyone, even the cooks and the guides, ran out to get a glimpse of them. They were a rare sight because they roamed a huge territory. With their long, loping gait, they could run and hunt all night long. Watching them, you could see—you could feel—how each dog knew its role, and what a terrifying thing it would be if they were locked in on you as their target.

When her team arrived, to drive off and study hyenas, Michael helped them load their equipment into the Land Rover they had arranged to borrow.

"When will you return?" he asked her.

"Our plan is not to backtrack. Only the driver will return," she said.

Their eyes met. Her blond hair and bright soul. His wild, black, iron strength. She reached out and touched his arm as she started for the Land Rover.

"If we don't find large packs, I'll come back and see you," she said.

It was a crazy thing to promise, but she did return, and she lived and worked with him for a year at the camp, and then they decided to move to Seattle together, so their child could be born in a hospital in the United States.

. .

Although—Michael had lied. He hadn't explained to Jillian, or later, to their daughter, what he had left behind to come to America. Who he had left behind. Her name was Toom, or really, Koketso, and she lived in a village of dirt and heat and acacia trees along the roadside to Kasane. She was from the village named Kagiso, meaning "Peace."

He had approached her parents, as was the custom, and asked permission to enter into a trial period. His family had paid her father three cows. A trial period lasts for several years, to see how compatible the couple is. They can have children during the trial period, but there is no marriage until all agree it will be successful. And so, while Michael worked at the tourist camp, an hour's flight away in the bush, Toom lived in her village and they had two children together. He saw them only once or twice a year when he had time off and there was an extra seat on one of the bush planes returning to Kasane.

"I must go visit my sister," he told Jillian, whenever he went to visit Toom. "There is room today on the plane."

"It was so brave of Michael," she loved telling her friends in Seattle, "to leave his country and his family behind, and all he knew, for me, and for Emily. What a magnificent man."

His nightmares were always of Toom. He had left a hard life behind for an easier life, without a goodbye to her or his children. Most of her village had died of AIDS over the years, he knew, so she would have to be the exception to be alive, and his children were, almost certainly, orphans of the land.

. .

Even a pack of African wild dogs will give up on a waterbuck, because the buck secretes a foul-smelling musk onto its own muscles under stress, and most predators cannot get beyond the scent to finish the kill.

There are many reasons a couple might fail to have a second child. It usually isn't discussed even with close friends. So often it has to do with the woman, but sometimes it has to do with the man.

. .

"For you, Miss Jillian."

They sat up late in the main tent with one lantern on after the tourists were in bed and they talked about work and sipped wine while the hippos chewed on the lawn outside. They could hear the animals tearing at the long green grass in the dark and snorting as they ate. It became a pleasant backdrop, like everything in Botswana, startling at first and then familiar and reassuring.

"These are dangerous animals," Michael said, "if you get between them and the safety of their watering hole. They only want the green grass—a delicacy in the dry season."

"I've never felt so happy," she told him.

"Do you have anything like this in Seattle?" he asked.

She laughed. “We have coyotes in the neighborhood where I grew up. No one has seen them, but we suspect. And crows. Crows everywhere.”

Their eyes met.

“Tell me about all of it,” he said.

. .

One sound Michael had never heard in Botswana was the rhythm and the low squeal of the heavy freight trains pulling slowly north and south along the coast of Puget Sound in the morning, far down the hill from Bayard Avenue. And the crows. Cawing and calling and harassing even the bald eagles out of the sky.

“There are quail in this neighborhood,” he reported to Jillian one morning.

“You’re kidding me.”

“I’ve seen them two mornings now, halfway down the hill on Blue Ridge Drive.”

There was no place on earth, however, like the Okavango Delta, where a large inland river formed each year, flowing south from Angola during the rainy season, and months later disgorging its water into the desert and the bush in search of the ancient lake that was once there to receive it. The land came to life and predators went hungry because the grazers could find water anywhere, instead of needing to risk the trip to one or two watering holes that had survived the dry season.

When the water came, the tourist guides conducted safaris by boat.

“Where could quail live in our neighborhood?” Jillian asked.

“There is still enough underbrush, and seed, in some of the wilder yards where everything is not level lawn and sprinklers. They won’t last for many more years, however.”

Just when Michael believed he had seen everything, it snowed.

. .

The idea for the trip was Jillian’s. To introduce Emily to her father’s homeland. To return to Kasane and the bush. To further her research and writing. They would stay a month, as she had planned to do the first time.

The journey seemed much longer this time, traveling with Michael and a 10-year-old daughter in tow—the 9-hour flight to London; the eight hours of waiting at Heathrow; a 12-hour flight to Johannesburg, South Africa and then backtracking by airplane north to Livingstone in Zambia near Victoria Falls, that great gash in the earth; then by van through Zambia to the Kazungula border station; by ferry across the Zambezi River, stepping through trays of disinfectant on the opposite shore to prevent the spread of hoof and mouth disease among the livestock; then by small truck four miles into Kasane and finally, walking the last two miles through the bush, to his home village, which had no name except to those who lived there.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

Michael had been quiet, from Heathrow on.

"I'm tired," he said.

Emily, however, was ablaze with excitement, inhaling Africa. She wanted to see yellow-bellied whip snakes and cape buffalo and vultures, and above all, to meet the girls her age who slept in their own huts, while lions hunted overnight on the same walking paths the children took to school in the morning.

"Baboons! Look!" she said. A troupe of them glided past in the bush 20 yards off. A small one stopped to regard them until its mother hurried it along.

"Keep walking, dear," Jillian told Emily.

Michael pointed to the grass roofs of his village. "There it is."

. .

He could have lied. His grandparents and parents were dead by then. His brothers were gone, working in the diamond mines or living in Gaborone—no one knew for sure what had become of them. Gaborone was the capital city, on the other side of the Kalahari, where 70% of the population was HIV positive. There were those in the village who remembered him, of course, and knew his trial period had not ended in marriage, but that was not unusual, and ten years was a lifetime here.

"There's another village we need to visit," he told Jillian. "After this one." He was speaking in a voice she hadn't heard before. His eyes were crow's eyes. "I have relatives there," he said.

"Which relatives?"

He pointed. "We can walk along the same road where we came."

. .

Emily saw her vultures the next morning, whitebacked with downy, bald heads, waiting in trees pushed over by the elephants. Black beaks like polished stone. Some of them were still working on a carcass in the grass, eating it down to the skeleton. "Impala," Michael identified the bones for her.

"How did it die?" she asked.

"A leopard would have hauled it up into a tree." He looked around, shading his eyes to the east. "Hyenas eat everything, bone and all." He pointed to higher ground. "There." Three cheetahs, still looking hungry, sat like living room statues in the grass in the shade of an acacia tree, black teardrop markings beneath their alert eyes. "Cheetahs give up their kills easily, even to vultures," he said.

This was how the nightmare went. At the second village, Kagiso, he spoke in Setswana to the people he could find. Many of the huts were empty. Young women lay in the shade, suffering. Their children couldn't walk. Anyone with strength pounded grain into meal. Michael looked out

finally on the land and cried.

They told him Toom sold her body to feed her children, sleeping with drivers at the ferry landing as they waited in their trucks to cross north to Kazungula. Sometimes they waited for days. They had time to visit with local women. She contracted AIDS quickly and died slowly. Her children lived in the village until it couldn't support them any longer, and then they lived along the roadside. They starved there, or were eaten by the wild dogs, the lion, the leopard, any of the larger predators. They would have run to the river, and tried to protect each other there. They might have drowned in the strong current.

"Toom is dead," he told Jillian. "All of them are dead. I have dreamed it so many times it must be true."

"Who is Toom?"

He stood alone the next morning under the African sun. Hot thermals lifted the vultures from their broken perch. "Heaven will be a sad place for me," he said to himself. God heard him say this, along the roadside, and agreed.

. .

After the snowfall on Bayard Avenue, the night sky cleared again and Michael followed the coyote tracks to the ravine and saw small disturbances along the fence tops where the crows had landed to complain. The imprint of coyote paws in the snow reminded him of the fresh tracks he once showed Jillian at the tourist camp, clear and clean, in the mud leading up to the watering hole.

"Jackal," he told her. "They follow the lions and wait their turn." The next morning, he took her out and they found a lion with its dead-calm yellow eyes looking back at them, eating a large kudu male it had taken down overnight, and she took pictures of the jackals sitting nearby like family dogs waiting for scraps at the barbeque.

"I love this place," she told him, and, turning, she kissed him on the cheek. "I'm afraid I might love you as well," she said. Their eyes met, as past and future meet on every day's horizon.

"I love this place, too," he told her, "but you must work very, very hard to stay alive here."

Then he willed himself awake.

. .

"Michael! Oh my God, you're back!"

"Jillian."

She took his hand. "You were hit, walking on the road, do you remember?" A side-mirror on a truck. A blow to the back of the head.

"Yes."

"Michael." Her hand holding his. "Toom is here."

Or so it might go.

No Light

by Stephen Schlatter

The darkness plays with my eyes,
then the light. Colors strobe through
the lens, flashing and pulsing with the music.

Sweat pummels the floor, alongside bright yellow
shoes and bare feet. Neon shirts, blue dyed hair,
and glow sticks bounce up and down in rhythm.

"We have one more pill," you tell me.
"I don't have money to get more, we
have to split it, lets go to the bathroom."

The door locked, the razor blade slices through
the center of the purple powder disc. You snort
your half, I swallow mine and return to the floor.

After an hour the high starts to fade. I head
over to you, "What can we get?" I remind,
"We ain't got shit. Get some, I'll front."

You take the bill and a half hour later pull
me back, pry the bag out of your pocket,
and throw me a smirk. "Check this shit."

The white powder spread across the counter is
"the best," I am told. "This is your chance to try the good
shit." A lump in my throat, I look away, and decline.

"The only difference between this shit and the other
shit is in your mind," you say. "Don't get high
and mighty on me now." You hand me the straw.

Sin never tasted so sweet in the back of my
throat. The darkness plays with my eyes,
then the night.

There is no light.

12 Oz.

by Buck Feero

Without Krylon to clean from under my fingernails I find it hard to breath.

I always held my ground, never letting my pieced together world fall,
Snatching what was mine from those who struggled to take me keep.
I walked the miles, claiming the cities wall space
With every sneakered step, cherishing the beauty
Of the white washed concrete canvas.
I covered any flaws the alley accumulated
With vivid colors and intricate words.

Spray can king was never the goal,
Getting up was my only passion.
I existed to caress my city with silver blue bombs,
Spread from window sills to foundations
        On the last train I decorated I took an entire car—
The sight of those twelve foot letters
Outlined and accented still brings ice to my nerves.

Those days are gone, and with them the thrill they carried.
The thought of Aerosol Burns Constant; I put myself into pain.

A Jungian Archetype

by Jake A. Martinez

There is no safety zone to warn
that you're backpedaling deeper into a dream
There is only the twitching of toes kicking
inside a hallucination that looks like your body
Thoughts flow down the mental storm drain
that empties into the polluted river of consciousness
Lying tangled in that glow is like waking up with the naked gray man
Pasty, hairless with beady, silver eyes and sagging skin, and you wonder
if this is just the dream uninterrupted
He twinkles inside that *blue light special* glow with a mean furrow
on his bulbous head, staring deep into you with rapacious eyes
Cooking up nausea in your gut because you suspect he's touched you
repeatedly, with those slender fingers
But your body doesn't belong to you
You don't even belong to yourself
The things you feel are a carved out niche in the corner of your mind
Where vermin trail their urine and bits of crumb never get swept clean
Even when your alarm clock chimes in the morning
Feeding your ears delusions of
I'm awake, I'm alive, I am something real!
A narcoleptic understands the secret
You are only that darkness floating in front of closed eyelids
never anything more
Only a fleeting dream, loosely woven in another's haunting gaze

My First Night in Izmir, Turkey

by Tyler Bigney

I lived in a little room
tucked neatly away
on some corner in Izmir, Turkey.

I spent most of that first night
on the balcony
eyeing the streets
and listening to a woman moan
in the room above mine.

I could hear a piano
but wasn't sure
from which direction it was coming.
There was a baby next door,
and I listened as it cried.

I smoked Marlboro's and sat
with my legs crossed, reading the new Sedaris,
thinking about my parent's back home,
now immersed in the tidal ebb and flow
of dreams, no doubt.

The sun was beginning to peek up.
The piano had stopped,
and music poured out
blanketing the city
in its song.

I didn't move. I sat with the book
on my lap
listening to that song,
(*what I later learned was prayer*)
listening to that baby, still crying
so close,
that for a moment,
I thought it might have been me.

Moon River, December, 1961

by Vanessa Blakeslee

My aunt Sharon has decided who she wants to be:
Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.
The black-and-white picture skips through the year's highlights.
She had seen the movie with her aunt and my grandmother
two months before, a girls' day out with hats and gloves,
but tonight she prefers her incarnation of Holly Golightly—
dark hair turbaned in a white towel, skinny legs rocking
back and forth in black Capri pants and scuffed flats
as she swings her brother's guitar on her hips,
and even though she can't play, sings, "Moon River, wider than a mile,"
even though she is only eleven, the song and George Peppard
gazing down from his apartment window have thrilled, captured her.
She doesn't know yet what is opening up:
the watershed of human yearning, always the hope for glory. For love.
On the television, Mike Wallace narrates a clip from back in May
of President Kennedy proclaiming the United States
will be the first to land a man on the moon
before the end of the decade. My aunt stops singing,
edges closer to the window, still being Audrey.
The towel loosens around her elfin face. She gazes
at the full-bright moon, wonders if rivers might run across
its glowing, broken surface.

Clarissa

by Maya Jewell Zeller

Mean boys teased Clarissa for her smell.
At Clarissa's the potbellied pigs were pets,
cradled or ridden by toddlers.
A chicken strolled across the counter.
Their house hung over the slough,
porch mossy as a tree, until you couldn't tell
that tanned planked deck
from the slow swell
of alder-strewn brown water.

When floods came, they packed their stuff upstairs
and watched old furniture float past.
Clarissa told me she once saw the sofa
she'd been born on,
trapped between pilings a few feet out,
pink begonia print bleeding in the current.
A raccoon was sort of stuck on it, she said.
It was the strangest thing I ever saw.

A Knife in the Wash

by Teresa Breeden

Who can say how it came to pass
That the 10" Henckel slipped
Past the glass? How no one heard it
Thumping about? Who can say
If it tried to get out before
Slips and bras bemused it so?
When first it slid its shaft into silk
Which was the more surprised?
And when it parted the calf to the knee—
And when it cleaved the breast from its bone—
Who can know if it felt misused,
Or simply felt relieved.

The Stain

by Karen Levy

Israel 1979

My mother is in her element. I have turned twelve, and my bat mitzvah party is just a few hours away, caterers like frenzied ants carrying trays of food, crisp linen tablecloths, sparkling wine glasses, steaming pots. Small round tables have appeared under the trees in our garden, like mushrooms after a rain, while from branch to branch hang wires bearing colorful lanterns which will soon bathe the greenery in magical light.

My father has disappeared altogether, his distaste for elaborate celebrations ignored by my mother's need for the dramatic. He suffers quietly through every birthday his own included, while my mother begins the festivities at the first light of dawn. I still recall waking up to the shadowy outlines of gifts in my room, and my mother's eager face bent over mine, bursting into the birthday song, her eyes reprimanding anyone who wasn't showing enough enthusiasm. It never stopped there. Birthday breakfast was followed by cake. Birthday lunch, and cake. Birthday dinner, more cake. And a constant need to ensure that we were enjoying ourselves, that the gifts were appreciated, that the day was special enough, not just another ordinary day.

Today she has outdone herself and soon will come her confirmation in the shape of dozens of guests who will attest to her entertaining prowess. All I need to do is put on the dress purchased for the occasion, thank one and all for my gifts, and keep my hands out of her sight until the stains are successfully removed. The now fading purple splotches that covered my hands like a pair of berry colored gloves were the result of a science experiment gone wrong the day before. The biology teacher had most likely explained the effects of Kali Permanganate on skin, but her warnings had faded into the distance as I dropped the dark crystals in the liquid before me, watching the slow curl of violet tails swirl towards the bottom of the glass container. I wanted to feel those smoky ribbons, their regal color, my hands dipping into the water and fishing out the nearly dissolved crystals so I could drop them in again, make them repeat their watery dance before their magic wore off. By the time the teacher caught me in her sights the damage had been done. My hands were slowly darkening, my classmates awed into unusual silence.

My mother had not been pleased. Why now? Why today? She questioned when I arrived from school, shaking her head in disbelief at my bad timing, her lips a thin disapproving line. I didn't know how to explain how my heart had leapt at the unexpected secret contained in those deceivingly mediocre specks on my desk. How they flowered before my eyes and asked to be touched. I had spent the rest of the afternoon scrubbing until my hands felt raw, the stubborn dye slowly fading under the persis-

tence of water, soap and my mother's determination. There was a moment when she suggested I wear gloves to the party, to hide the embarrassment of such hands.
But the royal smudges gave way, and now the only reminder was their dark outline soaked in around each of my nails, and a strange sadness I felt at the return of my skin to its regular unimpressive color.

Dusk is settling between the apartment buildings surrounding our garden, softening their gray cinder walls until they disappear into the background. Classical music is spilling from the balcony above, and our first guests are arriving. Festivities rarely begin early on this side of the world, partygoers waiting for the heat of the day to dissolve before venturing out. Among the invited is family having traveled from Tel Aviv, a negligible distance in American terms, while an entire day's outing for the aunts, uncles and cousins now unfolding out of their cars, stretching and rubbing their muscles. My mother greets one and all, excusing herself to answer the jangling of our telephone, demanding to be answered despite the stream of people making their way into our courtyard. I am left with my father's colleague, a short round-faced man everyone refers to as Perlberg, who offers me a small gift-wrapped box and waits expectantly for me to open it before him. Unlike the growing pile of books and sheet music I have already graciously accepted from guests clearly concerned with my educational well being, this present promises something different, and I am eager to learn its contents. So is its presenter, who helps me with the wrapping I am trying not to tear, then steps back to take in my reaction. The simple white box contains soft cotton in which is nestled the most beautiful necklace I had ever received. At the end of a delicate silver chain hangs a cylindrical piece of polished sea glass, its pale, green blue shades trapping waves and drawing my finger to feel its smooth flanks. I look up to thank Perlberg, the delight in his eyes at the offering's effect matching my own at receiving it.

It's thousands of years old, he tells me as he offers to clasp it around my neck. It was found at an archeological dig, he continues, as I turn back to face him now wearing this piece of history. Thank you, I whisper, my shyness taking over as I leave his side and run into the house to show my mother who has not returned since going in to answer the call.

The phone is missing from its stand on the second floor landing, and my eyes follow its curly cord as it wraps around the wall and into the narrow guest bathroom where it disappears behind the door left slightly ajar. I can hear my mother's muffled voice from within, the few words of Polish I have picked up from years of listening to my mother and grandmother not enough to let me understand. I stand rooted to the floor, trying to figure out who could be on the other side of the line, since everyone we know has been invited and is now seated in the garden below. While I am still lost in thought my mother emerges, the phone clasped to her chest, a strained look on her face, which she quickly attempts to erase when she finds me standing there. Who called? I ask, watching her features intently, the hint of tears in her eyes making me suspicious. I had seen this look before, a rapid adjustment to protect me from a frightening truth.

The last time she used it was at the beach, when she decided I was old enough to swim with her out to the raft, a jellyfish stinging her on the way. They floated all around us, their pale lavender domes gently bumping into our sides, misleading with their soothing color. I ignored their tentacles, just as I had pushed out of my mind all thoughts of what may be contained in the depths yawning darkly below me. I was determined to reach that raft, my mother's tight smile and everything I didn't know protecting me from panic.

Now once again she pretended all was well. It was just your aunt Ula from Berlin, calling to wish you a happy birthday. I knew she was lying but I was still too young to question her version of the truth. She promised to rejoin the party and sent me back down stairs, my new necklace forgotten as the sound of guests welcomed me back to their happy midst.

It isn't until the next morning that I am finally told about the call. By then my mother has been long gone, the neighbor, Miron, having driven her to the airport where she already boarded a plane to Austria where her father lay dying. I slept unknowingly through it all. The house is strangely silent, most traces of yesterday's festivities cleaned away. The garden has returned to its disenchanted greenery, the apartments back in sharp relief against the blue sky. The carport that had served as last night's bar now holds nothing but the old blue Fiat, and a handful of tiny, nearly translucent Geckos, watching me from their perch on the walls. How simple it was to turn the ordinary into remarkable; how easily the deceptively tranquil held unexpected secrets. Like the happy Perlberg, who in just a few years will call a cab into which he will then load himself, a ladder and a rope and ask the driver to drop him off in the forests of the Carmel where he will later hang himself.

I make my way back into the house, up the stairs and to my room. All traces of the magic in which my hands had briefly dipped are gone.

Solitaire

by Lacie Morgan

The doggy door clatters against the house and it sounds like the dogs can't make up their minds. The stove vents clap in protest. The walls grumble in disapproval. Ann is tucked under the covers, pulled up to her chin. The dogs are curled up on her feet and a game of solitaire is before her. The telephone rings and she cringes. Steve only calls because she asked him not to. He acts surprised when she tells him she had been sleeping. *Sleeping already? Yah, well, it's been a long day.* She finds herself apologizing before she even knows why and wishes she hadn't. The trash cans roll past her window. The tree knocks loudly. It reminds her to stop. Disengage. The trees shush her movement in the wind. *I miss you*, he says. *I want to see you.* He'd had her waiting so much before. She won't wait now. The dog snores deeply and she jumps at the sound. *How is your Dad?* And the wind picks up. *They're running tests.* He's forgotten his lie; forgets where he left off. She notices but doesn't respond. She can't take the doggy door sounds anymore. It slams more loudly than before. She goes to silence it and shoves a blanket through the hole. The dogs can't get out and they don't mind. *Ok, well, I'll talk to you tomorrow then.* The blanket comes loose and the doggy door clatters again. *I guess*, his reply. He doesn't understand her distance. She refuses to remind him how much she cared. The window is clear from the rain. *Goodnight then.* She blocks the door a final time and goes back to her game and listens to rain patter against the roof. *Goodnight then.*

Late for Work

by Jim Lamoreux

Morning came to Albert's window. The glass was obscured with filth and Morning just stood there looking in, unable to see anything inside. All around the city hummed, hissed and beeped. Outside Albert's apartment the World walked about with heavy feet, it brushed its teeth, it combed its hair. The World sat down to the kitchen table and poured its coffee and got ready to begin the day. Albert watched the World from his bed, the sheets so unwashed they were like crepe. Albert had to get in gear or be late for work.

Albert looked hard at the windows of his bedroom. He saw the light fingering the window glass like brilliant butterflies. He blinked them away. Focusing beyond the glass through the dirt and dust, he vaguely saw the city reach out a steak knife, trying to carve up the minutes of the day for everyone, serving it to them like a smothering, overbearing Mother. Albert was still in bed. He raised himself from the sheets, stood up and strolled naked across the floor like a drunken surveyor, marking out the distance with shaky strides. It was a short few steps from the bed to the bathroom. Above him, as he sat on the toilet, a single bulb whined. A moment later last night's dinner spun down the pipes and out to sea. This was a good beginning.

He wiped, stood up from the toilet, and looked weakly into the glass of the mirror. His face was gang-beaten by Time, what used to look like the familiar child in the family photo book now appeared swollen and abused like a roughed up Potato Head. The dark jaw erupted in stubble as if his lower face had been swarmed by tiny black ants. It was painful to look at himself. The pain felt like a toothache that settled like a cat with long claws on the top of his brain, trapped in the dome of the skull's brain pan, purring and kneading the red tissue with long, pin sharp nails.

He stabbed at his teeth with a stiff toothbrush. Outside a dog urinated on the tires of his car. His garbage can sat in the driveway erupting with TV dinners. The sun crawled weakly up the dome of the sky, shadows spreading like spilled ink on the park grass and sidewalks. Albert was going to be late for work.

He stopped brushing his teeth and looked down into the bowl of the bathroom sink, and saw a tooth. He thought at first that it might be popcorn. He fingered it curiously. It was a tooth. On the sink porcelain the tooth was surrounded by a swirl of gray hair. It was just a skiff of hair, but it was enough to make him pause. He was balder in the mirror today. The angry bathroom light bulb reflected a hard white shine on the dome of his head. He stood at the sink like a speaker at a lectern.

Something fell to the floor with a small thud.

It tumbled behind the toilet. The cold from the bathroom tile crawled up the muscles in his legs from the bottom of his feet. He noticed in

the mirror that an ear was missing. He wiggled his toes and something snapped softy, and rolled away. It was getting late. He had to focus. No time to be chasing things on the floor. The sun straddled his apartment and made the tarred roofing waffle with heat. Cats left the rooftop for cooler napping places and birds huddled under leaves and awnings to shield their dusty feathers from the hot fingers of the sun. Damn! He had to find that ear. He crawled around until he found the toe that had come away instead and rolled behind the toilet. It crumbled in his hand. He was definitely late now. No time for this crap.

All over the World the work-day was in full swing. In an office far away a water bottle in a lobby somewhere made an oily gulping sound as someone poured themselves a drink. The city water was too full of bugs to want to drink it. In his apartment though, Albert dealt handily with the bugs. Everything always smelled of Raid. Now his knee was numb. The bones ratcheted around in the socket when he turned to face the toilet again. How was he ever going to get to work like this?

He glared at the mirror of the medicine chest. He scratched his right breast crowned by a hard, berry colored nipple, and something popped softly, spun downward and made a plunking sound in the toilet. He pivoted on one foot to look, and felt the ankle powder under the skin and collapse like a mound of stiff sand. He needed to go to the kitchen. His foot dragged along on the tile floor of the bathroom dissolving into it as he reached for the knob of the door to steady himself. His boss was going to be pissed.

On the TV news in Albert's apartment the broadcaster wondered out loud if Iraq would ever become a sovereign nation. Then a smiling man burst down a mountain road in an SUV while his vehicle changed shape and color all the way down, like a chameleon on crack. TV would help Albert concentrate on getting to work. He shuffled to the kitchen, but on the linoleum halfway there the joint in his hip made a soft popping sound and his leg shot to the left as he grabbed at it like a man fumbling for a dropped crutch. He let it go. Dammit he was late. He filled the coffee maker with grounds hopping around in the kitchen on one leg. Then he went to the sink to get water.

He felt the temperature of the flow from the tap with his finger for no reason, and looked out across the driveway to the street beyond. People walked back and forth like cardboard targets. He thought briefly that perhaps he was looking at a personal shooting gallery; back and forth the cardboard caricatures of human beings ratcheted, and if he could hit one or two what would he win? Then again what would he hit them with, a dirty look? He glanced down and saw the water had dissolved his forefinger and carved a groove in the two fingers below it. He was holding the water receptacle around the bottom of the plastic handle with his pinky. He carefully placed it in the coffee maker, flipped it on with what was left of his finger and waited for the coffee to perk.

He sat down feeling the vinyl seat of his dining room chair on his bare ass. He absently kneaded his genitals waiting for the coffee. There had been a time that doing this would have evolved into several hours of

enthusiastic impromptu happy masturbation. This time he sighed as his scrotum came away in his hand. He held it up for a few minutes feeling its weight. He thought of things that he had held before that weighed the same as his scrotum. He bounced it all in his hand a little, the penis slipping through his missing upper fingers and dropping to the floor to explode in a small cloud of dust. The coffee bubbled and croaked in the pot. He set his balls on the table carefully, whining a little as they rolled off onto the floor and under his TV chair.

He would be fired today for not showing up for work. What excuse could he give? Should he call in sick? Outside, in offices all over the World people moved back and forth between cubicles focused on the task for the day. On their desks were pictures of their families. Eighty percent of their time was spent in that cubicle. He saw them dissolving in each little space like snails hit with salt, hissing and bubbling, their work place noisily becoming a damp, empty shell. He sighed and tried to handle the sugar with missing fingers. Instead he spilled it on the surface of the dining room table and floor. No sugar today.

The coffee had finally perked. He stood on one leg to pour it, and winced a little as the skin of his ass remained on the chair dissolving into a dust doughnut. He hopped to the counter, poured the coffee with his good hand and tried to sip it. He felt the steam dissolve his upper lip. Air blew across his exposed teeth and gums. Determined, he tried again, the coffee burning his inner mouth. He mumbled his anger at the staring sink erupting with unwashed dishes. He had to call in to the boss. He was sure he would be fired this time.

The work day wore on. The sun moved behind the tall office buildings. Clouds puffed and blew about windy skyscraper tops while birds drifted in the air around them. Inside, people mapped out the minutes of their lives from job to job. Here and there a personal touch or two bled into the fabric of the workday. It was like a stain on someone's underwear. It was accidental humanity.

He stood on one leg in the middle of his apartment. The TV complained about high gas prices. Osama bin Ladin bitched again about how America misunderstood him. The World dragged itself into the afternoon like a struggling dung beetle pushing its own waste uphill. He tried to pick up the phone but his remaining fingers snapped off his palm from the pressure. They flopped onto the top of the phone table, one falling on the floor behind it. He would explain his lateness to his boss, as soon as he figured out how to dial the phone.

Then again, where was he going today really? He hopped to his recliner and sat down heavily. He pushed back to raise the foot rest and felt his arms pop from the elbows and roll into his lap. He cried. The fingers left on the phone table dissolved like sand. The leg on the floor disintegrated and blew around in a breeze from the kitchen window. Outside someone yelled obscenities at a cabdriver. People were closing their briefcases and shutting down their office computers all over the World. It was quitting time. The sun ducked shyly behind the trees of the city park. Homeless people stirred.

He sat in his chair feeling his chest dissolve into the slick vinyl fabric. He sobbed. His pelvis softened in the seat and collapsed into the wooden frame and metal springs of the chair. In the gathering darkness a little while later his eyes stared sadly out of the ball of dust that had become his head, and then imploded and blew away with his skull.

It was "after work hour." The streets were haunted now with people trying to have a "kick-ass Friday night." They migrated to the bars like angry moths. In the dark booths at the strip clubs men talked too loudly and women painted themselves too thickly with the colors of war between the sexes. Urine misted off walls in alleys. Dumpsters echoed the stomach churning growl of dry heaves. At restaurants secretaries argued the drama of that week snitching on each other as if it mattered to anyone but them.

A man somewhere tried to touch his Girl Friday's shoulder explaining that he couldn't divorce his wife of 15 years just yet. Be patient baby. She shrunk from his fingers. Days ago she threw herself at him with a kind of abandon she hadn't felt since high school. All that didn't matter now. She had become a thing, like the stapler or the letter opener. She didn't know what to do. She didn't know what to say. She stared at the gathering night sky and the bright, burning stars blossoming on an inky blue atmospheric dome. Her eyes ached with a pain that gripped her lungs and made it hard to take a breath. It was lousy to be a thing.

The workplace was like a Petri dish, the relationships evolving like bacteria. It felt like slavery, and yet everyone had their own radio, CD players, wide-screen TV's and SUV's. They had all become affluent slaves. But they still kept burning themselves on that bug light, the one that entices them to be scorched by their pain even though they should know better than to keep going there. The streets settled into the deepest part of the night bordering on the onset of morning. Time passed like the inner spindly intricacies of a spider building a web.

Somewhere someone was murdered and disposed of in a cold river. Somewhere else someone had fevered sex on cool, clean bed sheets. A baby cried in a crib. A dog whimpered in its dreams. Buses and trains moved to and fro across the great, pulsing network of life that feeds and nurtures every city. And yet what had to be the fate of human beings that tried to live in accordance with the rules of steel, concrete, Xerox and fax machines? What did exposure to all this finally make them become?

The TV announcer on Albert's Television said there was no relief in sight for the gas price disaster bringing this nation to its knees. Next door the music of an all night party thumped and shouted against the adjoining walls to Albert's apartment. A woman whooped wildly somewhere, a live rock band played in a garage several blocks away, until police showed up. The World staggered on its own great feet into another relentless cycle of day and night around Albert's dry little apartment in the middle of Everything, Everywhere.

The wind blew softly through the screen of the kitchen window. In the early morning darkness the TV cast the living room in a blue glow. Cats moved along the wood fence outside, their shadows creeping across the

wide face of the waning moon. They blocked the light that powdered the reclining chair in a hoary whiteness, their dark twins padding across the stuffed fabric in smoky duplication.

In the frame of that light a beating heart dissolved into the springs, wood and cushions of the powder blue recliner. In a few hours the clock radio would go on and the day would begin.

But Albert, he would be late for work.

Those I Used to Know Who Knew Me

by Andrei Guruianu

Today I combed back the pretty clouds of summer just to find out they were not my friends. The chatter was empty and meaningless but the lipstick was not. We stood at night before a three-piece mirror that would break us apart and make us whole again; make us in turn the loneliest of men. We knew what it meant despite a pouring dark that soaked us to the bone.

And now someone's got us up his sleeve again this year. Someone always does. We are the spades or hearts in a pity hand, just enough for a couch on credit. As is. Just enough to take your darling out for a good time and forget that you can be everything but in control. As promised from the day we knew a promise could be broken.

And when you finally get used to it they will come around and mess with the color scheme. Black T-shirts with old Soviet propaganda peddled at a New York market stall. The art of hammer and sickle. A seller puts a tear in the otherwise stern eye and looks at you with that fresh twist of nostalgia—the oldest trick in the book.

And isn't it always like that when some years have passed? You watch an old man dying on a rainy afternoon as he looks out through the open window. The smell of the orchard. That village taste behind the curtain of a million drops lined up like orphans with their eyes against the soft horizon of a new age.

And what everyone seems to remember from this picture are the apples. Iconic sheen of green. That at the end, before the credits roll too fast over his grave, the old man appears happy. Something to talk about inside the car on the way home. More chatter and the smear of blush on your left cheek.

Drive By Pianoing

by Robby Schlesinger

The night after we longboarded through town, blowing vuvuzelas as we went,
The van made of Deadhead stickers and rust pulls into the newly
Refinished driveway, and inside's the token neighborhood vandals.
The ones that made galleries out of stolen road signs.
Tom Sanchez had bought a stand up piano from some Methodists.
He sits behind it in the cab, plinking the keys and singing,
The girls are definitely gonna find this one sexy
Or maybe at least interesting enough not to tell us to fuck off
Like normal. So, you know, here's hoping.
Leo rolls down the driver's window, releasing plumes of the dank smoke
That was building up inside, honks the horn by way of telling me to jump in.
And so we take off to assault pedestrians with improvised serenades,
Patchwork ballads, and crude pick up lines set to music.
Hooligans and punks? Maybe.
But for a moment we ascend above minimum wage jobs.
A mobile Algonquin Round Table with philosophy and psychedelics.
Sanchez becomes Robert Benchley with a Kabala bracelet.
We drive by a good ol' boy getting into his lifted Dodge Ram
With the trailer hitch and the NRA sticker, and he sang
No prizes for guessing who you voted for, huh, Hoss?
Leo, looking less like himself and more like Alexander Woollcott,
Right down to thick, square-framed glasses, self-assured
Well-read, and in love with graffitied overpasses,
Leans out the window and asks for his mudflap girls' phone numbers.
Foxcroft wouldn't have been unlike Harpo Marx
if he wasn't always sleeping off a hangover, drooling masterpieces
on the passenger window; the girls we passed flipped him off from the sidewalk,
thinking he was being suggestive with his tongue sticking out like that.
Tom whistled to them from his stool, cracked his fingers,
And skipped his fingers across a pentatonic scale.
You ladies read Shakespeare? Because you're like the shrew
And I'd like to tame you, if you get my meaning.
Chuck and I laughed from the back as the girls gave Tom
The inevitable *fuck off* that always came eventually, signaling it was time to leave.
The two of us were like a Kaufman and a Sherwood
We were always caught up in our own work, but we felt lucky
To be a part of something like this, watching secret artistic drives
Peek through tangles of uncut hair and old Warped Tour shirts.
At the end of the night, when Tom would run out of lyrics
And Leo would run out of bud, they'd drop us off
And we'd leave the Table, back to monochromatic
Lives without piano scores behind them.

The Boy

by Bipin Aurora

It was a nice day. I was wearing my white shirt, my white pants. I was wearing a red tie, a clip in the middle.

The people in the office even made remarks about it. "You look so handsome, Pushkar," they said. "You look so content."

Perhaps they spoke seriously; perhaps they spoke in jest. But I took their words at face value.

Did I not do the right thing?

I came out of the office. I lit my cigarette. It was a sunny day—a nice blue sky, a light breeze. I took a puff from the cigarette and watched the smoke rise in the air.

There was a park, the green grass of the park all around. I felt in a good mood, I decided to indulge. I took off my shoes (and why not?). How nice it was to walk on the green grass. How nice to walk in my socks!

I felt tempted, I decided to take off my socks as well. I felt so light, so free.

"You are a serious man, Pushkar," my manager had once told me. "If one is serious, sometimes one cannot be free."

I remembered the words of my manager. I remembered the words as I now walked on the green grass—walked in my bare feet.

There was a tree. A boy was sitting under it. He was a poor boy, he had a shoe-polish kit with him. Every few seconds someone walked by, he called after the person. "Shoe polish, sir, shoe polish!"

As I walked on the grass, the boy called after me. The shoes were in my hand, not on my feet. I looked at them, noticed that they were indeed dirty. But there was so much dust in India, they would always get dirty. Still I felt in a good, a liberal, mood. I decided to give the boy some business.

"Come come, sir."

I walked towards the boy.

"I will do a good job, sir."

"I know you will." And then: "These are nice shoes. You better do a good job," I joked.

I arrived at the tree. I handed the shoes to the boy.

The boy took the shoes, he laid them on the grass beside him. He took one of the shoes, he laid it on top of the metal stand before him. He began to open his can of shoe polish.

He looked up at me, smiled.

"You work in the office, sir?"

"Yes," I said.

"Your sir is good?"

"How is that?"

"Your sir, sir—the man who gives you orders—is he a good sir?"

I found his remarks amusing, but I found them impertinent as well. Who was he to speak to me in this way?

Still, I was in a good mood. I did not lose my temper. I ignored—I simply ignored his remarks.

He rubbed the shoe with his brush, rubbed it vigorously. As he rubbed, he began to hum a tune. It was a slow tune, one I did not recognize. Most poor boys sing the tunes—often crass and vulgar—from the latest film songs. But this was a different tune. Perhaps it was from some hymn; or perhaps from some folk song.

"Do you like the tune, sir?"

"How is that?"

"It is an old tune, sir, my mother taught it to me. She would go to the room inside (it is the only room we had). She would sit there, she would sing."

"Sing?"

"It was raining outside. She would sit there huddled all night. She would sit there damp and wet. And she would sing."

What strange words he spoke. He was sharing the words—why was he sharing them with me?

"My mother, sir, she was a good woman. She is dead now—they put her on a string cot, they took her to the Jumna River. When they took her, people were singing the tune. I had nothing better to do (it is true sir, ha ha)—I had nothing better to do. I went along, I sang the tune as well."

They were strange words. They were odd, they were disjointed. Were they mocking words as well?

He was telling me about his mother—why was he doing it?

"You work in the office, sir. Do they have water there, do they have soap? Do they have water and soap to keep you clean?"

"Water? Soap?"

"My mother died. There was so much pain (and so much dirt). They looked for water, sir, they looked for water to make her clean.

"The old women came, they came to clean her. But they did not have water, they sent them away.

"A man came to the house, a stranger. He had soap in his left hand (it was red in color), he had a bucket in his right. They were happy to see him. 'Come, come,' they said, and they pressed their backs to the wall to let him pass. 'Come, come,' they said, 'a nice man is here. He is here at last.'"

In this way he spoke—he continued to speak. I had stopped for a shoe polish—a simple shoe polish—and these were the words that awaited me.

I was in a good mood; I did not want my mood to be spoiled. I knew that I was being vain, that I was being selfish. But this was my one day of freedom. And who was he to spoil the freedom?

"Hurry up with the shoes," I said, my mood no longer so generous. "I am an important man (can't you see it?). I am an important man, I have places to go."

The boy looked at me. He grew serious, he grew quiet. Was he hurt as well?

Important man—ha. Was I really such an important man? Places to go—what places were they?

Sometimes I walked the streets. Sometimes I walked the alleys. Were these the important places to which I had to go?

The boy polished my shoes. Vigorously he brushed them—back and forth, back and forth.

"Finished, sir."

He was quiet, he was formal.

The charm of the moment—charm, what charm?—had been broken.

I tried to be nice to the boy. He was silent. I tried to make a joke. He was silent. I tried to give him a tip. But actions, real actions, speak louder than words. And had not my actions spoken for themselves?

The boy took the money—the fee for the shoe polish, not a penny more. He bowed silently.

He collected his things—with such purpose he collected them. He rose, he left.

I had come to the park—come with dirty shoes. My shoes were no longer dirty. But my soul, what of that?

My soul, what of that?

Some time passed. I thought of the boy—I felt low. I thought of the office—the praise, the flattering words—how silly it all seemed now, how pointless.

I went to the park looking for the boy. There was no sign. I walked the streets, the alleys. No sign.

Such a small boy he was—seven years old, perhaps eight. He wore those small shorts, brown, a small shirt that hung over the shorts. The shirt, originally white, was now covered with polish marks. He worked hard, he worked hard. He was a good boy—how could he not be?

Days passed, weeks. Weeks passed, months. I had forgotten the boy (or had I?); I had moved on to other things.

One day I saw the boy—I saw him again.

There was a long and narrow alley. There were open drains on both sides. Children played in the alley. They were poor children. Some of them wore clothes, some of them were half-naked, their genitals exposed. All of them were covered with dust.

The girls jumped rope. Some of the boys played with a ball. It was a pink rubber ball. One of the boys threw the ball, the other missed. The ball went over the other's head; it went into the open drain.

There was some shouting—some curse words were exchanged. The open drain was dirty, the ball would be dirty. No one wanted to go to the drain, to pick up the ball.

And there he was—the shoe-polish boy. He must have been standing in the corner (or perhaps in the shadows). He must have seen it all.

He came to the front. He walked—quietly, simply—to the open drain. He picked up the ball—picked it up between his thumb and his forefinger. He carried the ball—the water dripping from it—carried it this way for a few feet. Then he squatted on the ground. He took the ball, he rubbed it in the dirt. He rubbed it, he rubbed it—he did this almost for a minute.

The others looked at him—looked in awe. They were afraid. He was a brave boy. He was not afraid.

"Well done! Well done!" one of them said at last.

"Yes, yes, well done!" said another.

Now all the others joined in as well.

A boy came from the far end of the alley. He was pushing a bicycle tire—pushing the inner rim of the tire with a stick. He pushed the rim with such interest—with such concentration.

But when he saw the boy with the ball, he paused. He held the rim with one hand. He seemed to be filled with admiration—even he.

The boy—the shoe-polish boy—was not quite done. He reached into his kit, he took out a small towel (it was torn, it was green). He rubbed the ball with that now, rubbed it vigorously.

Back and forth; back and forth.

"It is clean now," he said at last. "The ball is clean."

A cheer—another cheer—rose from the children.

One of the children came running. He went to the ball, grabbed it. He held the ball in the air.

"Time for pithoo!" he said (a popular game).

The other children watched him, they cheered as well.

"Time for pithoo!" they said.

The boy ran with the ball—ran into the distance.

The other children went running after him.

The scene was forgotten, the children had moved on. And there he stood, the shoe-polish boy (the "hero"). He stood by himself.

I emerged from the shadows, I walked towards him.

He saw me—did he recognize me? Some seconds passed.

"I will clean the towel, sir," he said at last. He was referring to the towel he had used to clean the ball. "I will not use it for shoe polish. I will clean it, sir—I will, I will."

"I will, I will." Was I some kind of policeman, some inspector? Did he

have to justify his actions to me?

"My mother was a good woman, sir."

"I know."

"She loved me."

"She did."

"She said that it was important—important to be clean."

In this way the boy spoke—simply, calmly. Was it with passion as well?

His face was small and black. His eyes were small and black. He looked at me—directly he looked.

"Do you have a mother, sir?"

"A mother?"

"Is she good?"

"Good?"

"Does she tell you, sir, tell you to be clean?"

In this way he spoke. On and on he spoke. They were strange words. But he believed in his words. He believed in them, he believed! And was that not the key?

"The ball was dirty, sir—I cleaned it."

"I know."

"I cleaned it, I cleaned it. Did I not do the right thing?"

Clean, clean, how he insisted on that. I tried to explain to the boy—explain about that day. But how far away it seemed. I tried to apologize to him. But how silly it seemed. He knew about the world, he knew what was important—or did he? Did he have time for such things?

"There are good people in the world, sir."

"Good people?"

"There are bad people in the world, sir."

"Bad people?"

"My mother was a good person. The sir is an important man. Is he a good person as well?"

"There are wise people in the world, sir."

"Wise people?"

"My mother was a wise person. The sir is an important man. Is he a wise person as well?"

In this way he spoke. On and on he spoke. He spoke with pride. He spoke with feeling. Was it with insolence as well?

It was twilight now, the sun was beginning to set. Soon it would get dark (but did the boy care?). There was a reason for his words (what reason?). There was a meaning to his words (what meaning?).

"My mother was a wise person. The sir is an important man. Is he a wise person as well?"

In this way he spoke. On and on he spoke. The minutes passed. Perhaps, at last, the boy grew tired. Perhaps, at last, he had exhausted himself. He looked at me, he smiled. He looked at me, he stared. Then he bowed. He picked up his things—his shoe-polish kit, his old green towel. With such purpose he picked them up, with such concentration. And he continued on his way.

Bangor, Pennsylvania: SOS

by Sean Prentiss

When a girl likes a boy in Bangor, Pennsylvania
She never asks him on a date. Instead, our girl waits (waits)
For the boy to ask her out, stammering. Then she says, quietly,
We can go to the prom because she knows the moment she whispers
The slightest interest, the boy (with blond hair and a slight build)
Will fly—that is what boys do in towns built on brittle rock.

After the dancing, the sugary punch, and some other girl
Being crowned—in the prom parking lot, the boy leans in. And our girl,
She knows boys from Bangor, so she kisses with tongue and hard
Though it's a first date because all the boys talk about is that mechanics job
with benefits and how, after a year, he can buy that '87 Mustang
With the V8 engine. And our girl wants nothing more than to ride shotgun.

So she lets the boy's desperate tongue click against her teeth
As if he's tapping out some Morris code: SOS.

American Dating Scene: $1 Menu

by Micheal Dubon

Man with faux-hawk & muscle shirt
and woman, bleached blonde wearing a Britney T,
walk into the restaurant, grease floating in the air,
glancing at each other nervously and imagining
future power plays. Neither knows who should pay,
only a few dollars of effort to put in on both sides,
the taxing, an afterthought.
McChickens hide their affections, artificial, in plastic
like the spoils of dipping sauces
they ask for after ordering; the rancid ranch she coats her breath
with and the sticky honey mustard he gets glued
to his fingers.

As they sit and eat in the hard yellow seats,
he asks, "How's your double cheeseburger?"
"It tastes like the oily sex
that will be the basis of our relationship,"
she says with a piece of bun falling out of her mouth.
"I forgot to buy fries," he leaves her
for a moment to her thoughts. *He's gonna leave me here,*
just like in the future and I'll act like a bitch
because that's simply part of the wrapping
that covers intimacy.

He returns, and she intentionally cries.
She grabs a fry and dresses it in her tear.
He grabs a plastic knife, gives himself a tiny cut
and dips a fry in the blood.
They lift the potato strips in their hands towards the other's mouth.
"The ketchup I'll bleed for you," he says.
"The saline I'll cry for you," she says,
as they place them on one another's tongues.
The dance of liquid salt and copper tomato,
coating fries that get lodged in the throat of the courter and courted,
leaving them with only choked and misinterpreted messages
to escape through their apple-pie-holes.

They depart hand-in-hand, looking back
at where they'll be tomorrow, going home
to deep-fry another,
knowing there's never nuggets of advice offered in this scene,
just all-fake-white-meat, empty calories.

The Teenage Couple Who Has Sex in a Slasher Flick

by Nathan Graziano

What in Hell possessed them to screw
in the cabin's one bunk bed, two friends dead
in the tool shed, and another's severed head
left as a centerpiece on the card table
littered with beer cans in the living room?

They're surrounded by senseless slaughter,
an un-medicated psychopath in a hockey mask
prowling the campground like a condom vendor,
waiting for the first hint of a bare breast
or pot smoke to exact his pointless wrath.
Still, the teenage couple can't fight the need
to shed their tank tops and cut-off denim shorts
and wind their lithe bodies in sweaty coitus.

Of course, the second she straddles his lap,
he's impaled—a human kebob—by a fishing spear
jammed through the mattress on the top bunk.
The killer hops down and grabs the girl,
naked with blood on her boobs, screaming
until the nut in a hockey mask snaps her neck
and tosses her to the cabin floor before searching
for more teenagers dumb enough to dare to get laid
on Crystal Lake, where the sign clearly reads: *Keep out.*

Your Kiss Usually Means Some of It

by Caitlin Thomas

For Shaun

Your kiss usually means some of it.
Like, usually 60% at least.

When we first met, we were at 50%.
Both our bodies permitting access
Like security guards
In shitty, outdoor malls.

Then we fell into a rabbit hole,
And it was dark.
We were at 90%,
Not knowing who we were,
We used our hands for holding
Familiarity,
And our eyes, like cameras,
Taking shots that belonged
In shitty, downtown galleries.

But last night
Your kiss didn't mean any of it.
You were in the negatives,
And I was positive.
Our legs had out ran our course.

Spring

by Erika Robles

We were by a river on a Sunday,
where people did not want to bother

two kids who looked at each other
like bees looked at flowers.

With your sly smile
and your bright sunny polo shirt,
you called me honey.

Then you leaned forward.

Before I knew my job,

you pulled back
so you could teach me
how to kiss the right way.

I didn't know
if you were leaving pollen,
or if you were taking it.

Summer, 2002

by Meghan L. Bucknell **Third Place Poetry Award**

Sing saccharine sweet through me
courting my ankles to your lap.
A charcoal future of radicals
who easily smudge and burn
the easy bridge—
to escape.

Fuck it if it made our mothers nervous,
brandy in the egg nog, your left arm
and my right, orange badges
of old orchards holding dreams

where kids believe—
in Santa.

Improvised munitions sit zealous
and unassembled. Somewhere down
by my river swing washing away
Happy Birthday wishes
to America—
the doomed.

The whole world
is the back of a knee
unthought-of until brushed up against.
Place this on the treetop
holding hope until—
the 26th.

You see...

by Grant Tierney Dehne

You see,
the problem with Ana
is that she is too literal.

When I tell her,
I never want to leave your skin,
she doesn't get dressed for work.

When I text,
U SMELL GOOD ON MY HANDS,
she stops showering.

And when I encourage with,
I love the way your hair feels
when it's on my belly button,
she spends her days
half-in
half-out of clean and dirty
thoughts.

And my words are meant to be lies.
I don't want to hurt her.
I just want to turn her on,
and let her run,
until the mirror steams
and it's not a shock
to enter.

But she needs to understand
the words I say
are translated through
a filter of jagged teeth;
a siphon of gummy gravestones
backing up the drain
until the suds cake
a ring on the porcelain
and someone flushes
and she curls in the shower
curtain as if
it could protect her
naked body.

Strawberry Heart

by R. L. Kurtz

Just a strawberry
heart tattoo blossoming on her wrist like
a tiny blood-red spider flexing its legs
across rebellious flesh.
Just a sweet girl
moniker meaning darkness, like
Night Shade twisting raven curls
under a pale light across the street—
And taken from the gentle Greek is
Melanie.

Of Piers

by Kymmo Valenton

Loss is a heart drawn in the sand like a mandala,
Or bravery built like a sandcastle,
Too close to the edge of the sea when the tide comes
Slowly washing away every last grain,
Every speck of courage
Built up to walk across the boardwalk
To the end of the pier to look her in the eyes
And smile without an awkward, nervous giggle
To ask her to dance.
Her elegant wrist rests on the old, wooden
Pier guard rail that contrasts
With her soft, creamy hazelnut skin.
Her hair is backlit, gloriously
Set on fire, revealing her radiance.
You are not ready yet and all your plans are sure to fail.
The salt in the air is thick in your throat
As you notice how large the ocean is behind her,
And how high up the planks of wood you're standing on
Rise above the crashing waves,
Loss is yours because you turn away
A few steps from deeper waters.
The wooden boards beneath you creak.

Even Her Name

by Kay Doss

Second Place Poetry Award

Trying to describe Love,
Is the same as trying to describe
the taste of water,
the novel began,
but the supposed difficulty
was lost on me.

I sat up on the beach towel
and peered over my sunglasses
toward Naida as she climbed
out of the corner of the pool.

Water tastes,
like the chlorine, carmex kisses
Naida offered me when we glided
just below the surface
of the pool this morning.
Her palm
up the small of my back,
the feel
of the blue nail, on the pale finger
searching beneath my panties
gave me
an insatiable thirst.
Scarlet hair fanned out in every direction
combined with her impermeable makeup
made her look like a Water Nymph,
thus her name's meaning,
tucked her head in the curve of my neck.

Love is like water;
you need it to survive,
she giggled the cliche in my ear,
glossed lips pressed just above it sending
chills down my spine.
She took the book
from my hands,
and gave me water.

As If

by Suzanne Roberts

You fell into her,
where the world
balances its light
and shadow.
As if it happened
in your sleep,
and you were peering
out a small crack
in the window
to a corner
of wind-feathered sea.
Like the sun, submerged
in a wet horizon—
the red after.
Just out of sight,
but you can't
pull your eyes
from the absence.
Still looking,
not seeing.

Flak

by Tim Dickerson **First Place Fiction Award**

James pressed the pen down hard on the paper and held it there to let the ink pool up a bit, prolonging the inevitable. He looked across the table into Helens eyes. They were cold eyes, dull and stripped of emotion, a look he knew all too well. Reluctantly he asked, "Are you absolutely sure?"

The vacant stare directed at James was her only remark. James's eyes focused back onto the paper. The room was silent accept for James' pen scratching his signature.

"Well it looks like this divorce is final then. I'll have my office send over your copies." Helen's attorney Doyle Lampard stood up and gently pressed his index finger on the paper, lightly sliding it across the smooth finish of the oak table. Doyle was a short balding man whose ego grew with every paycheck. James felt Doyle represented a perfect depiction of the corruption and greed which plagued America. He hated this kind of man, he could almost smell his arrogance. After neatly placing the paperwork into a folder he offered a handshake to James. James's large hand engulfed Doyle's petite fingers. James slowly squeezed until the pain grew too much for Doyle. "Ahh! What the hell's your problem?" Doyle exclaimed. James offered a half smile to Doyle. Helen couldn't get out of her chair fast enough. She gave off a sigh of annoyance as she clutched her handbag. She refused to make eye contact with her previous husband while Doyle escorted her out of the room. Helen was moving on with her life and spending another moment with James was last on her to-do list. Again the room fell silent as James listened to the scamper of feet walking down the hallway. He felt as if the last seventeen years of his life was taken from him and a piece of himself was somehow missing. With his heart rate elevated, James' mind did what it always did when he was tense. He focused on objects in his surrounding and counted them by threes. Once he found three objects he connected them with an imaginary line until a triangle was formed. He did this exercise for several minutes until his mind was clear: clear of Helen and her prick-face attorney, clear of the messy divorce, and finally clear of his inner voice. He reached into his pocket until his fingers grasped the familiar round shape. He opened the tin and carefully placed a pinch of tobacco in his bottom lip. Satisfied for the moment, James stood up and made his way to the door. With each step, his steel toed boots made a heavy thump on the hard wood floor. He possessed no hope or aspiration for the new world that awaited him.

The next morning James ate his scrambled eggs straight out of the skillet instead of using a plate. He pictured Helen's reaction and thought how she would shit a brick if she saw him do this at home. He took comfort in this moment and a slight smirk grew on his face. After finishing his meal, James placed the large skillet into the sink. He turned the water on and held his finger underneath the stream patiently awaiting the ar-

rival of hot water. He filled the skillet and left it there. James then went back to the table and sat down in the lone chair positioned at the head of the table. He carefully unfolded a large piece of yellow paper. The seams of which were so worn out by the constant attention it almost appeared ancient. The top of the paper read:

Check List

The list was almost complete, just few of the larger items toward the bottom remained. After making some minor adjustments to the list he then made sure all his camping supplies where accounted for. Fishing gear, flint and striker, MRE's, a small tarp, 50' of strong rope, 10' of snare rope, a first aid kit, a water purification kit and some small comfort items. Packing light was essential for where he was heading. Next, James unfolded an Idaho trail map. The map had his route outlined in red pen. The challenge was making it from San Francisco to Idaho, undetected. He just needed to get north to Twin Falls; if he could make it there safe, the rest was a cinch. He would simply ditch his vehicle and disappear without a trace. From there it was just a matter of following the Snake River into Washington where it met up with the Columbia River, and then he could make his way into Canada. Being a former Marine sniper, James was confident he possessed the knowledge and will power that he could survive almost anywhere in the world. It would be the better part of one thousand miles of semi-rough terrain until he reached his destination. He figured this trek would take him a couple of months to accomplish. If the weather turned for the worse, he could always hitchhike for a couple hundred miles, but that in itself brought on a whole new set of problems. Escaping reality and parting with the world as James new it required meticulous detail, the wrong move could cost him his freedom. He knew his planning had to be precise.

James's cell phone began to chirp and vibrate on the table. James let out an aggravated sigh as he picked up the phone. He hated technology simply for one reason, he could not get a firm grasp of it, nor did he want to. James was stubborn that way. He despised the chirping ringtone his phone made. It reminded him of a terrible attempt to imitate a quail, but computerized with a high pitched robotic squeak. Most of all James hated the fact that he had no clue of how to change it. "Hello," James said.

"Hello, is this James McCoy?"

"Ya, you got him."

"Hi there, Mr. McCoy. My name is Stan Olson and I represent Goldman and Flanders. I'm calling to inform you of your obligation to our client. The settlement in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars has been finalized, and, however, we will not actually be collecting on the loan. That's a different company all together. We are simply informing you of your commitment to our client."

"Commitment?"

"Well, contract to our client. Our records show that your next paycheck should be arriving in about five days. Is that correct Mr. McCoy?"

"Ya, tell Helen she'll get her money. Are we through here?"

"Well, not quite Mr. McCoy." James pressed the end button on his phone and slammed it down on the table before the caller could respond. The thought of paying Helen that kind of money for no good reason was absolutely criminal on all accounts. She didn't deserve his money, especially after all the sacrifices he made for her. The idea of Helen and her new boyfriend living in the house that his hands built absolutely infuriated James. He would rather burn it to the ground than pay their mortgage. In one swift motion, James scooped up the cell phone and hurled it across the room. The phone exploded against the opposing brick wall as pieces shattered in every direction. James looked at the multiple pieces of broken plastic and realized how that annoying cell phone mimicked his broken life. Determined, James immediately clothed himself and headed out the door with his check list in hand.

After running his errands James made his way home. As he pulled into the parking lot of his new apartment complex, he could not help to noticed how deprived the community was. A complete lack of care for their surroundings accompanied by no sense of nationalism or community was more than present. The furrowed eyebrows on the young boy's faces that stood on the corner day after day and night after night said everything to James. In his flannel shirt and Wrangler jeans James stood out in this part of town. However, James never ran into any kind of trouble, due to that fact that he weighed well over two hundred pounds and towered over most. Upon entering his musky smelling studio James set the two plastic bags on the lone kitchen table that made up the bulk of his home furnishing. He pulled out two boxes of 12 gauge Federal Premium shotgun shells and emptied the contents into a large zip-lock bag. Next, James opened a plain cardboard box, no bigger than a shoe box. Inside sat a 15mm CO2 hypodermic tranquilizer pistol. He pulled off the plastic wrapping and studied the gun. He held the pistol in his hand to get a feel of the size and weight of the weapon. The pistol only fired one dart at a time. After a dart was fired the breach needed to be opened before another dart was chambered into the weapon. The slow fire rate of the gun worried James; this was not at all efficient. When the time came, he knew he would have to be calm and precise. Flashes of Vietnam suddenly overwhelmed his mind: the training on hill 55, the endless hours of patiently waiting before a target was eliminated, drinking beers and playing cards with the guys, vicious screams of women, the beautiful sunsets over the rice fields, the sharp elephant grass, the eyes of the enemy fading into a distant gaze and then there was Stone, all James saw was Stone. His lifeless body still sitting down just the way he had fallen asleep. The dark blood that made its way down his chest from the wound on his neck. "Stone..." James said quietly, softly. His thick lips quivered for a split second before coming together.

1st Lieutenant Glen McMullen was James's sniping spotter and after two tours in Vietnam, his best friend. He received the name "Stone" on

the training grounds by none other than Captain Jim Land. Captain Land was running a drill on hill 55 where the men would crawl through the grass slowly towards him, if spotted they were eliminated. From an elevated position with binoculars in hand, Captain Land would call the men out by name when he spotted them. Most of the men didn't last more than twenty minutes. An hour and fifty minutes into the exercise, Glen McMullen was the last man on the training field and eventually had to stand up to be spotted. Afterward, Captain Land said, "He was like a stone out there," and the name stuck.

Stone was a gentleman in every sense of the word. A political science graduate from Georgetown University, Stone was something of a contradiction when compared to the rest of the Devil Dogs in his unit. He was a democrat that enlisted in the Marine Corps by his own free will. James felt the upmost admiration for Lieutenant Stone and their partnership was not only pleasant, it flourished. As both men were from Irish ancestry they were nicknamed the "Mc's." Although derogatory, the name didn't bother the two men and in a short time grew into a glorified term. Their impeccable record in the field made the two somewhat of celebrities in the service. When a commanding Officer said, "We're bringing in the Mc's for this one," morale throughout the ranks instantly increased. Their popularity also increased with the Vietcong. For their entire second tour, both men had large bounties on their heads. Spending endless hours together, James saw Stone more as a brother than a friend.

It was a Friday, the last day of a five day work week for James, more significantly, the last normal eight hour shift he would put in for the rest of his life. James was a veteran employee for Dunbar Security Services. For the last eleven years he collected a steady pay check twice a month and was one of the companies most trusted and valued employees. James spent his shift driving the streets of San Francisco as an in-transit armored truck driver. Fourteen stops collecting the goods of fourteen different banks and his shift was complete. However, today was going to be different. James needed a practice run to make sure every facet of his plan was covered, he couldn't afford any slip-ups.

As usual, James was the first one in the truck that morning. He slowly sipped his coffee while letting the truck warm up, a ritual he did everyday waiting for the other two guards to accompany him. The passenger door opened, and there stood Thomas Rooney. A tall and slender man at the ripe old age of fifty-three years, Thomas was a retired cop who became bored with his life away from work. Thomas smiled as he said, "You got the goods?" James slid a small plastic container across the seat of the truck towards Thomas. "Nice," Thomas exclaimed as he grabbed the metal handle attached to the door frame and pulled himself up into the truck.

"Where's Grey?" James said.

"Haven't seen him." Thomas opened the container of handmade flies in excitement. "Hey are these the ones you were telling me about?"

"Yup. The yellow ones work wonders. The fish think they're the real thing." Being an outdoorsman, James picked up the hobby of hand tying his own flies for fishing. Throughout the years his skill grew to produce an exceptional creation of realistic flies. In his latest creation, he mastered a fly that looks almost identical to a yellow jacket. Three loud pounds thumped the back of the truck. James glanced to his side mirror just in time to see Grey emerge from the rear of the truck. With his belly protruding to the limits of his uniform, Grey was in no shape for confrontation. That's exactly why he was assigned to the back of the truck. He managed to find the only job on the planet that required nothing, he just had to sit and wait. Grey made his way to the driver side door as James rolled down the window. "Stick em up," Grey said, holding his finger out in the shape of a gun.

"All we got is flash lights and cotton balls," James replied.

"Mmm, let me get my lube." He gave James a little wink, then turned around. As he made his way to the back of the truck a tainted smile filled his face. James flipped a toggle switch next to his right knee, and the back door popped open a quarter inch.

"His brain is fucking polluted. I don't know why you provoke him." Thomas was shaking his head in disgust, still fiddling with the files. The back door slammed and two thuds on the cold metal that separated the cab from the back gave James the go-ahead to put the truck in gear.

"And we're off," James said, tipping his cap.

The route went normal in the sense that all the correct stops were made and James seemed to be doing his job as usual. James was a little more quite today, not that Thomas noticed, but James' brain was on the heist. At each stop James would calculate how much cash Thomas would lug in the back of the truck. He figured nine stops would yield somewhere around eight hundred thousand dollars. However, this was a Friday and because some branches are opened on Saturdays James figured that number could significantly go up. Due to trucks not running on the weekends, Mondays were always the heaviest day of the week, and that's exactly when James would strike. While waiting for Thomas at stop number nine on the corner of Fell and Broderick, James studied the parking lot to the west. It was the location of the old DMV. Now vacant, the building remained empty for several months. James thought he read somewhere that the city was making it a children's center. This vacant lot would be the scene of James' crime; this is where it would all go down. James envisioned a smooth plan. He would pull into the empty lot, shoot Thomas with the tranquilizer gun then radio to Grey that something was wrong with Thomas. He would reload the gun, pop the back and put Grey down. He would be over the bridge before anyone knew what was going on. Movement in his peripheral vision caught James' attention. He saw Thomas at the back of the truck. James reached down and popped the door for him. As Thomas climbed back into the cab he said, "Nine down, five left."

"Ya. Hey, what are they doing with that?" James pointed across Thomas to the vacant lot.

"Um. Something for the kids I think." Thomas said with an unsure tone, while both men stared at the empty parking lot. James could see his future crime being perfectly executed from this angle. It was as if he was watching a movie.

"Wanna go fishing tomorrow?" Thomas said.

"Yup," said James, still staring out the window. Both continued to gaze at the empty lot, almost hypnotized.

On Monday morning James sat in the truck, sipping his coffee while the anticipation of the day ahead increased. Waiting for Thomas, he heard the familiar thumps of Grey on the back door. Without looking, James popped the door. A couple of minutes went by before Thomas opened the passenger door. Thomas climbed in with a thud and let out a sigh of exhaustion. James put the truck in gear and eased out. "Hey. What about Grey?" Thomas said as he touched James's shoulder.

"He's already in."

"Well how the fuck did that fat ass beat me here?" Thomas looked over at James with a stern look before both men let out a chuckle. James thought of how he would miss the talks with Thomas and even miss seeing Grey five times a week. As James made his way down the street he felt a surge of anxiety run through his body. He felt as if this was his first day driving the truck and he was being evaluated somehow.

"Three." James said quietly.

"Huh, what's three?"

"What?"

"You said three." Thomas replied. James looked at Thomas then back to the road. He shrugged his shoulders and was quite for a couple of seconds.

"You know how I never talk about Nam?" James said, looking straight out the windshield, with a more serious tone.

"Ya," Thomas said, hesitating and unsure of what was to come.

"Well, now's your chance. You can ask me anything." Thomas's eyes immediately lit up. He didn't know where this was coming from, but he didn't care either. With his mouth open for a good two seconds before he spoke, he finally said.

"You were a sniper right?" All these years in the truck without a single conversation about Vietnam, Thomas wasn't about to waste this moment. He had a thousand questions to ask James, maybe more.

"Ya," James said, nodding his head lightly.

"How many kills?" Thomas was already thinking of his next question.

"46 confirmed," James said. He paused then squinted his eyes. "But there were more."

"You kill anybody important, you know, high up?" Thomas was like a kid in a candy store. Sitting next to a Vietnam hero for so many years and not being able to talk about it was torture to him. James went quiet for a couple of seconds, and then he nodded his head forward a few times before he spoke, as if he was in agreement with himself.

"There was this night. We made it to a make-shift base behind enemy lines. There must have been about thirty Marines stationed there. Stone

and I were coming back from a four-day mission, and that was the closest place to get picked up. We were all heading out the next morning, back to base for a little time off."

"Stone?" Thomas said.

"Ya, Stone. That was my partner, my sniping spotter. Anyway, the chopper was picking us up the next morning about a click south of our location. We couldn't wait to get back. Stone and I ate everything that night." James let out a little laugh followed by a smirk as if he was right there, reliving the moment. "Being a sniper, you can't eat most stuff. The oils of the food escape from the pours in your skin and the enemy can smell that, you better believe they can. Can't take showers either, there's all kinds of stuff we couldn't do. But that night, there were no rules. We ate anything we could get our hands on. Man, I woke up around 2am with the shits, I kid you not. I grabbed some T.P. and headed off into the woods. Never had food run through me like that my whole life. I must have been gone for the better part of twenty minutes. Anyway, when I got back to camp I heard something. Feet moving around and what-have-you. I caught a glimpse of someone run through camp, I couldn't tell who it was. All I could see were shadows; they were moving this way and that. Immediately I hit the ground, because I knew something was off. I mean when I left no one was up, now all this commotion. I crawled through the bush a little closer, you know, to get a better look." Thomas nodded at James, his eyes as wide as golf balls.

"Man, there must have been ten or fifteen of 'em, Vietcong. They were sneaking around the camp butt ass naked. The only thing they had were their knifes."

"Wait! They were naked?" Thomas said. Not understanding the strange turn in the story.

"Ya. Can't hear em that way. Fuckers used to do it all the time. They're like little naked fucking ninjas out there. Anyway, in the twenty or so I was gone, they managed to cut the throats of every man in that camp. Not a single shot was fired, not a single man even made it to his weapon. All of 'em, sliced ear to ear. There wasn't a fucking thing I could do. I just lay there and watched them ravage the camp. Then off into the night like ghosts. I didn't even have my gun on me." James was shaking his head now. He was pale in the face, but emotionless, as if the story was told to him and he was just relaying it.

"Shit," Thomas said. The truck was completely silent for the next block until James pulled over to stop number one. Still silent, Thomas hopped out of the truck and made his way to the bank. James didn't want to talk of Nam or that night. He didn't sleep well as is, the last thing he needed was to replay it in the day. James knew if he took Thomas someplace dark, he would be less likely to ask James more questions about Nam. James was also not himself today. With his anxiety through the roof James didn't want Thomas to know anything was up.

The rest of the day Thomas was less talkative; he mostly stared out the passenger window and made small talk here and there. James' plan had worked and for all Thomas knew James was still thinking of that horrible

night in Vietnam. James turned left on Broderick St. and pulled up to the curb.

"Five left after this one." James said, with a smile on his face. Thomas smiled back and climbed down from the cab. James knew he would miss his partner; he always got matched up with the best. His brain was uncertain, it bounced all over: Helen, his sweaty palms, plugging Thomas with the gun, Stone, fishing, driving to Idaho. James thought of the consequences of his actions, he wondered if he would be alive by the time he got out of prison. Thomas was already at the back of the truck, he knocked on the door. James jumped in his seat and snapped back into reality. He reached down and popped the door for Thomas, the last honest thing he would do for his partner. Thomas climbed back into the cab.

"You okay?" Thomas said.

"Ya, I'm fine." James looked over at Thomas and smiled lightly. He put the truck in gear and pulled out. Immediately James turned right into the empty lot.

"What are you doing?" James eyes were looking past Thomas as he gave a nod to look out the window. Thomas turned to his right. "Isn't that your truck?" Thomas was pointing out the window to the lone truck in the empty lot. James already had the pistol out, pointing it at Thomas, waiting for him to turn his head. One last look from the best partner an armored truck driver could ever want. To himself, James uttered words he hadn't said in over twenty years.

"Hail Mary, full of Grace. The Lord is with thee…"

Corpsman

by Michael P. McManus

The shrink at the VA hospital in Shreveport
calls me capillary because I carry blood.
I call her my hit-and-run mistress who sees me once a month,
at which time I like to undress her with my eyes
until glasses are all that's left.
This was the invisible man's downfall
when he was hiding from the world.
Mine is the headless PFC
whose wife was eight months pregnant with twins,
or the wide-eyed disbelief on the face
of the Irish kid from Jersey,
who knelt clutching the front of his throat
inches above his Kevlar.
He tried to dam the bleeding,
but the blood kept leaping through his fingers
like salmon on their way to spawn.
It's PTSD and IEDs and collateral damage.
It's remembering how you jerked off
in your rack three weeks into your deployment
the night before the morning
you treated your first sucking chest wound.
And don't forgot the laser-guided smart bomb,
which earned an F-minus on the afternoon
the Gunny called you over to the rubble.
Hey, Doc, what's this? he asked and pointed—
That night in dreams the girl's body was my little sister,
her bloody grin thankful for democracy,
while we snuggled on the couch watching SpongeBob.
Now my sister the shrink asks what I'm thinking
and I want to tell her about earlier this morning
in physical therapy, how beautiful it was
with so much sunlight streaming through the windows
when I took my prosthetic leg in for its tune-up.
Two tables down were two men—one old and one young—
sitting opposite each other. And everything mortal
seemed a passage between them; that awakening
in our lives when we realize we are born to die.
Sixtyish, moustached, the older man wore a gray ponytail
down his back like a poor man's version of David Crosby.
The younger one's head was shaved clean like a Zen Master,
and his Koan was the pink jagged scar behind the ear.
Soon it turned into a garish exclamation point

at the end of his sentence which I kept trying to rewrite
so it would read neither man held a guitar.
No use because memory is ever mindful of its place
in the here-and-now. The guitars stayed.
Crosby played the way we fall in love
for the first time. Do you remember
becoming conscious of and falling into it
like some beautiful reflection
to which you were suddenly beholden?
Many times I wanted to hold it in my hands
so I could take it someplace quiet to ask it questions—
do you discover love, or does it discover you?
Another kind of discovery was taking place
with the young man and his guitar.
A special grief seemed to master the moments
he tried to find whatever truth he needed.
But a season of small deaths arrived each time
he struggled to find the right chord
with fingers now changed to crab claws.
What is the terminal velocity of the human heart
before it signs a truce to love no more?
Had I reached my terminal velocity?
The PT told me the young man was shot
by a sniper in Iraq and learning to play guitar
was one way used to help regain motor skills.
Penetrating craniocerebral trauma without an exit wound,
I thought, and thought, and thought...
until the familiar voice was wanting to know
what I was thinking, again. Cymbal-clash,
trumpet-blare, the lone harmonica playing taps
in that moment of terrible things.
Always that orchestra plays in the background.
I wanted to tell her how that terrifying music sounds
when I listen to the many albums that I own.
And I wanted to play all my guitars for her.
But I won't.

Fuel Guard

by Jerry D. Mathes II

It's a joke, standing with a small fire
extinguisher and an assortment
of hand-tools designed for prying
and hacking trapped people
from the wreckage
of a helicopter after *what we call*
a hard landing, when you stand less
than 25 yards off the nose. In full view
of the pilot I imagine her face,
the look of *oh shit, it's all over*
and the aircraft balls up,
4000 pounds of Jet-A bursting
in a cloud of flame
laced with carbon fiber and metal.
How still in that split second
before my eyes fry
our eyes lock. I know
she believes I'm going to survive
and cross the blasted pad to rescue her,
but I'm too close to the fire to save myself.

Pulaski

by Jerry D. Mathes II

The file rasps against the edge
raining metal dust
filling my gloves' pores and creases.

The a combination tool, an axe
to chop roots
or fell small trees and a hoe

to scrape away the duff and grass,
sparking rocks hidden
in the dirt to halt the fire as it rolls

over the mountain, blowing flame
down canyons
or to lean on for a breath. The tool

is named after the crew boss, who
during the 1910 Big Blow-up,
held his crew at gunpoint in a mineshaft

as fire seared the forest. Some men
trembled in the dark, wanting
to run like bears from a den at the howl

of the hunter's hounds. Pulaski blocked
the passage and his men survived
the freight of smoke and heat above ground.

I'll keep this tool sharp and free of rust
so that if fire ever burns me over,
the investigators will find the surviving steel
head and comment on its fine condition.

On the Move

by Jerry D. Mathes II

When hiking up a steep mountain
or over a long trail of broken ground,
I like to hum old marching songs.

Momma, Momma can't you see
what the Forest Service done to me.

I raise and lower each foot in cadence
swaying my arms gripping a fire tool:
a pulaski, a shovel, a combi, a McCleod
or the power saw slung over the shoulder,
smelling of slashed timber, brush and grass

like a wine aged in a cask of hardwood
still nuanced with mixed gas and bar oil
that keeps the chain unbound,
humming in the friction of heat and steel.

The Hammers

by David Shattuck

If after you read this, the snow
still squats in low places of the field,
in the shadows at the wood's edge,
then maybe winter is a lion
eating its young. I mean to say I am
hammering out a pretext for war.
I should start over. If after the snow

falls, then the sunlight, then the bare
shoulders of the neighbor's eldest girl,
seek evidence of Spring in the fields.
I mean to say all the young men leave
for other continents. The snow doesn't catch
on. I'm hammering out the details.

You will read this and remember
how we loved each other and the soldiering life.
How the snow falls in mountains
without names. How, after all of this,
our fathers would wait in their long coats
for our return: we hammers of fortune,
we lost, we bloodied, at last come home.

"Addicted to Listening:"

Mark Maynard's interview with Alyson Hagy

Photo by Ted Brummond

Alyson Hagy was raised on a farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. She is a graduate of Williams College and the MFA Program at the University of Michigan. Hagy is the author of seven books including the story collection *Ghosts of Wyoming* (Graywolf Press, 2010) and the forthcoming novel *Boleta* (Graywolf Press, 2012). Her work has been published in a number of journals and magazines, including *Ploughshares, Shenandoah, Virginia Quarterly Review* and the *New York Times Magazine*. Her fiction has also been recorded for National Public Radio. Hagy has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Christopher Isherwood Foundation. Her short stories have been awarded a Nelson Algren Prize, a Pushcart Prize, and been included in the Best American Short Stories series. Hagy currently lives in Laramie, Wyoming and teaches at the University of Wyoming. Recent interests include collaborations with visual artists, microfictions, interviews with workers in the energy industries, hiking, camping, and stealthy fly-fishing.

Mark Maynard: The stories in *Ghosts of Wyoming* all have a very strong sense of place and a strong sense of character – each seems to mirror the other. How do you observe not only the people you write about, but also the places they inhabit – and how do you get both into your stories so vividly?

Alyson Hagy: I've been thinking of character and place in tandem for so long that I rarely separate them in my mind. I think it comes from growing up in rural Virginia in a culture that marked you immediately by who you were (your mother, your father, your kinfolk for generations) and where you were from (every crossroads had a name, every building had a long, story-filled history). The people I grew up among were, many of them, as tied to the land they lived on as they were tied to their relatives. That's not so true in suburban America, where the specific connections to land—what you can grow on it, what livestock will thrive on it—are not central to peoples' lives. I guess I became used to hearing people speak in a language that linked them to place. Talk about drought and flood, frost and fungus, tobacco prices, milk prices—those are the stories I absorbed.

When I moved to the West, I found people who had transferred that kind of connection to the land with them as they moved to Wyoming from other places. Character is destiny, right? Well, the character of the place where you build your life can also influence your choices, your values, your passions. That's really the only business writers are in if you think about it—listening, watching, chronicling human passions.

I'm addicted to listening. And I ask a lot of questions. Most folks are very willing to talk about what excites them.

MM: Many of your stories in the collection invoke a sense of characters being haunted by a collective past. What makes Wyoming particularly prone to ghosts/ghost stories?

AH: I guess I'd say that every place that has suffered a couple of decades of human habitation is prone to ghost stories. We like ghost stories—as much as they unsettle us. Wyoming has been home to European settlers for only about 170 years. That's not very long, so the stories out here seem shallow to me, and many of them are borrowed from other places. Wyoming (and the rest of the American West) is also a place people have been attracted to as a place to "start over." I guess I don't think we really get to start over with completely clean slates. Our heritage follows us. Our crimes. Our prejudices. And sometimes those things won't leave us alone no matter how much we want them to. Several of the ghosts in the book are linked to famous crimes committed in the state—lynchings and murders that people still argue about to this day. Why can't we put some stories to rest? Why are certain injustices so hard to swallow? I'm really

interested in those questions.

The West, of course, is also haunted by the removal/extermination of the indigenous people who were here before those of us who hail from Europe became so interested in gold or cheap land or "clean slates." I've been told a lot of ghost stories that link American Indian and settler communities. Why are those stories handed down and preserved? What are the lessons there?

MM: In "How Bitter the Weather" a character observes her police officer friend: "there are crescent bruises under Cole's hazel eyes. They've been there since a gay man was pistol-whipped to death on the prairie outside town." Is this your response to the Matthew Shepard murder and its far-reaching effects on Wyoming and the entire country?

AH: Yes. I wanted to write a story set in Laramie during the gloomy aftermath of Matt Shepard's murder. I couldn't find a way to write about the murder directly. And it didn't seem like a story that was mine to tell. But a friend of mine said that she thought that Westerners were actually harder on outsiders or strangers than they claimed to be, that Matt was the kind of man who was easily marginalized in this part of the country. I began to think about the other unmoored, unsupported men I'd seen in Wyoming, and I started to think about small town hospitality, whether it was a myth or not. There aren't easy answers to my questions, of course. But writing about Armand allowed me to think about how we often miss opportunities to care for one another. There is a lot of suicide in the West. We let too many folks slip through the cracks. And the cracks are big ones.

MM: Some of the impressions of rural Wyoming seem to be snapshots of America at large: one of the characters enviously describes those "whom have moved on to towns with better football teams and restaurants." Do you see American regionalism as a wholly unique experience, or is the country becoming more homogenized?

AH: The country is much more homogenized than it was 40 years ago, or even 10 years ago. The way we link ourselves together is shared and universal in many, many ways. But there are some things you can't change. You can't make the high plains any wetter or less wind-whipped. You can't lower the mountain passes. You can't keep hurricanes from slamming islands and coastal regions on the continent. You can't make every place on the continent easy to live in. The cities in this region—Albuquerque, Denver, Salt Lake, Boise—are all dynamic and interesting places, and perhaps they are starting to look more like Dallas or Sacramento or Pittsburgh than they used to. But those cities are changing as they have always changed, via immigration. So new regional flavors are being developed. Always. There are still many places in America where landscape and weather have an upper hand, I think. And there's still a lot of

odd diversity in the rural margins of the nation and in our cities. If I were a different writer, I'd see the odd diversity in the suburbs and planned communities. It's certainly there. For me, human endeavor is all grist for the mill. So many individuals with their quirks and defeats and achievements, so little time to write about them.

MM: The stories focus on many careers (cowboys, missionaries, newspaper reporters, railroad men) that are becoming obsolete or rare in our modern world. What does this say about the character of small western towns? Is a fiction writer engaged in an occupation that will also be increasingly rare?

AH: I actually think that storytellers are in a growth industry. Stories—the narratives that knit us together—are in higher demand than ever. Americans crave narrative. We like beginnings, middles, and ends. We like resolution to our conflicts—clean, upbeat resolutions. And we become anxious when our national narratives (like the Iraq War) don't have clean endings. I love to listen to people tell one another stories. That impulse hasn't weakened a bit. Folks may not be reading as much as they once did, but they are still talking to one another via stories. There's also no doubt that I like to write about working people. I like people who have physical jobs. I like people who have to go out into the world and do things with their hands. I like people who are passionate about their work, even if they are hanging onto that passion by their fingertips.

MM: There is a strong theme regarding outsiders that runs through the stories. Where do you think that sense of not-belonging somewhere comes from?

AH: All of the fiction I'm drawn to features outsiders, so I'm not conscious of that trend in my work. I'm not sure I would know how to write about an "insider," though some people have done it well. The West is filled with people who have come here to remake themselves, to start over, to change the focus of their lives, to succeed in some American way that seems important to them. I am fascinated by that impulse. I am drawn to people who strive in places where striving is difficult. They seem to want to be outsiders—independent cusses—even as they want to be accepted for their pursuit of some kind of monumental American dream. There's a powerful contradiction embedded in those two wants.

MM: In "Brief Lives of the Trainmen," the roles of the railroad workers are something that one might encounter in a brief summary on a display in a county museum anywhere out west. Yet your characterizations bring them to concrete life and give them depth. Describe the research that you did for this story (and others in the collection) and how you've humanized that history.

AH: That story began with a photograph. I'd never seen a work train be-

fore. The photo depicted the engine, a few of the cars (each one rigged up for a specific purpose), and a ragtag crew that was so diverse in dress and ethnicity and demeanor that I couldn't help but imagine a story. How did all those people end up in the same place? How did they manage to live together in such an odd, transient community? I often do significant research for my fiction, but it's usually not formal research. I read. I poke around. I visit small museums, read local histories, collect newspaper articles. I read everything I could find about small railroads, and the stories referred to in "Trainmen" come from oral histories or other documents. There really was a fellow named Boda who hung a card cheat from a wagon tongue. There really was a one-legged Civil War officer who lost at least one fortune at cards. There really was a guy who leased his Victrola to his buddies so they could listen to music. You can't make that stuff up. And you don't really need to. For me, it was enough to evoke the crazy energies that must have infused a work train each and every day. Those people had to live together. They had to make it work. And I like to believe they did it with gusto.

MM: The book starts ("Border") and ends ("The Sin Eaters") with stories about characters on a journey with no clear destination. Why are there so many restless characters in the book?

AH: "Border" seemed to be a good place to start because the young man in that story is running away. He wants to start over after bad things have happened in his household in Wyoming. He wants to begin a new story for himself and the puppy he steals. "The Sin Eaters" is long, so that's a good reason to put it at the end. But Porterfield, the missionary, believes he is heading into the West to save souls. He believes his journey has a very definite—and optimistic—end, just as the boy in "Border" hopes his journey does. Neither of them gets where they are going unscathed. Do any of us get where we hope to go unscathed? Probably not. And America is a restless nation. We are less tied to our pasts than the citizens of other cultures. We tend to move around a lot. I'm a good example of that. I live 2,000 miles from my homeplace.

MM: How important is it to select the right order for short stories in a collection? What was your process in putting the collection together? Did the revisions in one story influence changes in the others?

AH: Order is important in a collection. *Ghosts of Wyoming* is my fourth book of stories. I tried something different this time. I wanted to blend the 19th century stories in with the 20th century stories, and I wanted to separate the darker stories from one another to give the reader some space to absorb those pieces. I like dark stories. But a reader ought to be given space to ebb and flow her way through a book. The revisions didn't really affect the order, although there were lots of revisions. Dozens and dozens. But tone and mood affected which stories I kept in *Ghosts of Wyoming* and which stories I eventually cut out.

A good rule of thumb is that you should begin with a strong piece, change pace with the second piece, and make your third story a very strong one. You should also try to end on a strong note. What happens between the third story and the last one, well, that can get tricky. It certainly did for me. I tried to "lighten" the book up a little with stories like "Superstitions of the Indians" and "Lost Boys." Did that work? I'm still mulling that question over.

MM: I've heard that short story collections are one of the hardest types of creative writing to get published. How do you determine if your characters and narratives belong in a short story or in a longer form such as a novel? What advice do you have for burgeoning writers of short fiction? What about writers that have a collection of short stories – how can they take the individual works and form them into something more cohesive?

AH: Publishers love novels because a novel is easier to package and pitch. It's usually about one thing. So there's still a strong sense that if you want to publish with a New York publisher that you need to write a novel. But the skill sets aren't the same. Some writers are natural novelists. I'm not. I wrote very hard for twelve years before I found an idea that was big enough for me to sustain for 300 pages. I had decided I might never write a novel, that I might never "see" the world in that bigger, panoramic way. And I sort of stopped worrying about it. Then the character who became the narrator of *Keeneland*, my first novel, began to talk to me, and she wouldn't stop, not even after I put her at the center of a short story. So I just plunged into *Keeneland*, and I did it without much of an agenda. A novel about the scrappy characters on the backside of a thoroughbred race track didn't have obvious commercial appeal. I wrote the book because I wanted to write it. That's the key for me. I stick with stories, or novels, because I *have* to, because they gnaw at me. I don't think about markets or money or anything much beyond trying to get the characters down as honestly and complexly as I can.

The publishing world is changing, and I think the changes are exciting. Smaller presses are publishing story collections in a big way. And there are publishers who wish to publish novellas—a form I also adore. So it's an exciting time. None of the doors are closed.

I think you'd find a mix of opinions among editors about what makes a great story collection. Is diversity of style, mood, content, and setting a plus? Or is it better to steep a reader in a group of stories that have shared characters and settings, that read as if they were written as a group? I've assembled both types of books. I can't say that one is better than the other. Emerging writers, however, are probably wise to begin thinking about a book that showcases their voice. Voice is the thing you can't fake. It's the element of your prose that makes you memorable, that insists its way into a reader's mind.

MM: What is your day-to-day writing process? How do you avoid distractions and manage your time to write? How do you split your time between research, writing new material, and revision?

AH: I work every day unless I am teaching. I still tend to give student work priority, and that takes time. But a normal day for me would begin with exercise, followed by 2-3 hours at the desk. Writing first drafts is the hardest for me. It demands focus. So no email, no music, no nothing. Just the blank pages and my notes. After I've spent a couple of hours doing that (and the time flies by), I can attend to other matters. Revision is actually easier for me than the production of a first draft. I can spend hours at revision. I somehow have faith that I can always make a sentence or a paragraph or a scene better. I tend to do my research when I need it. You don't really need that much research for a short story—unless you insist on writing about things like work trains or muleskinners, which I sometimes do. A short story can be very convincing if you get the human behavior down, then support it with some sensory detail—smells, tastes, textures, colors that give your reader a powerful sense of the physical world your characters are in.

Research can be an excuse not to do the hard work that needs to be done on a story or a novel. So I keep that in mind. I make myself sit down. And I'm pretty good about staying off the computer or my phone or whatever. I need to be. Fiction, particularly the labors of writing a novel, is very demanding. And it doesn't wait for you to be ready for it. Fiction comes, and it will go--good stories and good books will leave you—unless you honor it.

Where Have All the Parents Gone (Ebe Ka Nne na Nna No)

by Ifeanyichukwu Onyewuchi

The wind whistled, its sound like the rumbling of tea as it moved easterly, gathering dry sand along the way. A silhouette of a mountain danced on the desert ground as the sun burned irreproachably through the cloudless sky. In the distance, dots glided through the blue backdrop like buoyant specks of dirt in an ocean.

Even as they started their slow descent, the wake of vultures that hovered overhead maintained the pall of the desert village. Suddenly they closed in, tearing downwards with aquiline precision.

On the ground, a lone chameleon stalked through the brushes, approaching the cricket slowly. The untrained talons of a vulture snatched it just as its tongue flicked out for the kill. The chameleon slipped free, but only for a second. A hasty claw caught it in the head and ended its struggle, its left forelimb rent in the ensuing flurry of feathers and claws that followed. The vultures tore it apart.

The most dogged vulture flew off with most of the transmogrified lizard caught in its talons. The others gave chase, breaking up what had been an uncommon hunt. And once again, all was silent.

In just a few hours, the slight breeze had grown into a gust as it traveled, carrying with it the sound of a persistent cough from the eastern direction.

She coughed again, a searing sound that ate into the barren air. As she continued to cough, a rheumatic pain triggered in her back as she bent over and discharged blood-lined mucus from her mouth, the wind arriving just in time to shove the phlegm back into her face. She reached up reflexively to wipe off the reddish green glob but was unbalanced by another cough spasm.

When it ended, she slowly picked herself up, and generously applied the snot as a balm for the graze that had appeared on her left leg from the fall. It would prevent any bleeding and she knew she could not afford to lose any blood. She sighed as she limped back home, The children should not be living here.

Her home was a tiny hut which could barely withstand the ravenous appetite of the weather. Constructed out of thatch and unhealthy wood, it leaned tiredly to the left, as though on its last foot.

In the hut's sun-beaten enclosure, a rag lay abandoned on the floor of beaten earth.

How many times do I have to remind them not to leave their clothes lying around, she asked herself, dropping the ragged shirt on a mat lying in the corner. As she bent over, the white wrapper around her narrow waist, now flecked with dried mucus and blood, came undone. With an expert hand of habit, she retied the wrapper as she simultaneously tried

to revive a fire smoldering underneath a blackened pot sitting in the left corner of the small room.

A troubled look marred her face, transforming it into a pessimistic mask, Very soon, we are going to have to burn Amnogu's doll for firewood. That old mix of wood is the only thing the little child has.

Already, she and the children had torn down chunks of the hut for fire. But she knew that even if they tore it all down, there would only be enough wood for two people to survive the next harmattan. She knew that if something did not happen soon, the next one would kill them all.

~

Every day, she walked the twenty four kilometers to the town outskirts, and gathered as much as she could at the refuse dump. On a good day, she made about twenty arian scavenging for metals, plastic and cans; but normally, she barely made five. The money was meager but she didn't complain; she knew that things could be a lot worse. Besides it was among the trash that she had found the ragged doll that Amnogu so loved.

At the dump, she was part of a crowd of workers that gathered trash in big black polythene bags. When they were done, they hauled the bags over, with the laborious concentration of strongmen at a tournament to the counting center, praying that the scraps they gathered would not tear through the bags.

The man at the counter wore a pious smile on his huge lips to go along with the gold-plated cross around his neck which he toyed with.

She forced herself to look at him as he measured her bag. There was a time when she had been fooled by his smile. Then, she had smiled toothlessly back at him, making small talk and listening as he recited short scriptures from the Bible. But all that changed when she heard from the other workers that he cheated them with the weights. "But how can we prove it," they asked. "None of us can read or write."

Now as she listened to the man preach, all she wanted to do was shove ground pepper up those broad nostrils of his. God punish him!

As she walked back home, with the two five arian notes warming her small breasts, she wondered what the children would eat today.

She knew she was very fortunate to have found a rat two weeks ago. And as if that was not enough luck, the rat was already dead when she found it! Even though she had to fight off, with kerosene drops, the swarm of soldier ants that had begun to work on the rodent's gaunt carcass, she didn't blame them for biting her. After all, meat was a very scarce item.

That day, when she brought back the meat, the children had chattered excitedly, waiting as she spooned the thin soup out for both of them. She sat in a corner of the room, hungry, watching them eat hungrily. She had blamed a diarrhea for her rumbling stomach. But the children were old enough to know that one did not get diarrhea from eating nothing.

They chewed their food slowly, heads down.

And then one of them, Anneki, did a very wild thing: he offered his leftovers to her! There was nothing but a few strands of stringy meat remain-

ing on his plate but she knew how much he loved to lick his plate clean.

"See, I have finished it pata pata," he would say with a happy smile as he held up his broken plate like a plaque.

Knowing all of this, she refused him, smiling wordlessly; she did not trust her mouth to turn down what her shaking head had. With guilty relief, the boy finished up the food, his moldy teeth grazing the sandy plate as he licked it slowly. She had walked out of the mono-roomed hut when her stomach rumbled again.

Unfortunately, the meat had run out yesterday.

She worried about the bleak chances of finding a stray herb to make food with, let alone another rat. To worsen matters, everything was exorbitantly priced in the market and the little money she had been saving was for something else.

Be that as it may, I have to feed the children.

The thought of what would happen if she could not provide for them anymore terrified her. She clenched her fists to calm the tremors running through her body. Her overlarge head swayed ritualistically from side to side in an attempt to quiet the uncomfortable thoughts that presented themselves to her.

Why do you even bother, a voice at the back of her mind taunted. The little ones will go their own way sooner or later. How long do you think they will continue with this pitiful life that you're giving them? You see that look Anneki gets when he hasn't eaten, eh?

The voice tried to woo her, You have a chance to do better you know. All of the other women are doing it, many of them younger than you. You know that they say you get used to it after the first time.

Unconsciously, she considered the possibility. Maybe it really is worth it, she thought. I can provide more for the children and when I add that money to the one I am saving, maybe I can send Anneki and Amnogu to a proper school.

Who knows? Maybe I will even be able to have a few years of rest after that.

The last thought rattled the cages of her mind, causing her to deliberate further, somewhat morbidly, That's probably what they all thought. Some of them do not even know who infected them.

She had heard that the men were not using the free condoms offered to them by the Red Cross.

"Ah ah how I go take enjoy am if I dey wear that thing? Na you go give me new one if this una rubber chop my tongolo? Una don come with this your oyibo talk," they argued.

To worsen matters, she had grown up with most of the girls who were now dying of the disease.

No, I cannot do this!

At this, the voice returned, furious, unrelenting, Well suit yourself eh, suit yourself. One day, the boy will be chased back here and his head will be bashed into the ground until it shatters. Hunger will teach him to steal but not how to avoid getting caught. Even the girl, your precious Amnogu, will do what you cannot do. She will provide for herself. Do you

think she is too young to open the eye between her legs?

Look at yourself, it demanded forcefully, Look at yourself.

She saw herself in her mind's eye: white hair was starting to fall from her huge head in patches; bloodless veins stretched all the way to her ears and neck; her skin was unhealthily soft and peeled like overcooked yams; pelvic bones protruded from the sides of her fleshless hips; in place of buttocks, she had hollowed cavities. Two bones jutted out unnaturally from her back, making her flat breasts seem to have been turned inside out.

At least, I still have all my limbs, she thought sadly. She had heard of people, who in desperation for food had become anthropophagic, eating their dead children, until they had nothing left to feed on but themselves.

She picked at a scab on her ankle, tearing at it absentmindedly.

The voice returned again, waxing temptatious, Listen to me, you are not that bad looking… imagine what you could look like with some more flesh on your bones, eh? You could be the envy of the village you know.

With that, whatever hold the words had on her was broken, I do not care about myself! Leave me alone! I only care for them; I will not do it!

She walked over to a corner of the room and waited for the children to return, her little body curled up against the cold.

~

When she awakened from her unexpected nap, she saw that the children were still not home. Where is Amnogu? I will beat Anneki for this. Haven't I told him to make sure he brings her back before going out to play?

A sound outside startled her. She jerked upright just as her little sister ran in.

Her heart skipped a beat as she saw the fear in the girl's normally playful dark brown eyes.

"What is it? Talk to me now ah baaaaby; talk to me," she drawled coaxingly. "Please now, talk to me."

The little girl of four ran wailing into her arms, looking up at her with panic-stricken eyes. Amnogu was shaking so much that she did not even notice her torn clothes. But the blood slowly dripping at the girl's feet attracted her attention. "What happened to you Amnogu! God!! Tell me. Where is Anneki? Amnogu talk to me," she screamed, pressing the shivering mass against her body.

She slowly coaxed the story from the girl, trying to make sense of her babbles.

~

Amnogu had been walking home from the school shelter, speaking gently to her rag doll as she did.

Today, the children at the camp had corn and water for lunch. As was their custom, they had sung 'God is good, He has done me well, oh my soul rise up and praise the Lord' in the morning. Amnogu had sung loudly; she liked that song. The teacher had smiled at her and said she was a good girl. As they sang, she had laughed and danced with the other girls.

After school, she took the little shortcut that she and Anneki had found, with hopes of making it back home early. Anneki had hung back, avoiding her; his friends always teased him for walking home with a little girl, even if she was his sister. Even though he was slightly bigger than most of them, they still called him names.

Amnogu had walked silently for a little while before she heard voices.

The men were sitting on rocks, smoking weed and singing hoarsely. But they quieted when they saw her. Instinctively sensing danger, she had walked faster, trying to get away as quickly as possible when one of them hallooed at her. She ignored him even as he lazily called out again. But when she felt a tug at her dress from behind, she turned and struggled with the middle aged man in front of her.

The doll fell out of her hands and crashed to the ground.

The man slapped Amnogu backhanded across the face, still holding onto her with his other hand. The force of his blow threw her backwards, tearing her dress. She saw his eyes light up madly as he looked at her bare thigh. She had cried for her sister as he pressed her down and unzipped his pants, energized by the obscene calls of his companions. Excruciating pain seared through her entire body as he ripped open the eye between her legs. She heard the blood bursting in her ears as she felt herself losing consciousness…

But it ended as quickly as it started. When she opened her eyes weakly, she saw Anneki throwing his small fists into the sides of the man.

The man picked up the little ten year old boy and threw him against a rock. When Anneki came at him again, the man threw him down and clenched the boy's neck in his fist, squeezing hard.

Some of the men had tried to intervene but the man still held on, bashing the boy's head against the ground until it shattered. Finally, they dragged him off and ran away.

Amnogu's weak cries for help were drowned out by silence as she limped over to her brother's body. She tugged at him, urging him to wake up so they could go home.

When he did not move, she ran home as quickly as her ravished body let her.

~

The girl looked at Amnogu incredulously, stunned by all she just heard.

"Anneki, dead? Anneki is dead?"

She refused to believe it.

As she ran out of the hut, she mistakenly banged her little sister's head against a piece of wood on the side. Without stopping, she followed Amnogu to the place where their brother lay.

She cried out at the shadows standing over him, scattering them with an enraged shriek as she rushed over to his side.

She turned her head away from the remains of her younger brother. His entire left hand and part of his right leg were gone. His shirtless body showed where he had been hacked into, most probably by a machete. When she saw this, she knew that they must have been working on his

insides when she arrived.

In the distance, barely visible dots glided through the dark backdrop like buoyant specks of dirt on the ocean floor.

Even as they started their slow descent, the wake of vultures that hovered overhead maintained the pall of the desert village. Suddenly they closed in, tearing downwards with aquiline precision.

She tried to fight them off but there were too many of them. Although she knew that meat was a very scarce item, she hated them for attacking. The talons of the vultures snatched at the dead flesh. Hasty claws tore at it, ripping off long strips of skin in the ensuing flurry of feathers and claws that followed.

When they were done, the vultures flew off, leaving behind the dead boy's transmogrified form, more husk than substance. And once again, all was silent.

Scarred from her futile attempts to honor her brother's corpse, she bent over to the side, coughing and vomiting. She stood, dazed, only regaining consciousness when she heard her little sister's frightened sobs. She nestled Amnogu in her chest, shielding her from the macabre sight.

It was then that she saw the child's ragged doll lying among the dust and filth. It seemed to be smiling at her. A chameleon ran across its face.

And then she cried.

Finally after so long, she cried, her long thirteen years drawn out across her helpless face. She allowed herself to be a child again.

She called out to her mother and father, both long gone, victims to the disease. She cried out to her ninety year old grandmother who had taken care of them until her death three years ago.

She cried out to God.

She cried the cry of the poor.

She cried the innocent cry of the young.

Where have all the parents gone?

Autumn Day

by Andrew Crimmins

I sit behind the wheel in my white truck
autumn sun glinting off the hood.
Pull the Zippo lighter out of my pocket,
given once as a gift by my father.

The light catches on the silver case,
the emblem bearing his military unit
stares back at me from within my hand.
Smoke hangs lazily in the air.

I relight the joint I share
with my best friend seated next to me.
In the back, two marble boxes,
hold the ashen remains of my parents.

They are seated together in death,
just like they walked hand in hand in life.
The torch has been passed for me to carry,
and bear the burden of leading my family.

We finish the joint as we pull into the cemetery.
My friend leans over, a strange look on his face,
This is the first time I've rode
in the car with both your parents.

We share a look and laugh hysterically.

A Life for a Life

by Amy Hendrickson

Mommy drives back and forth all year
from the hospital of her dying grandpa
to the patient rooms at the pregnancy center.

I bet sometimes she wonders
what the future holds for us—

The machines hooked up helping him breath—
the sound of my heart beat in her belly all she knows.

Soon she might by standing by a grave,
wearing black with a splash
of baby spit on her shoulder.

I'll be just starting to say, *I love you, Mommy,*
crawling around, trying to eat the lilies.

I Always Wanted to Save a Life

by Samantha Elliott

At 17, I was quickly becoming a hero.
EMS classes every Tuesday and Thursday
prepped me for what would happen in the
real world, until everything I studied for months
was erased from my mind faster
than the sneeze that escaped you,
and caused your death.

Your silver Rav-4
caught on the ravine and
cart wheeled through the field.

You pounded the windshield going 75.
I didn't recognize you at first,
but your left arm that was wrapped
around your torso quartered the same
maroon and white bracelets I proudly wore.

The transparent chunks of glass
were now painted in reds, pinks, and fleshy tones
and your blonde hair was mangled,
coated and sticky with the same chaos.

When you landed in the field
hundreds of feet away from your vehicle,
the earth's paint became yours.
I never saw you wear brown so brilliantly,
or accessorize with gravel and sagebrush.

The sound of gargling and life
evading you was all I could hear.
The smell of soil and iron
bombarded my nostrils as I took a knee
next to your mangled corpse.

No breathing. No pulse.
The procedure of CPR seemed foreign to me.
All that plagued my thoughts was your family
and how I had just witnessed my best friend
lose his sister.

As the sun took it last bit of light beneath the horizon,
The doctors pronounced you dead
and I turned in my ambulance keys.

A Private Wake

by Meghan L. Bucknell

On park benches and blades of grass
where forgotten men sleep, heat

and flies buzz like radio static, while barking
dogs and passing cars peel pavement.

Her presence sits heavy in the air
and on my shoulders. Automatic messages

of movement to my limbs. Lift, open, pour,
repeat, numbing my thoughts.

Honeysuckles wilt like the lines
I loved about her face

lines that will show on me. I thought
she would be here still. Bending,

the tears miss my shoes. The blades
of glass drink them up.

After Viewing John Maguire's Painting *Montgomery Street in Winter*

by Arian Katsimbras

Painting: Birch, brick, chimney stuck through apartment,
fence, shed stamped with snow, creek, tendons of ice and ash,
Studebaker out of frame (not running), sky.

We say nothing driving from a garage sale somewhere between Reno
and Donner. This water-gashed interstate, zippered on either side
by pine, telephone poles, and gray, carnelian in places where rain
meets oil and needles of autumn, drink in the silence, abandon this map,
navigate by catalog of blues and cold, drive further into stale air and December,
harder into 1996.

But no, you were not there. We were not there. No stump of tree, no grass
or sky, but bills, apartment, lamp, porcelain. You said nothing.
I said non-photo blue when I should have said knuckle of bone, winter.

Elegy with Handgun, Soot, and Bird

by Arian Katsimbras

For Larry Levis

Across the street, parking lot crowned with fence and church,
I would watch you dance in an abandoned scow late mornings
under larkspur and steeple, make home some unusable hymn, its sound
strung behind you like white lanterns in autumn with bulbs missing.

You would sit with the sidewalk after, buckle over its corner, sink bare feet
in asphalt and reach out to pluck red from taillights like burnt starlings
from night. You would fill your mouth with sand, with Lorca and herons
that walk through screams

of cemetery grass, and always with claws of crushed landscape that swam
like ghosts or rain in our periphery. And those nights when the moon reached
into itself, you argued that history is not linear, but moves in pops and bangs,
flashes of light and violence, like hiccoughs or gunfire,

that it drifts listlessly in an unlearned waltz the way the West's clouds do,
abstaining and neglectful. We had rinsed ourselves in language then, bathed
in a wash of traffic light, all the smoke and manes of ash, baptized ourselves
in the spaces in-between. Tonight your steps move in cumbersome sway,

hands try to find shelves for those who throw songbirds down sewers, while I,
now gray and some months, sit on the steps of some cobbled and unknown
place
and turn cedar leaf and bottle into blanket and symphony, roll history
and cigarette together in that clash of violence and apology.

More of the Day Collapses into this Moment of Waiting for Bread

by Arian Katsimbras

A woman walks by outside, deep in autumn and fire, blanketed
and naked against both sky and asphalt, drags her hips behind her,
head crowned with gold and some noise. She wears a coat made
of something from misery—wool perhaps—and a band of fabric
to drown sideways from neck to wind, like sun scarved with cloud.
Her one hand is key; blade, bow, bittings. The other is letter;
enveloped, postdated, written in pencil, capped with eraser, skin.
I think of her there,

at mailbox looking up here, not at mailbox, where I watch bird-like,
anxious, clumsy, think of how we might unzip skull, pull the stitches
of lip back against word and cursive, abandon forgetting and forgetting.
But that's not the story. The story is that this is not a poem as much as it is
thief, lines stolen from memory or kite anchored to anvil of bone, knotted
and tied to string tied to you reading this somewhere forward from me now
tied to a letter still postdated, still tied to woman, still October, noise,
and fire.

Gathering an Appetite

by Tara Mae Schultz

I bring a fork, a knife, and a spoon to bed with me.
I might awake to labor pains,
to my body's desire to turn itself inside out.
Pregnant again, belly curved like a cow's ass,
Tommy promises he'll leave if this one is another *dud.*

After Montgomery came out with dwarfed arms,
Tommy never forgave me.
It's your fucking womb; it's just as cursed as you are.
His eldest son would never handle a tractor,
never work outside a horse stall.

I once saw a mother corn snake, threatened,
swallow its young. They were weak.
If the fetus that stirs inside me like an unsettling brew
comes out with any deformity,
I'll eat it to protect it from itself.

Weathered

by Joanne Lowery

Push a buzz saw through my thighs
and you won't see two columns
of felled oak trees with their age
transcribed in rings. Measure
instead my recollection of the blizzard
that shut our high school for two weeks,
then the one after the birth of my son.
Big weather, freakish and record-setting,
plots memory on the x-axis of time.
Year of the Drought when small lakes
became mud baked into crazed geometry.
Year of That Other Big Snow when
my son built elaborate forts and frozen castles.
Year of the Flood—the one we're
being compared to now as dams bulge
and high-water marks exceed themselves.
In '93 the floodplain was described
as an area the size of New Jersey
as if New Jersey were a unit of measure.
Do we want this flood to be worse
as a way to win a meteorological contest?
Maybe this flood is not as bad as back then.
Once I loved someone like a dozen Kansas tornadoes.
Now the forecast is above average, like Wyoming.

Souvenir

by Jake A. Martinez **First Place Poetry Award**

Somewhere there is a snow globe
An acrylic half-dome really
It gathers dust, sitting on a coffee table
Mottled with ring-stains and dull magazines
It's a souvenir purchased
With a picture of Lincoln's wrinkled face
Won from a scratch-lottery
Bought at a derelict *gas-up* on 52nd

When shaken
The hobos spring up, relocate headquarters
And land on the other side of MLK blvd
Where their collection of cardboard
Scraps, Bic pens, and foil wrappers settle neatly

When shaken
Painted fishing boats bob in the churning bay
That vomits sour brine
The tired, gray lungs of Oakland
Cough up a flurry of thick phlegm
Spewing rain droplets as they wheeze
Like the 11:15 BART train
Scratching on metal pipes overhead
Crocheted with clotted tarmac expressways
Leaving dandelions and obscene graffiti
Covered in frigid blue shade

Sacrifice

by Charles Haddox

Cruel winter gave place to an unusually hot spring, and it seemed for a time that the old black Muscat vines lovingly tended for so many years would fail to produce any fruit. Planted in rows down the length of a rock-strewn ravine that met up with a tiny creek shaded by cottonwoods little by little falling under the axe, they had always been temperamental, unaware that truly noble grapes must always suffer. It is said that this variety was brought from Cyprus to the West during the Third Crusade by Leopold V of Austria, also known as Leopold the Excommunicate. Originally of the green variety, it was only after his excommunication, punishment for imprisoning Richard Cœur de Lion, that the grapes turned black. Such was the story that was told out here in the wastes, where the common settlers and dishonest merchants believed every legend that came their way.

We survived by cultivating grapes or fruit trees, or by trading, all of us: Californios, adventurers, outcasts, renegades and deserters. We tore a living from the grassy swamps and red sandstone hills ringed by oak-covered mountains with their blind trails and steep pitch fit only for Indian ponies, all slickrock and confounding undergrowth of sagebrush and cactus and toyon. One day a goat herder joined us, but his goats ate fiddleneck and went mad and died of sunstroke. A preacher arrived on a blue mule and built a church of mud and ocotillo stalks, a single low room without seating or altar or ornament. He baptized the scarred and ignorant farmers and storekeepers and craftsmen who were the best of our settlement in Redfork Creek, and expected to see us on Sunday in his windowless sanctuary.

When the vines and citrus trees condescended to produce a little fruit we dried it in the sun and sent what we did not need for ourselves to San Francisco by wagon and pack horse. I occasionally made a little wine from my black Muscats, as the wild reds that the others cultivated were unfit for that purpose. My wine did not find favor with our reverend in his empty mud lair.

I was crisscrossing the ruddy, dusty slope, carefully examining the ragged vines for signs of flowers, when an ox train carrying salt from New Mexico came down the bit of trail that followed Redfork Creek as it meandered west. They stopped at the base of the rise and asked me for permission to fill their water barrel and make camp in the shade of a cottonwood that hugged the creek.

"Suit yourselves, but leave your rifles in the wagon."

Worse than the lot around here, I thought to myself, and my estimation of humanity had already fallen a long way since settling in California. The teamsters were always drunkards and dipsomaniacs who saw the ghosts of men they had killed in the war, chicken thieves and lackeys and bullies.

"Just be gone in the morning," I said to the boss.

A large black dog with the look of a coward accompanied them. He was hot and sore as they were, but no one paid him any mind.

"That dog bite?" I asked a filthy old man as the beast sheepishly made his way toward me.

"That dog don't do nothing but bark," the boss answered.

"That's what you keep it around for? Its bark?"

"I don't keep it at all. It just follows."

The dog rubbed his flattened, ugly head against my leg. Without thinking, I leaned down and gave him a scratch. He looked at me with frightened, pleading eyes.

"Get on out of here," I said, and gave him a push with my boot. Instead of retreating with a snarl, the slick-haired hound fell on his side and licked my hand. As I walked back down the ravine to my vines he tentatively followed at my heel.

Trouble enough, without these evil-eyed drovers gathering firewood and washing in the creek, their big black dog following me around like an orphan. What if they got into the barrels that I kept in the cellar? I would take my breech-loading Sharps rifle to bed with me that night, guarding my gold earned with sweat and dread under the merciless sun, and the land that produced it, my earth, a view troubled with malevolence and unfamiliarity through the iron ghost ring. I watched at the window over my bed, the end of the rifle barrel slightly raised and my exhausted body braced with a squat; the trigger set and my finger on it. My unwanted guests settled into sleep and the fire died down. The moon looked like it had fallen on its side. I heard nothing until dawn.

The day was dark and gloomy, but I took comfort in the fact that the teamsters had left without doing any mischief. Or so I thought, until I heard the bark and saw the black shape stealing tentatively toward the house.

"You there," I yelled. "Get on out of here before I boil your skin off."

At the sound of my voice he scampered up to me, fell at my feet and licked my hands.

"What do you want with me?" I asked, but I went to the house and threw him the beans and corn mush left over from breakfast.

Not so bad, I thought as I watched him eat. Not so bad. I could use a friend to watch the place when I'm away. Don't seem to have much spirit, though.

I picked the papery skin of a boiled bean out of my teeth and watched the dog rub its muzzle in the dirt. That lad. Blacker than my muscats. Satan himself ain't so black as that.

It wasn't the heat, but the searing wind, noisy as a calliope and angry as boiling sulfur, that struck at the new-sprung fruits. The creek turned yellow and smelled like tin, and the young grapes began to harden and dry. It was a time when the roots needed stress, but the lack of water made the wind-burn worse. In a few days the entire yield could be lost.

Leo was by now my good companion, but the comfort of his affection

could do little to distract me from the struggle with the choking gusts out of a grey southern sky. He barked and pranced behind me as I poured buckets of the caustic, turbid water on the delicate clusters.

"Here boy, this is the day to dance. The dance of death." He put his ears back at the sound of my voice.

The preacher had come down from the house. For the first time since I'd known him, Leo growled.

"You keep that dog away from me," the preacher said.

"He won't leave my side 'lest I tell him to."

The preacher didn't dress much like a preacher. He wore a dirty blue cambric shirt and white suspenders.

"That dog's been coming around during my service at the church. He stands outside and howls until the front row can't hear a word I'm sayin'. It's not right, him doing that. He's not right. I think he's got a devil in 'im."

"You're telling me my dog's got a devil in him 'cause he likes to howl. Now, if he was standing up on two feet and talking I'd be worried. How'd a devil get into him anyway?"

"Somebody done something to him. It says in the scriptures that Jesus sent those demons into a flock of pigs."

"I may not come to church, but I know the Word. In that there story the pigs went jumping off a cliff. You seen my dog jump off a cliff?"

"People are beginning to talk."

"That's all they do 'round here—talk. Like to see 'um working once in a while."

"You keep that dog around, knowing it's a devil, people starting thinking you're the devil's friend. Maybe that's where this dog come from. That you got dealings with the devil."

"Look at my vines. You think they'd be all dried up like that, dried to the callus, if I had a deal with the devil."

"It's not just the howling. That dog likes to prowl. And they say his prowling around, it's making people sick. Chickens, ducks and pigeons are dying. Yeah, that's right. And not from having their necks broke by that devil dog. They just up and die."

"The land's bad. The bugs are bad. The air is bad. Been that way a long time before this dog showed up."

"Get rid of him. Show us you ain't no friend to the devil. That's all I got to say."

Damn this land. And damn that preacher all the way to hell. Spreading it around that a dog that can't take its tail from between its legs is a devil. Men are full of mischief, especially the fools around here. And the fear, the fear that destroys nations, that destroys everything, eats away their hearts like lime.

Leo, my dear Leopold, stood by me as the winds abated and veraison began. I was looking forward to a successful harvest, although the struggle to bring the clusters all the way to maturity was far from over. My dear Leopold, eating from my table, sleeping at my feet, his muzzle pressed against my face as I rested after a hard day's work. He was as

kindly as the grapes were pitiless.

They came at night, the preacher leading the mob like Judas. They were armed, and I couldn't take them all with my rifle. I figured talking was better than shooting, especially with a gang like that, but they did all their talking with a rope for the dog and a rope for me. He growled and struggled, but didn't have the courage or sense to bite. Once they got the rope on him he howled like a cat until the gunshots silenced him. I was alone now. It was all gone: the taut body, the eyes of everlasting question, the soundless corporeal gestures of affinity annealing the impossible comradeship between one tattered, lonely monster and another, as if they—as if it—had never existed at all.

I struggled and bit, but that army of the righteous bound me tighter than Lazarus in his winding-sheet.

A low hill of yellow rock rose above a grove of cottonwoods that had been left untouched at a bend in the creek. It was rough going, with my hands and arms bound and five men dragging at the end of a tether. There was no trail, and the rocks were slick with desert varnish and black, fernlike dendrites. They found the old prospector's hole. He had gone down twenty feet and found no signs of ore. It was straight and narrow as a well. They lowered me down by the rope, still bound, and let the rope fall in after me. The spiraling stars looked down at the opening of the shaft as their footsteps died away. I felt panic rise as I touched the smooth, cold walls of the hole, cold as a tomb, black as my Leo. My feet were wet. Keep the panic away. I felt for a loose stone that I could use to begin pecking footholds. I would find a use for the rope as well. The sky was close enough to touch, and somewhere, far away, a dog barked.

When the Finches Start Up

by Jeff Hardin

for Michelle

There are movies you can't get anywhere else
        except by standing in a field,
remembering how,
                once,
                        you were a spirit in moonlight,
mended by wind through sage grass.

Yet now, most of what you say
        sounds like coming out
of a mental institution
                on your knees,
                        begging to hear the voices again,
the ones that used to speak your name.

I heard you say remembering not remembering snow
        was one way of thinking
about the mind, how it
                can't really
                        get to where it wants to be,
not knowing even where that is.

Oh is it possible an evening sky's embroidery
        can be the "image" you take with you
when you yourself
                are taken away?
                        How many beloveds you hear
when the finches start up, flitting from tree to tree.

Obsessed with how we don't touch the stems
        of dandelions often enough
is how I will
                remember you—
                        who stood on earth so flimsily,
who blew seeds into everything with your very own breath.

A Day of Slow Rain

by Jeff Hardin

On a day of slow rain, the translucence of leaves
reminds me, as a child, I wanted wisdom. Now I'm that
man who forgets his raincoat and doesn't seem to mind.

It makes good sense to scan the margins of books.
The notes penciled in may enlighten the text. An asterisk
or question mark could change my whole life.

Remember staring at a hen egg, wanting it to hatch?
Then the next day your school desk and theories of time?
Leaves in the water trough were cleaned out by hand.

Some things can't be improved—the gospel of Luke,
the size of a blueberry, the taste of ripe plums,
a quick leap over the lengths of a fern on the path.

It was always a life of inconcievables and afterthoughts,
a soundlessness to follow just after the bell chimes.
Some mornings the breath of horses was the only thing to say.

Cut Branch

by Sean Evans

After trains
antlered shadows
give their ghosts
to the pine.

Whatever the deer taught me
I've forgotten. How to lose
the last skin
of velvet
in time
for rut.

I no longer hear the Rosewood
and the Solingen braiding
cut-mark in the green. Low always
for balance, tempered by fire
the grain won't split; I was no boy scout.
I needed a father

outpacing the Cheyenne over a suicide
butte, proud as any
light of hoof
in the white cloud of runaway Chevy.

Nothing epic—
straight bender, unholstered
and loaded through one eye
of Tequila worm—a start
west anyhow.

We never blamed you; just weathered
the call, half-sober at least, and collect.

I believed in lassos then.
It couldn't last, I know that.
Each lope and hoof upon water
must converge, linger
long before a kitchen window
at dusk, threading
the latch, nightly,
in time, always in time.

Nature's Gold

by Dave Malone

Smoke polkaed above the pines
the night I burned my novel.
You baked your old man's heart in a fire,
a blackened raisin. I buried a brother.
You raised a daughter from the dead.

Our losses spread out nature's gold
as bountiful as needles beneath
Scotch pines lining our drive.
The afternoon you showed me
your disasters, Illinois farm field
flowed into me and spun compasses
into electromagnetic dystopia.
What you can't show me rises inside
the cracks of a ginger harvest moon.

Autumn solstice burns orange
on silo and pumpkin on our farm.
I wedge my foot inside the tractor
with hay to cut before the frost
predicted by summer katydid call.

Where They Do That At?

by Alan King

after Jeffrey McDaniel

I'm from salt fish for breakfast and
coconut bake steaming on counter tops,
from Byron Lee's Dragonaires blaring

through basement speakers
when mom, my brother, my sister

and I come home from church. I'm from
card games in the backyard, from where
sunsets are ice melting in Jack Daniel skies,

from where gunshot victims leak
mambo sauce on piss-infested streets.

Ask me where I live and I'll say
at the corner of Chuck Brown Lane
and Pharoahe Monch Ave, at the corner

of Roti and Rotisserie. I'm from after-
school fights at the ice cream truck,

from *don't let that green Lex*
with tinted windows find you wandering

the neighborhood late. I'm from
you lunchin' like... and *why you cised?*
from *don't lose a fight you ain't start*

and come home not expecting
another one. I'm from charcoal-scented

summers and whiskey-breath evenings
when the wind stumbles on its way
to the next bar-b-que, from okra and

callaloo bubbling in a pot, next to curry
goat and stewed ox tail. I'm from electric

slide lessons in the living room,
and dad snatching mom from by the stove
to slow dance to The Whispers.

Movement

by Benjamin Evans

Summer flickers like an A.M. station.
September dusk is bruised pear or peach.

Thick-tongued and chivalrous we tango, measure
the writhe of whiskey on your father's land.

You talk of art: the emptying, filling, and
thickening of free fluids that refuse to coalesce.

I whisper of science: the whir, drip, and
ripple of a woman's fiendish physics.

In Boulder we snuck behind the teahouse,
returned to the streets in a stick of fruit and wonder.

In Monmartre when flakes spun fat, we freckled
snow with mulled wine and laughed ash.

All history burned for warmth,
kindling for the fire lighting our specious dance.

Buckeye Hot Springs

by Karen A. Terrey

Just down the creek lie the ruins
of Buckeye Sawmill.
I curl around a sleeping dog's back,
late sun sifting the crowns

of second growth pines along the bank.
How prosperous a place for a warm bath
after ripping and planking, the scent of sawdust
wafting in the summer of 1861.

Yet buckskinned men and roughened horses
couldn't drag away the few ancient cedars
or single wall of trunk we passed today
gripping the loose ravine with knuckled roots,

fragments of old conversation high in the drainages.
Extrapolate the forest from tree, tree.
The difference in species doesn't matter,
in sleep. The dog and I share a primal warmth

of breath and soil. I'd like to think
this was how a garden slept
before language separated,
as our island splits the gentle murmuring stream now,

the sucking and trickling of soft absorption,
the bank a sponge, and myself,
as if spelled. Nearby a young stag is just knowing
the velvet brown of antlers

no taller than his twitching ears.
He dips a narrow hoof and steps across
just below our sleeping heads lined up like lovers,
leaving no difference in sound.

The Dead of Shawnee

by David Shattuck

I
In my room, beneath its unchanging dark
I wear out your name by calling it.
But when the line is severed, your soft voice is hushed over
by the rain outside.
What was it about this place I loved?
More highways than people.
More empty fields than black cows
to swallow them each season.

II
The dead of Shawnee, Oklahoma
stay quiet tonight.

The full moon slips over the airport
with its single runway and no planes for miles.

Tomorrow they'll begin again
to drudge the Deep Fork for a girl

who believed she could, and almost did,
walk across the water.

Here faith and its absence
are two lines from the same song.

III
In Autumn the pecans crowd the gutters.
Everyone has a neighbor who shells them for free,
so everyone has bags of halved pecans
to give or to sell.

Outside the Indian casino
the sheriff's boys laugh nervously
around a parked squad car
and wait for someone to stagger out.
Wait, and thumb erotic the tips of their batons.

The dead wait out the rapture
on Parker's Hill.
Their grandchildren have forgotten them,
the brave ones have left already

on the last good breeze.

IV
The girl never leaves the river.
Her brother never looks at it again.
When he is twenty two he will rob
the only liquor store in town
but lose an eye when they catch him,
twelve miles away.

When she was younger the girl
would dance ballet.
Her brother, watching, knew for sure
that God was more a part of us
than what he'd been told,
that he'd written his words
in the marrow of our bones.

V
In the park I watch the leaves
lift and fall in a timid breeze;
their rustling calling out old words.
All morning I've packed brown boxes,
unsure of where I'm going.
I wonder what I loved about this place
and what I'll leave behind.
Clouds roll in and darken.
I'm halfway gone when the rain begins
to fall and change the nature
of the song.

Silenced

by D.O.A. Worrell

The wind pushed south, in phases and infrequent like a stuttering breeze, and gradually dwindling with the horizon's narrowing light. But seated in a thick patch of bushes on the steep hillside Dae-Ho couldn't feel a thing. His gaze entangled in the thorny shrubs and high meadow grass that thrashed back in the breeze and the fall shaded trees whipping to the side as if tossing their hair. He also noticed his own camouflaged jacket incessantly swell with wind then gradually shrink like the croak of a mute toad. Dae-Ho could see the wind clearly as an emerald ocean splashing and whirling around him but couldn't feel it, because sometimes when he stared too closely it made him numb.

They coined this the "anesthetic sense" in the North Korean army, a term originating from winter snipers in the early sixties. Their entire bodies hibernated for hours in the snow drenched hills of Kaesong with only the whites of their eyes astir. It was a state that few North Korean soldiers could achieve and Dae-Ho Jung was one of them. Though from today onward, sitting silent while countless others prayed the evening's national anthem, he wasn't one of them anymore.

Dae-Ho sat in a thicket of bushes just a few meters east of the dirt road he trailed the night before. The bushes were dense, giving him just enough visibility to keep an eye on the jeeps and other military vehicles that routinely swept the restricted streets and dirt paths.

His camouflage was a couple shades off the viridian-hued bushes around him but close enough that it wasn't conspicuous. Though he knew the black semiautomatic rifle around his shoulder with its silver clip and the sable shaded silencer on his waist were in a word, eye-catching. *Two words*, Dae-Ho then thought, though he figured he had two guns and that was one word each.

Dae-Ho's thoughts slipped in and out of focus. The envelope in his breast pocket and the border a few miles off on the horizon brought thoughts of South Korea, his fiancée, or the thousand other daydreams that might branch off. Though somehow these notions would always reunite on one thought: death, and Dae-Ho would immediately regain his focus, clutching his rifle, surveying the vista and letting everything else recede.

The only moment Dae-Ho let the poise slip from his trigger finger was when he tapped his chest so that the envelope with cash, photographs and other documents inside rustled like a paper heartbeat.

He knew it was there. He had touched the materials just a few minutes earlier but needed to check it again to calm his constant nerves. This envelope with documents and photos of North Korean atrocities had turned into a pressure point while his finger became the needle of acupuncture. As light as it was, the envelope made a far heavier burden than the guns

or bulky camouflage and body armor strapped to his chest. Of all the secrets Dae-Ho kept in his heart, the gravest one now lay next to it.

He never believed he'd end up here. Here, somewhere between Kaesong and the South Korean border. A border that he once guarded like a jealous husband, Dae-Ho was now trying to cross himself. Sometimes he felt he committed some infidelity of ego and the irony almost made him smile but didn't. His cheeks didn't quite rise high enough, the single dimple on his left cheek didn't quite fall in deep enough, and his expression lingered between a smirk and nothing at all. He just couldn't seem to completely smile anymore since his fiancée died about six months earlier. *Had it been that long*? He began to think; then he tried not to.

His face had become the same as the peasant farmers or the occasional local pedestrian he sometimes passed on the passenger side window of whatever military van or truck he rode in. Their barren expressions seemed so unmistakable even as he sped by. Their eyes would hook and swing dance like a Doppler for the eyes. But in that moment or less Dae-Ho could see a face narrowed into an expression that hadn't seemed to change in years, and it wasn't until now that he understood why.

The forest green fatigues with ruffles on the shoulders and matching hat with a rim that always lined his eyes with an ominous shadow drew the line between him and the average North Korean citizen. He felt it immediately, this peeling sensation then the eventual separation, during his daily marches along the near empty streets in uniform.

He always heard silence throttled to the very last breath as he strolled by the swarms of loiterers around makeshift markets and food stands. Smiles and nods even the occasional salute would skip from person to person in the most unnatural way. It wasn't a willing motion or even a reflex but almost seemed a sort of twitch. The type of twitch that crooks the neck when a prickling drizzles like raindrops down the spine. And as Dae-Ho would continue past them he always heard whispers burst out in exhaustion as if they had been holding back their words like their breath.

He couldn't remember what had caused it. Why he split from the common man like an asexual cell. Though he believes it might have been the propaganda that sounded so repetitive it began to echo through his mind, resounding between every thought, from *where did I put my keys* to *what should I have for lunch*. Eventually it became a quiet conscience in the back of his head that talked him out of empathy and cooled the burning sensation that stuck to his chest when he executed men for stealing for their families or glanced down at the desperation of the prostitutes underneath him.

The feeling remained, the love for his country and people, that sense hadn't left him and one could say it grew even stronger. Though thinking back on it now he feels the sense of love mixed and muddled into other senses and ideas like staring into a kiss or trying to touching a whisper. And from other's point of view it seemed that Dae-Ho ignored the suffering that spilled out from his rifle. As an executioner he put to death men and women by the hundreds and orphaned countless children. But in his logic, silencing one or two or more for the stability of millions saved the

very children he orphaned.

It got to the point that the villagers began to pay Dae-Ho just to speak for them about residential problems, like the overflow of village sewage or the lack of proper irrigation for their crops. They feared so much to speak out about these issues that they would slip him a few chon or won merely to have him speak on their behalves. And even with the government always in his right ear and his propaganda conscience at the other, Dae-Ho couldn't help but feel guilty. *Of all things*, he would think, *speaking at least should be free*.

A twig snapped into the silence, then another and it took one more before Dae-Ho realized footsteps were approaching. The person's feet dawdled and stepped nearly inaudible as if they purposely slinked towards him and tiptoeing so quietly in fact that at times it sounded as if they barely touched the ground.

Did they know? He thought but wasted no time in lifting his rifle towards the tiny opening in the bushes that he crawled through twelve hours earlier. His instincts flinched into place. His hand and trigger finger remained steady, his breathing stayed measured and constant and his eyelids not once fell into a blink. In the army they trained soldiers like Dae-Ho to make the unnatural natural and Dae-Ho felt most natural now with the trigger as an extension of his fist and the scope an extension of his eyes.

The shadow came first, swallowing light already crooked and dimmed under the evening sun. Then the bushes shuddered and with it the rustle of half dead leaves and an array of shadows shifting Dae-Ho's features in and out of shade and light. Not a moment later stubby feet came into view, followed by a waist wrapped in diapers, until finally the head of a baby boy no older than eighteen months was revealed.

Dae-Ho's finger sprang from the trigger immediately and he lowered the rifle. He could see the boy clearer now with the scope gone and his squinted eyes opening. Russet smudges lined the undoubtedly hand-me-down cloth diapers with blue patterned flowers that had faded nearly completely into the white. One of the boy's hands lay on his little belly, also smudged in that reddish-brown hue, probably from the plowed potato fields in the villages to the north. His other hand dug into his nose lined with trails of snot that stopped at his upper lips.

Standing barely half a meter high the boy could see clearly into the low-slung cavity that Dae-Ho had crawled into and consequently turned to Dae-Ho. With a whimper and lack of hesitation the boy stepped under the thorny bushes with Dae-Ho in site like the light at the end of the tunnel.

"Go back," Dae-Ho whispered but his voice only seemed to lead the boys towards him. "Go back," Dae-Ho repeated, this time with a flap of his hand.

Yet the little boy continued towards Dae-Ho with his hands stretched at his sides as if mimicking an airplane. When in fact the uneven patches of soil and stones laid out in front of him drove the boy to flatten his arms onto the air as if holding on to invisible crutches.

Dae-Ho couldn't fathom how the boy got this far out. The nearest village was more than half a mile to the north. Even if the boy came from the farm at the edge of the village, which judging by his soiled hands and diapers he more than likely did, it would have taken his little feet more than half an hour to arrive at the edge of this civilian dirt road.

Dae-Ho figured the boy was the son of a prostitute. One of countless infants who ran wild outside as their mothers worked. Despite the fact that prostitution was illegal and punishable by death it remained the most common expense of government officials. No one spoke out about prostitutions rings that had girls abducted from homes and trained in the arts of satisfaction. And anyone who did speak out never spoke out again. This point in particular Dae-Ho had the most difficulty forgetting because his fiancée spoke out against this very thing.

"Go home," Dae Ho griped, trying not to even glance at the boy who stood barely a meter away from him, hoping somewhere in his imagination that if he ignored the boy long enough he'd simply go away.

Though as Dae-Ho's vision slipped into the corners of his eyes, he saw the boy staring at him with a reminiscent pout that brought to mind street beggars and stray dogs. The boy suffered from malnutrition and it appeared as obvious to Dae-Ho as the boy's bulging belly button, now pointing him directly in the face.

The boy began fussing in protest of his Dae-Ho's lack of attention. Somewhere mixed in his undeveloped pronunciation, limited vocabulary and Kaesong dialect, words struggled desperately to surface. One of which sounded like *water*, though in his southern North Korean accent it almost resembled the word *door*.

But Dae-Ho didn't pay enough attention to hear details in the boy's accent. He was too busy hushing him, not simply with the flush of air between his teeth but with gestures and suggestive expressions that to his dismay only pushed the boy to fuss and fret louder and try even harder to squeeze the words between his infant lips. Then something did slip out. Amid the tumultuous exchange of swirls and slurs of his tongue, Dae-Ho heard the word, *no*.

It was reminiscent and more so a flashback for Dae-Ho. He felt as if he suddenly tripped over the boy's voice and fell hard into a memory from six months earlier. Their voices sounded the same, men and women, sobbing and pleading for their lives like children. Though unlike children their voices weren't muffled by infancy but by the bag draped around their heads.

Dae-Ho stood in front of them that night at the head of a firing squad. He never saw their faces and didn't know what crime they committed but he did what he had done each time he was asked to do something questionable. He didn't ask a question and instead listened to a propaganda conscience that whispered, *"pull the trigger."* And he did.

There was the crackle of bullets, screams, shrieks then someone said in a whispered that carried in the wind, *no*. All of which should have gone routine for Dae-Ho but something just felt wrong about that night's executions. Something besides the fact that with most other death sentences

a reason was given to why they executed the prisoners. And it wasn't just the larger amount of women this time around or the voices of a few prisoners that sounded like adolescents. Something seeped into the air that night that even to a veteran executioner like Dae-Ho just felt wrong.

Dae-Ho remembered the ride home that night. The soldiers didn't exchange a word in the military SUV nor did they listen to the buzz of static clogging up the music on the aging radio. Every soldier who took part in the execution sat with their heads bowed and bobbling. The only noises were that of wrenching metal as they hooked tight around corners and the rubber pummeling the dirt roads as they bounced over unpaved shortcuts to get home.

They dropped Dae-Ho off in front of his house and he immediately began feeling lightheaded. All he thought about was changing out of his uniform and resting his face on his fiancée's supple chest. Though his fiancée never returned home that night. She had gotten abducted in a government raid earlier in the evening and then taken to an undisclosed location. A bag was put over her head, then she was shot, and shot to death.

His propaganda conscience had always told him that for the stability of the country voices had to be sacrificed. That silencing one or two to avoid riots or rebellion was the small price that had to be paid. And he himself never lied to his family about the goings-on inside the government's secret police or even to his fiancée about prostitutes. He found that the best way not to lie is not to say anything at all.

Secret service soldiers like Dae-Ho were encouraged and an implication off of coerced to keep quiet about the executions. They took an oath of silence with their hands over their chests and the almighty flag waving above them. But after perhaps killing his own fiancée a bitter aftertaste lingered on his tongue every time he saluted or sang the national anthem. An excess of profanity came to mind each time and for him it felt a bit like swallowing his own vomit. Then he realized he couldn't silence himself anymore. It was all going to come spewing out and Dae-Ho knew he needed to reach that border or else anything he had to say would fall on deaf ears.

The skid of tires, as sudden as it was sharp, screeched from the side of the road and ground the gravel and pebbles into crackles and pops. Dae-Ho whipped forward as if he sat in the vehicle that came to a sudden stop at the side of the road. He lunged for the boy, grabbing his tiny hand and dragging his seemingly weightless body towards him. Though the boy's stubby bare feet couldn't keep up. He tripped, skidding his knees and stumping his toe against the litter of stones, snapped twigs and their protruding thorns, threatening with sharpness.

The boy stared at the thirty year old soldier through a screen tears. His lips shuddered like bubbles from the spout of a kettle rearing to burst into noise. Then the whimpering started, short and sudden breathing like an engine that wouldn't start, beginning with a breath and ended with a sniffle.

Dae-Ho panicked and reached blindly for his rifle. His gaze in the

meantime weaved between the leaves and snapped stems and tried to procure an accurate headcount of the men in the back of the truck. His head nodded each time he mouthed another number, ending finally on seven, plus one in the driver's seat and another stepping leisurely out of the truck.

Dae-Ho could only see the man's feet as he approached and the tip of the rifle, which undoubtedly hung from his neck, swinging just below his waist. His dark-brown leather boots staggered and even swiveled, seemingly unable to find a straight line between the truck door and bushes ahead of him. Laughter and blend of voices followed the soldier's unsteady steps, something about *it's nothing* or *wait until we get back* but Dae-Ho was too focused to hear or more so understand. All he saw was in the scope of his rifle, all he felt was the trigger, and all he heard were the whimpers of a lost infant boy.

He couldn't fight them all, as skilled as he was, Dae-Ho knew he crouched in that position vastly outnumbered. That realization came with a cringe and a frightening thought that began at his chest and rippled through him as if each heartbeat felt like a raindrop and he was a puddle for it to ripple through. The panic surged through every part of him and he tried not to entertain this idea, yet soon found that it had already begun.

His finger unfurled from the trigger of the rifle, his palm slipped off the handle and he let it hang. He still tried not to think about it but the nightmare of an idea continued as his arm dropped to his side and the mere touch of his silencer seemed blisteringly cold. He flinched, the feeling still trickling down his spinal chord yet he somehow slipped the gun from its holster. He tried one last time to purge the thought from his head but it was too late. He wrapped the boy into under his arm and shoved the silencer into his mouth.

Dae-Ho heard a few muffled screams as the silencer rattled against the boy's few and still forming teeth. He in turn rammed the gun down firmly towards the his tonsils. The boy gargled, then coughed as his arms flailed and he tried to kick free. Finally the boy began to squeal just loud enough for the soldier who stood no more than ten meters away from the bush to hear.

Dae-Ho heard a voice just then. A voice that sounded as clear as the men in the truck and child under his arms. The voice seemed familiar and like one that he hadn't heard in a long time, his propaganda conscience. Dae-Ho flinched as if an invisible tongue stroked against his ear and whispering, *"Pull the trigger."*

Dae-Ho's heart dropped and his trigger finger tightened. His finger seemed to splash against a trigger that felt heavier than its ever been for him. He struggled to curl his finger into a knuckle because now he finally felt it. He wasn't numb and he could taste, smell and feel every detail in the air around. He cringed his eyes shut and into a frill of wrinkles as he felt the bullet slipping from the muzzle like a premature or unwilling ejaculation. In the end he couldn't even watch.

After that there was nothing. All that remained audible was the engine

of the truck in the background rumbling like the pant of a heavy dog. No more screams resounded, no more kicking nor whining echoed in the bushes and yet there was no muffled thwack of a bullet from a silencer. Only the sound of saliva could be heard, sliding against the boy's cheeks as he nursed on the silencer's long black muzzle like a lethal nipple, as if trying to suck the bullet out.

Then the sound of urine trickling onto leaves and settling into a puddle on the dirt and soon to be mud, brought Dae-Ho's attention to the soldier. The man sighed and spit and sighed again, until the flow of piss began to drizzle like leaking faucets onto his boots. Then as haphazardly as he came the soldier staggered back to the truck and his cohort's chuckles and chatter.

The truck pulled off immediately and dragged with it the thousand clanks and chimes from its engine, tires and beaten body and faded off like the last instrumental of a song on the radio, forever lingering. Lingering so long on Dae-Ho's ears that he felt the noise sounded like low humming earrings that just wouldn't stop, until eventually they did.

The boy still sucked on the barrel of the silencer, now more ardent than before. His eyes began to close and he found a comfortable position on Dae-Ho's lap. His last gesture before he fell asleep was to wrap his chubby fingers and thumb around Dae-Ho's index finger, which a moment earlier lay on the trigger of the gun.

Dae-Ho sat back and rested his shoulder blades on a stout plant that stood too short to be called a tree and far too tall to be a bush or shrub. As his lips popped open for a sigh he thought he heard himself speak but he didn't. What he heard was a voice, his propaganda conscience or some other ghost of his consciousness, whispering towards and about the gun placed inside the child's mouth and saying, *"I couldn't have put it any better myself."*

A Routine Procedure

by Gary Metras

When they began to wheel you away,
I said, "Wait," took your hand gently, kissed
your lips with the weight and air
of forty-one years married.
A hysterectomy, age and all that.
"Not to worry," the young surgeon says.
But still, still the anxiety, the uncertainty.
The great dark about to descend.
The vast emptiness of anesthesia.

What if our eyes had never locked
across that dance floor when we were teens—
No Spangdalem with first apartment
in the cellar, lacking TV, radio,
full of dark, German furniture
we grew to love because
that was where we loved.
No Paris that Christmas, walking in cold rain
to Midnight Mass at Notre Dame,
no night spent dreaming our life
in the hotel feather bed, such passion, the hopes.

In the waiting room, I watch
the electronic status board on the wall,
patient initials, doctor, color bar to indicate
the procedure's level. I walk outside,
smoke a cigarette, remember
how invincible our flesh once was.
The rising sun harsh with early summer heat
humidity hazing the sky, waiting,
waiting for your lips to return my kiss.

A Wife's Prayer

by Kimberly Thompson

Lord I plead of thee to never forget
the way his icy blue eyes glisten
like azure gems buried in snow
when the light hit them perfectly.
Or the way his calves looked like Michelangelo sculpted
them himself. Lord may I never forget
the way he whispered caresses
into the nape of my neck while I washed the dishes.
Or the way his clothes had the lingering smell
of fresh amber with faint hints of lavender and coffee.
Or the way he ended every phone call with I love you.
May I never forget the way the lines in his face softened
when I entered the room or the way he promised
to be the best father ever when our son was born.
And when I instill values in our son like "a man is nothing
without his word" and "undying loyalty to your family
and friends is imperative" I'll be reminded of him.
And when I'm between the worlds
of sleep and reality lying in our bed,
for one brief moment I feel his arms
wrap around me and it's like he's not even gone.

Wedding Poem

by Wendy Barry

Think of yourselves as going on a long journey
who knows where.
You're pulling a two story wagon
over impossible terrain.
And you're taking the most difficult route
following the advice of the wrong people.
There will be endless taunting laughter
echoing from the canyon walls
and arrows, inexplicably, in your oxen.
Cast out and separate, you'll wander the desert
bickering and squabbling over who carries what.
Mostly you'll be hungry--
a gnawing desire in your bones--
so hungry you'll suck the lichen from the rocks
and chew on the bark of trees.
Finally, winter's night will fall upon you
Dropping down like a beast from the trees, covering
the world in white.
Your hands will be cut,
your wagon broken—
Look at each other and remember:
This is the one above all others
You have sworn not to eat.

The Darker Touch

by Alexandra Sweeney

I like to touch your tattoos in the dark,
this way I can't see them. I know exactly
where they are. I know by heart the precise
lines of lightning pulsating across
your chest, I can find them, as if by impulse, the green
blades of grass on your forearm where a tiger
camouflages in, glaring outward. When I pull you

to me, I take you in until we're useless
and silent between the sheets, I kiss
the engraved pictures on your flesh. Permanent ink,
committed and bold. Position me like a tattoo,
let me be everlasting on your body. Till death do us part
there will still be the stains. Fingers laced,
I sit and touch your tattoos in the dark.

Inharmonious

by Jake A Martinez

When I fall asleep, there is an anti-parallel universe
that patiently waits in loneliness
Like a longing lover staring into a black pool of still water
She sighs into the breeze because she can't distinguish
the sable sky from the surrounding darkness
She finds herself lost in the night of closed eyelids
Waiting not for me—but *anti*-me
The one who knows how to make her smile

And when I wake up later, late calling
Late arriving—late apologizing
We sit in her car listening to the patter of rain
Slamming against the metal roof, peeling the charcoal
paint at an infinitesimally slow rate
I mention that the percussive rain clouds above are grooving in 6/8
Almost like freeform jazz—rebellious, chaotic in appearance
but actually a beautiful thing
The rhythm is unanticipated, offbeat
The melody is selfless and gentle
She says, *It's more like they're crying—oblivious*
to each others' tears, not able to compose themselves
I nod, looking ahead into the smoky overcast
and tell her, *No, no—I'm hearing alternating triplets*
With a downbeat that's really the rhythm of the blues

The Empty Sign

by Dasha Bulatov

The empty sign in the southwestern desert shifts
upon its stage, wavers in the swell of the road.
We scuttle through the blood slate of the sand,
west to Arizona, to Sedona with its vortices
and a meteor's crater, galactic shards of tectonics
scathing upwards, all wounded and hallucinatory.
Alexander says we're a long way out of Julian,
its sunflowers and juniper horizons, but we don't need
the map of the sign, he says the sun is enough,
and his instincts, my body in the car steaming
red shedding salt from the ocean into the rough
of the land is enough, and he covers me
with the gritty blanket to mean I should sleep
through the worst of it, the worst spin of vultures
in the August desert and the heat of their friction.
And once we hit the Sonora, where I feel my
first hate and ache, it's no stopping till Mexico,
as if all of America were the desert we know
from its parts. Alexander promises me a bed there
where he will press into my neck, promises me
a basket full of sand dollars and beige linens,
rooted sunflowers in a terracotta pot only
if we spend nothing till then, nothing at all,
and then he tenses his forearms
against the curve of the road.

My Sister-in-law Was a Better Cook

by Kay Doss

The first time,
My brother forgot to put the strawberries
In his daughter, Mickey's, strawberry birthday cake.
The second time, sugar, and the third time,
He only used one oven mitt and burned his left hand,
Dropping the cake on the kitchen tile.

I sat Mickey on the sink counter and stared
At the ruined cake on the floor below us.
Chewing on a beret from her hair,
She kicked the drawers behind me
To make visible the lights on her sneakers.

Would you like me to do it, Mack? I asked.
He shook his head as I cleaned the tile.
She's only two; she won't care if it's store bought.
He said homemade was the family tradition.

Carol would never have fucked up her cake,
He muttered, and picked Mickey up from the counter,
And kissed her, stroking the heart shaped pendant
Passed down to her from the mother she'd never know.

The three of us stared at the strawberry mess.
What do I do? He asked.
Start over, I said.

Another Ending

by Suzanne Roberts

after Ruth Stone

At the end of the poem, the lovers
are in the hotel room—the man has returned,
the last line dwells on his cock, rising
to the heavens. But it seems to me,
the real ending is that the woman
once again lies in the wide bed alone.
I can see her through the creases in the blinds,
there in the empty-walled room,
the dusky shadows trace across her body
like bars, the starched sheets tangled
at her ankles. She is smoking a cigarette.
He has returned home to his wife. Gone,
the ache, that loose-limbed desire, replaced
by an empty suitcase she will refill and carry home.

Contributor Notes

Bipin Aurora has worked as an economist, an energy analyst, and a systems analyst. His fiction has appeared in *Quarterly West, Epiphany, Harpur Palate, Prism Review,* and *North Atlantic Review*, and is forthcoming in *Quiddity, Southern Indiana Review, Southern Humanities Review, Puerto del Sol*, and *Eclipse: A Literary Journal.*

Wendy Berry teaches Composition and Literature in the English Department at Trident Technical College, and has her Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University where she studied poetry and writing with Mark Jarman. She is the coeditor of *The Annotated Anne of Green Gables* from Oxford University Press.

Tyler Bigney was born in 1984. He lives, and writes in Nova Scotia, Canada. His poems, short stories, and travelogues have appeared in *Third Wednesday, Iodine Poetry Journal, Nerve Cowboy*, and *Turbulence*.

Vanessa Blakeslee is a graduate of the MFA in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She attended the 2010 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in the *New York Quarterly*, *Illuminations, Italian Americana, The Sow's Ear Poetry Review, Southern Poetry Review* and other places. She directs the Maitland Poets & Writers, a community organization which focuses on expanding the literary arts throughout Central Florida.

Teresa Breeden was a recipient of the 2007 Nevada Arts Council Fellowship for Literature, and has had poems published in the *California Quarterly, Cold Mountain Review, Loonfeather, Spillway* and *Best New Poets 2010* among others. Her best two poems are her children.

Meghan L. Bucknell is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Dasha Bulatov has served on the editorial team for *The Berkeley Fiction Review* and *14 Hills*. Her work has previously been published in *The Berkeley Poetry Review* and *CLAM*.

Andrew Crimmins is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Janann Dawkins' work has featured in *decomP*, *Existere*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Phoebe, Two Review* & more. Leadfoot Press published her chapbook *Micropleasure* in 2008. Twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize, she resides in Ann Arbor.

Grant Tierney Dehne is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Kay Doss is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College. She enjoys writing, has over 74 stuffed animals on her twin bed, and pours Tapatío on everything she eats. Except ice-cream. Ice-cream taste fine just the way it is.

Michael Dubon has lived in Nevada all his life, in Incline Village and Sparks. He is working on his associate degree in English at Truckee Meadows Community College. Writing thrills him. He write for his enjoyment and for others. He hopes to one day create something inspiring of this joy.

Samantha Elliott is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Benjamin Evans is the editor of the arts review, *Fogged Clarity* (http://foggedclarity.com). His poetry, essays, and reviews have appeared in many print and online publications.

Sean Evans is a Hogrefe Fellow and first-year M.F.A. student in creative writing at Iowa State University. He is from Oxford, Mississippi.

Buck Feero is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Nathan Graziano lives in Manchester, New Hampshire, with his wife and two children. He is the author of three books of poetry *After the Honeymoon* (Sunnyoutside, 2009), *Teaching Metaphors* (Sunnyoutside, 2007), *Not So Profound* (Green Bean Press, 2004), and a collection of stories, *Frostbite* (GBP, 2002). His work has appeared in *Rattle, Night Train, Freight Stories, Word Riot, Sententia,* and others. For more information, visit his website: www.nathangraziano.com.

Andrei Guruianu is the author of three previous collections of poems and currently teaches at North Central College in Illinois. From 2009 to 2010 he served as the Broome County, NY Poet Laureate. More of his work can be found at www.andreiguruianu.com.

Charles Haddox's lives in El Paso, Texas. His work has appeared in a number of journals including the *Concho River Review*, *The Sierra Nevada Review*, *Folio* and *Switchback.*

Jeff Hardin has poems appearing in recent and forthcoming issues of *The Hudson Review, The Southern Review, Southwest Review, Ploughshares, Poetry Northwest, Hotel Amerika, Gargoyle, The Gettysburg Review*, and others. He is the author of two chapbooks and one collection, *Fall Sanctuary*, which received the 2004 Nicholas Roerich Prize.

Amy Hendrickson is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Arian Katsimbras has had poetry and prose published in previous issues of *The Meadow*.

Alan King's poems have appeared in *Alehouse, Audience, Boxcar Poetry Review, Indiana Review, MiPoesias* and *RATTLE*, among others. A Cave Canem fellow and VONA Alum, he's been nominated for both a Best of the Net selection and Pushcart Prize. When he's not reporting or sending poems to journals, you can find Alan chasing the muse through Washington, D.C. — people watching with his boys and laughing at the crazy things strangers say to get close to one another.

R. L. Kurtz was raised in Mansfield Ohio. He graduated from East Carolina University in '98 with a Masters in Literature. He has traveled extensively around the world and is currently working as Director of an English School in Taiwan.

Jim Lamoreux was born in Long Beach California in 1949. He was raised in Southern California until 1968 when he graduated from Sunny Hills High School. That year he entered the Army and served there for three years. He was in Vietnam during the Tet of 1969. Jim has been writing ever since grade school. A graphic artist, he has been illustrating his stories ever since he was a child. Currently he has a book of illustrated work titled "Patient 444 and Other Short Stories" offered through the major book vendors. Jim currently lives with his wife Leandra, cat "Suzi" and Amazon Parrot "Patrick" in a home in northern Reno very close to TMCC.

Karen Levy is an American-Israeli writer with an M.A. in English, creative writing from California State University where she teaches composition. Her most recent work has appeared in *The Blue Moon Literary & Art Review* and *So to Speak*. "The Stain" is an excerpt from her memoir, *My Father's Gardens*.

Joanne Lowery's poems have appeared in many literary magazines, including *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Eclipse, roger, Cottonwood,* and *Poetry East.* Her most recent collection is the chapbook, *Scything,* published by FutureCycle Press. She lives in Michigan.

Jake A. Martinez is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Dave Malone is the author of two books of poetry, most recently *Under the Sycamore* (Elder Mountain Press). His poems have appeared in *decomP, Elder Mountain, Mid Rivers Review, Red Rock Review, San Pedro River Review,* and *Word Riot.* He teaches part-time at Missouri State University-West Plains.

Jerry D. Mathes II is a Jack Kent Cooke Scholar alum. He has published in numerous journals. His most recent poetry collection is *The*

Journal West. He teaches writing at Stephen F. Austin State University, fights wildfire on a helicopter-rappel crew during the summer and taught the Southernmost Poetry Workshop in the World at South Pole Station, Antarctica during the 2009-2010 summer season. He loves his two daughters very much.

Michael P. McManus' awards in poetry include a Fellowship from the Louisiana Division of the Arts, The Virginia Award from The Lyric, and The Ocean's Prize from *Sulphur River Literary Review*.

Lacie Morgan is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Nicole Navarro is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Lindsey Neely was born and raised in Georgia, and she is a student at Georgia College & State University, and will be graduating in May 2011. Her major is English with a concentration in Creative Writing.

Ifeanyichukwu Onyewuchi is a Christian, Nigerian, literary geek, optimist, Mad-Hatterist, technology enthusiast, a fighter not a lover (but he's a lover too so don't get it twisted). He is a gentle savage; an electrical engineer with work experience at Apple Inc., but also a poet seeking after God's heart.

Sean Prentiss is an assistant professor of Writing at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He can be reached at seanprentiss@gmail.com.

Suzanne Roberts is the author of four collections of poetry: *Shameless* (2007), *Nothing to You* (2008), *Three Hours to Burn a Body* (Cherry Grove Collections, 2011), and *Plotting Temporality* (Forthcoming from Pecan Grove Press, 2011). She is also the author of a memoir, *Almost Somewhere: 28 Days on the John Muir Trail* (forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press). Suzanne holds degrees in biology and creative writing and a doctorate in literature and the environment from the University of Nevada-Reno. She currently lives in South Lake Tahoe, California where she teaches English at Lake Tahoe Community College. For more information, please visit her website at www.suzanneroberts.org.

Erika Robles has graduated from TMCC and is currently furthering her education. She has lived in Reno since 2003 and considers it a great community. She is an artist, a writer, and self educator.

Stephen Schlatter is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Robby Schlesinger is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Tara Mae Schultz is a second year MFA candidate in poetry at the University of Memphis. She is also the senior poetry editor for the award-winning journal, *The Pinch*. She has work published or forthcoming in *The Los Angeles Review, Connotation Press*, and *The Southern Women's Review*.

David Shattuck is a professor of poetry and composition. He has had a few poems published in *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Quercus Review*, *Midwest Literary Magazine* and *Cold Mountain Review*.

Nathan Slinker lives and writes in Central Oregon. He is a graduate of the creative writing program at the University of Nevada, Reno. He often sojourns into the wilderness after something but is never sure what he finds there. His poems have been published previously in *the Meadow* and recently in *Brushfire*.

Alexandra Sweeney is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Karen Terrey teaches creative writing at Sierra Nevada College and at Tangled Roots Writing in Truckee, CA, as well as serving as poetry editor for *Quay*, a literary journal. She earned her MFA from Goddard College and is a recipient of a Sierra Arts Endowment Grant. She blogs at www.karenaterrey.blogspot.com.

Caitlin Thomas has had a poem published in a previous issue of *The Meadow*.

Kimberly Thompson is currently a student at Truckee Meadows Community College working towards acceptance into the Nursing program. She is a mother to an 19th month old beautiful boy who inspires her daily to be her best self and a wife to her amazing husband who supports all her endeavors.

Kymmo Valenton was born in Olongapo City on the Philippine island of Luzon. When he was five, he moved to Lake Forest, California, a small city in Orange County. Whimsical tide pool adventures, sand castle mote digging, and dancing in the sea during tropical typhoons splash his memories. He is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Harry Wilson is a retired professor of art at Bakersfield College. His photographs have been exhibited widely and published in *Zyzzyva, The Sun, Rolling Stone, Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Artweek*, among others. His work can be seen online at www.harrywilsonphoto.com.

D.O.A. Worrell attended Georgia State University where he studied various forms of creative writing including screenwriting, poetry and fiction. After graduation Dwain became an instructor at New Oriental University

in Beijing. During this time Dwain has published numerous short stories including: "Fermi's Paradox" for Black Matrix Publishing and "The Little Things" for Black Magnolias, to name a few. He has also penned the screenplay for the feature film: *Walking the Dead*. Dwain is currently the head professor of English Literature at New Oriental University in China.

Maya Jewell Zeller's first book, *Rust Fish*, is due out next year (2011) from Lost Horse Press, and individual poems can recently be found in *Rattle, High Desert Journal, Cirque*, and the anthology *New Poets of the American West*. Maya teaches English at Gonzaga University.

Submission Guidelines

We accept only e-mail submissions. Submit your work as described below to meadow@tmcc.edu between September 1 and February 1.

Sponsored Cash Prizes

In past issues, the Student Government Association of TMCC has sponsored cash prizes for the winners of the Meadow literary, art and design contests. Through a blind submission process, the editorial board chooses finalists in four categories: fiction, poetry, nonfiction, art/photography and cover design. An independent committee selects the first-place winners from among the student body. Only TMCC students are eligible for cash prizes.

Submission Guidelines

After reading the submission guidelines below, send your submission to meadow@tmcc.edu.

We welcome submissions of poetry, fiction, screenplay, nonfiction, artwork, graphic design, comics and photography, preferably high-contrast artwork that will reproduce well in print. We cannot accept original artwork of any kind. Please scan artwork and send through e-mail as an attachment. Because all submissions must be sent via e-mail, we prefer to receive submissions as an attachment (in .doc, .rtf or jpg format). Cover design must be sent as .pdf.

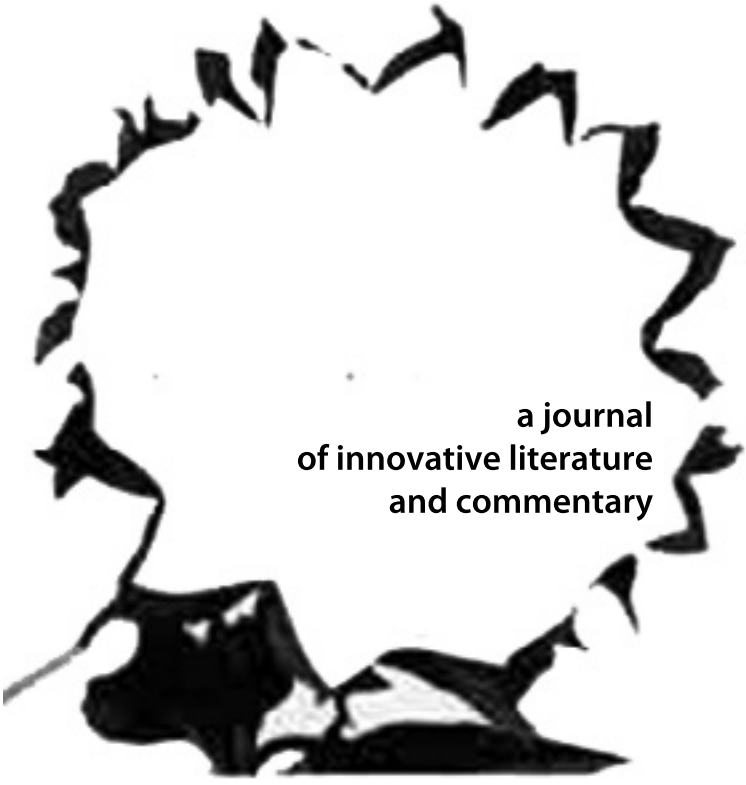
Do not paste submissions into the e-mail.

All e-mail submissions must be accompanied by contact information (name, address, telephone and e-mail) and brief (less than 50 words) biography—include the title(s) of each piece submitted in the e-mail. We do not accepted previously published work, but we will consider simultaneous submission and expect to be notified immediately of acceptance elsewhere.

We will accept up to 6 poems, photos or art pieces or 1 work of prose (fiction or nonfiction) from each author or artist. Prose may not exceed 4,500 words.

Please put all poems into one attachment. Do not send in individual attachments.

Your name may not appear anywhere on the pieces submitted as we read all submissions without names.



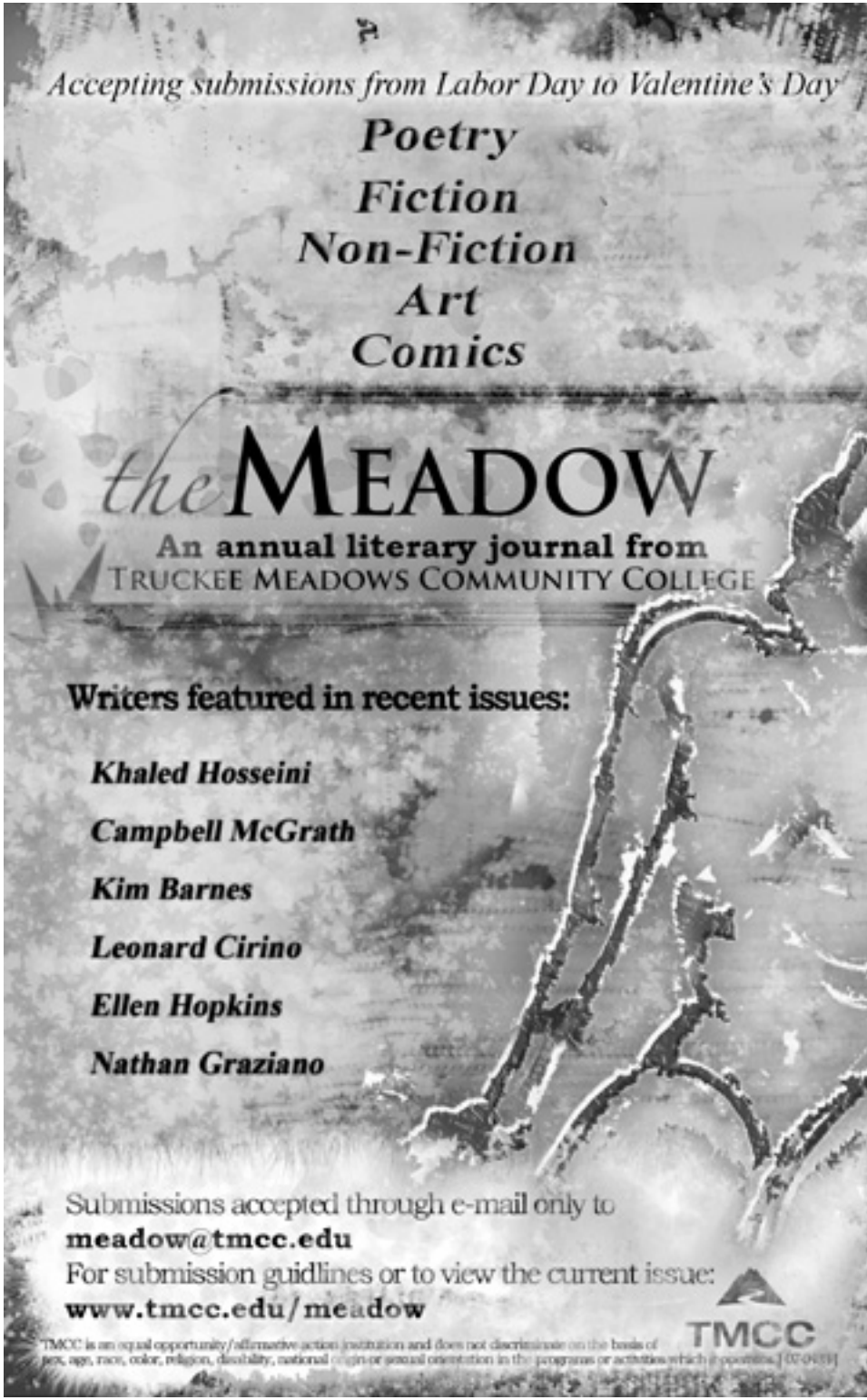
Quarter After Eight

is pleased to announce

The 2011 ROBERT J. DEMOTT SHORT PROSE CONTEST

Submit your prose-poem, short-short fiction, essay-in-brief, etc. of 500 words of fewer.

$1000 prize * $15 reading fee * Dec. 1, 2011 deadline
www.quarteraftereight.org


Accepting submissions from Labor Day to Valentine's Day
Poetry
Fiction
Non-Fiction
Art
Comics
the MEADOW
An annual literary journal from
TRUCKEE MEADOWS COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Writers featured in recent issues:
Khaled Hosseini
Campbell McGrath
Kim Barnes
Leonard Cirino
Ellen Hopkins
Nathan Graziano
Submissions accepted through e-mail only to
meadow@tmcc.edu
For submission guidlines or to view the current issue:
www.tmcc.edu/meadow
TMCC
TMCC is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution and does not discriminate on the basis of
sex, age, race, color, religion, disability, national origin or sexual orientation in the programs or activities which it operates.