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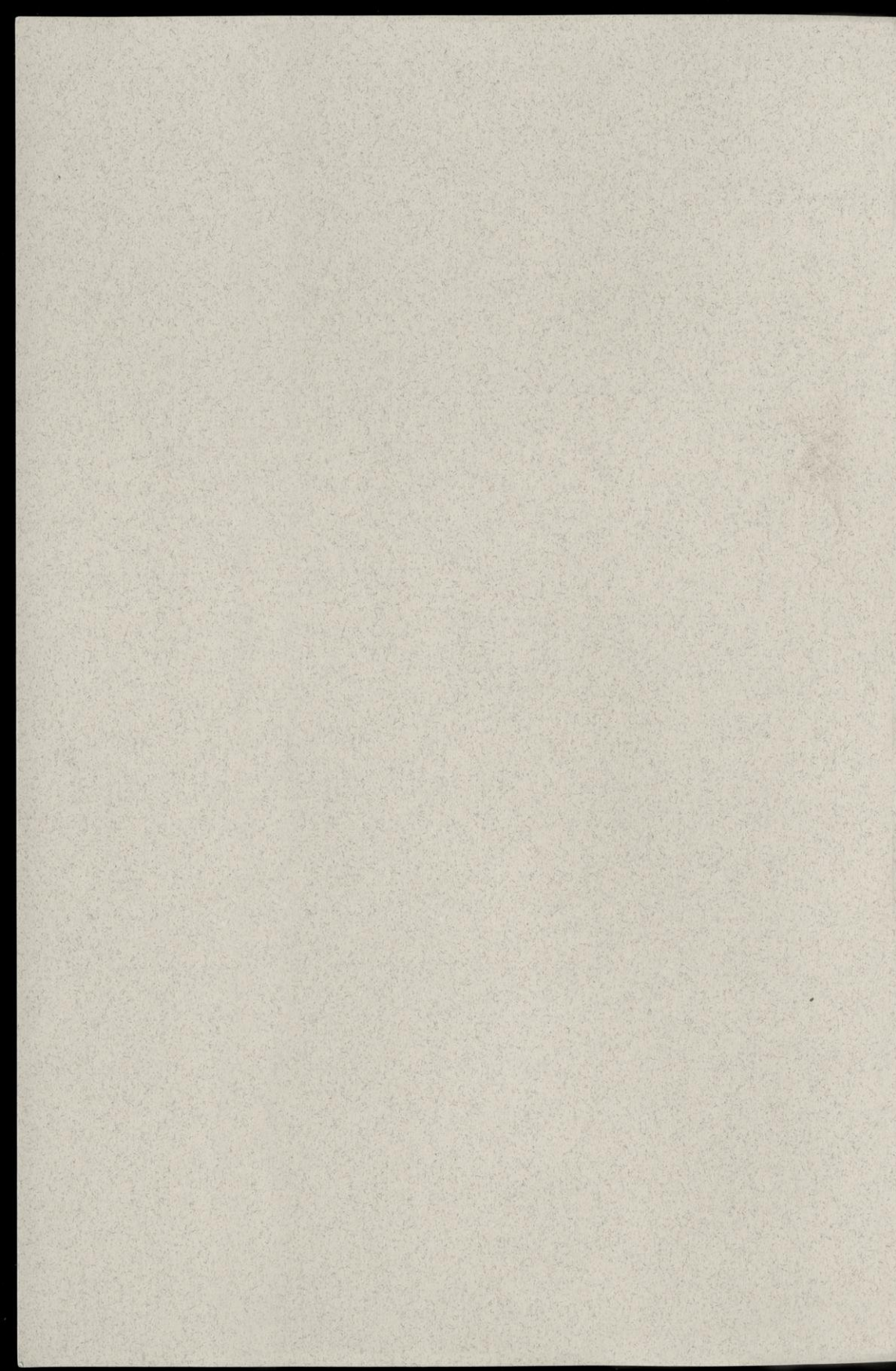
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# WINDY HILL REVIEW







# WINDY HILL REVIEW

**27<sup>th</sup> Edition**  
**2005**

University of Wisconsin – Waukesha

1500 N. University Drive

Waukesha, Wisconsin 53188



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Photo taken by Dan Fehler  
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The Windy Hill Staff would like to thank all of the writers  
and artists who contributed their creative works to this collection.

## Courting Form

Carol Deprez

Villanelle, pantoum, sestina,  
how shall I court a notion?  
Triolet, quatrain, haiku,  
is formula a magic potion?

Can a sonnet caress more tender?  
Is a ballad more sweetly sung?  
Might a madrigal lighten the mood?  
Does rhyme slip smoothest off the tongue?

'Tis vital to choose with caution  
as meaning will suffer the error  
for a love poem posed as a limerick  
might nip a budding affair.

## **Mood Reliever**

James Kaczmarek

If the day seems middling somber,  
drizzle maybe, fog, whatever.  
Grab a cup of coffee, tee,  
and spend some time with poetry.

Just the thing to make one calmer.  
Simple, really. Not that clever.  
Pick what you choose, or do like me.  
Grab pad, and pen some poetry.

Oh, needn't be some great glamour.  
Need not be some great endeavor.  
Just some words; some world to be;  
some headbone orgy ecstasy.

Pen can be like sculptor's hammer,  
slung with gusto, in a fever.  
Compose words excitedly.  
Know ecstasy be poetry!

Can't recall. Did day start somber?  
Floundered 'round for some whatever.  
Know it closed in magic fever.  
Me a weaver, poetry.



Gravel  
Lisa Malczewski

He drops the smooth green olives in to the martinis one by one. They slide down the curves of the glass before settling on the bottom.

"I don't see why you can't get past this." She glides back towards the giant glass windows. Below her the city roars on. A couple on the corner is huddled together in the dark, arms wrapped around one another waiting for the streetlight to change.

She raises her eyes to meet her own reflection in the glass. Hints of fine lines are beginning to creep around her lips and eyes. Her dark hair blends perfectly with her smooth olive skin. It is always pulled back drastically into a flawless bun.

"You don't see why I can't get past this? That is an outlandish thing to say! I can't get past the way you toss this aside, as if it were a completely natural thing to do."

He hands her a martini and takes a long desperate drink of his own. The cold rush soothes the burning in the back of his throat.

"It is completely natural. I wish you could open your eyes to that. It's just something respectable people never talk about." The way she spits out the word "respectable" sends chills down his spine. Her gravelly voice holds the word and turns it over and over again in her mouth until she has had enough.

The martini has too much vermouth, but she decides against saying thing. He paces to the other side of the office and sets his drink on the bar top. The contrast of his black shoes against her stark white carpeting is irritating her.

"Are you really so foolish to believe this never happens?" She pinches the toothpick between her fingers and watches the olive spin in the glass, doing twirls and curtseys.

"I know it happens, but not to people...people like *us*."

She turns abruptly and looks into his eyes, into his heart, but she doesn't know it's broken. "Of course it does. You are so naïve. My parents, your parents, almost every couple we know, it is so common." She cannot imagine how she got here, with him, why they were even having this conversation.

He can feel his heart race and his hands begin to tremble. He doesn't know what to say. He wants to strike her, but instead finishes his drink and begins making another, a stronger one.

"What are we going to do?" he asks, his voice steady and even.

"What do you mean what are we going to do? There is nothing *to* do. You can't see that. We will wed in May and we will live happily ever after."

He resents the way she is so light and sarcastic about everything. Nothing is ever a catastrophe, never even shocks her. Money could fall from the skies and she would simply shrug her shoulders. She's so emotionless.

He doesn't like to think about the other man touching her, holding her firm smooth breasts, running his lips along hers. If only he could do something, stop her. Maybe just get her to understand the way his heart is shattering.

He didn't come from a family like hers, so saturated in old money, where everything is "completely natural." Still, here he is, madly in love, with nothing he can do. He scowls into his drink.

"You are being so childish; this is not the way to act." She sits at the bar on the opposite end from him and crosses her long tanned legs.

Now he feels as if he has been struck. He fumbles his rough hands into his pockets. They are itching to move towards her, to touch her cheek, her hair. He looks at her cold, dark eyes.

"I...I can't look at you the same way ever again."

## **The Solidity of His Being**

Michelle Murphy

Upon your rough cheek,  
my face has found the softest bed.  
In your silken hair, beauty in every strand,  
my hands have found their home.

My face has found the softest bed  
on the warmth of your body.  
My hands have found a home  
with my face on your chest.

The warmth of your body  
is the pinnacle of my contentedness.  
My face on your chest  
your hands on my face, my hair

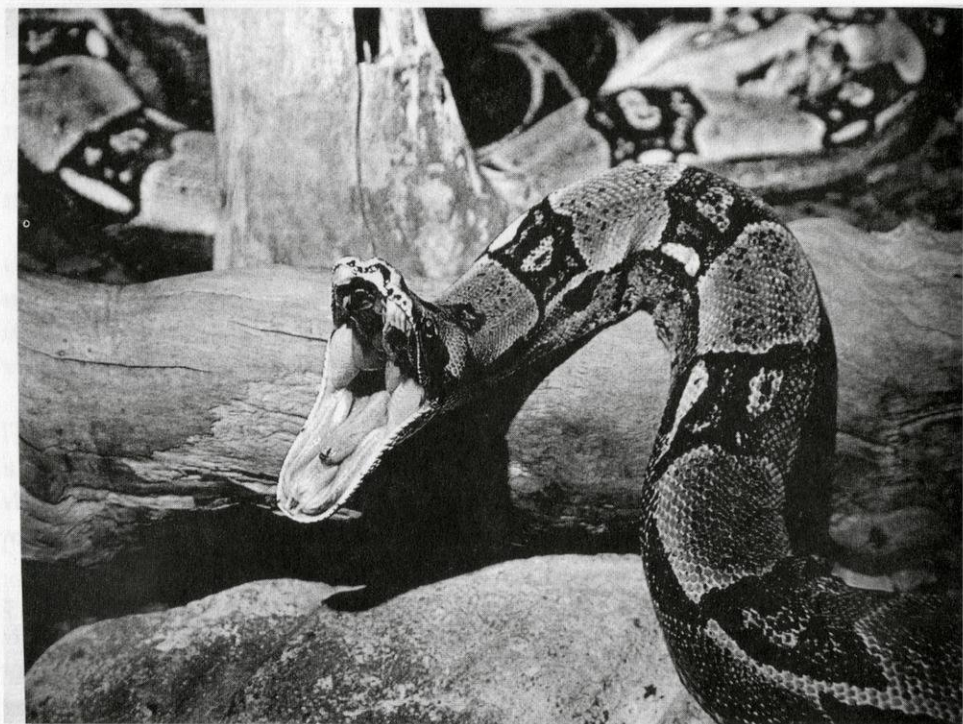
is the pinnacle of my contentedness.  
My body is against yours  
your hands are on my face, in my hair,  
we are breathing in each other's scents.

My body against yours,  
your silken hair, beauty in every strand,  
I am breathing in your scent  
as my face rests upon your rough cheek.

## Ben Hillen

you saved my life, man.  
The day we befriended.





**Caged**  
Molly McGuire

She dreamt again of snow on the ground, whiter than snow could ever be in waking life. There was a trail of blood contaminating its purity - not a lot, but a few drops here and there that gave her a greater feeling of horror than gallons and gallons of it would. She screamed in silence and woke to the whistle of a train, far off, like the muted wail of a ghost in an old horror movie.

She looked at the clock and tried to remember what day it was. The phone rang. She let it go to the machine and from it shrieked her mother's voice behind its calm, polite mask.

"...and I know that you think your Aunt Margot's tea parties are boring... Well, we all think she's odd and hard to bear but she's blood so she must be borne. Besides, it will do you good to get out and socialize, rather than sitting at home and moping about your broken heart. If you don't call me back within ten minutes I'll assume you're sleeping and come over to wake you up myself! Bye, Emma, sweetie."

Emma groaned, threw her legs out of bed, and groped for the phone. She had no wish to see her mother until she absolutely had to.

\* \* \*

They had been fighting more frequently, more violently. He had been drinking a lot more - and more often. Emma could hear herself screaming at him, about the alcohol, about his taste in movies, about the Bible. She chose words that would bite him and strangle him, she wanted to cause him unbearable pain.

"Why don't you come to church with me tomorrow, and I'll prove you wrong?" He was tall and handsome, but blind and oppressive. He thought that women should always agree with their boyfriends, and she refused to submit.

"I'll tell you why. Because your religion is a new-wave cult that won't last more than thirty years. It's a fad. Its purpose is to tell women that they are inferior."

"I've never said that women are inferior."

"But you have, passive-aggressively. You said the bible is the Word of God. That means you think that Paul was speaking with God's voice when he wrote 'Wives, obey your husbands.'"

"The verse right after that says, 'Husbands, love your wives.'"

"Oh, so you'll love me...in return for my complete obedience. What a surprise," Emma overdid the sarcasm, knowing that it was hard for him to pick it out. "I don't want your love if you can't give me respect first."

"Is there something wrong with husbands loving their wives?"

"You're not listening, or you wouldn't keep repeating things like a broken record. You say the same things over and over because you can't think of anything better. I'm superior to you intellectually. It drives you nuts. So you don't listen."

"Now..."

"Don't even try, farm boy. You've never even read a book that wasn't complete garbage. Don't try to argue with me, stupid."

"Okay, Emma, I think this has gone too far. We're obviously never going to be able to fix this now."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you and I have nothing in common."



"What you mean to say is, I won't nod my head and agree with everything you say."

"Okay, sure. But I think it's time we both decided, like adults, to move on."

"Are you breaking up with me? You can't do that. You're not breaking up with me." She looked down at her dress. It was as red as a drop of blood on snow. She closed her eyes.

\* \* \*

Aunt Margot lived alone in the student district, amidst frat houses and art kids and loud drinking parties. Emma hated this part of town - there was never snow or grass on the lawns, just mud. Margot's home was a two-bedroom apartment in a Victorian mansion that had been turned into a three-unit building. It looked like all the other apartment buildings in the area: huge, ancient, and dilapidated.

She sighed as she neared the door and heard jazz playing inside. Every few months or so Aunt Margot threw a tea party, although there was rarely tea involved. Except for when Carol Bryant came. She drank Long Island iced teas.

She knocked on the door and it opened immediately, as if Margot had been waiting to pounce on her. She crossed the threshold and saw the tea set from China catching light on the glass table. Margot attacked her with hugs and compliments on her clothes, weight, and hair. Emma's mother leaned against the far wall in hostility, an oversized martini in her hand. Carol Bryant tried her best to look comfortable on a bean bag by the window, and Emma's cousin Gwen lounged on the sofa. Margot rushed Emma into a chair and rushed her a glass of red wine.

"Now, girls, what shall we do? Trivial Pursuit or tarot cards?" Margot fluttered around the room like a young girl, her own drink in hand. Her hair was dyed crimson and her chipped nail polish was burgundy. She was wearing a dress that looked like it came from India.

"Please, not tarot cards Margot. You know how I feel about them," Emma's mother protested.

"I don't remember. How do you feel about them, Lilly?"

"They're one of the devil's devices."

"Doesn't that sound exciting? Tarot it is, then. Now, where did I put those cards? Maybe in my dresser...I'll be right back..."

Emma's attention was drawn to a white birdcage in the corner. Its door was wide open and there were some peacock feathers sticking out of it decoratively. She stood to get a closer look at it and discovered a photograph placed inside, on the floor. It was a picture that Margot had taken of Emma when she was nine, standing on a bridge and holding a lace parasol that Margot had given her. She remembered it was always her aunt's favorite picture of her. She paused for a moment, then closed the door to the cage, leaving the picture trapped inside.

"I've always wanted a parrot," Margot whispered, right behind her. Emma felt like her heart stopped for a moment. "But I've never had the heart to actually buy one and imprison it."

"I see." Emma tried to calm her breathing.

"I knew you would understand. I've always thought we understood each other best in the family. Because we're both artists."

"Don't be silly," Emma sat down again, "I couldn't draw a stick figure."

"That doesn't mean you're not an artist."



"Doesn't it?"

"There are many different kinds of artists, of course. Many different kinds of art. Painting, writing, drawing, singing . . ."

"And what's Emma's art form, then, dear sister?" Emma's mother asked, her voice tight and shrill.

"Why, her life, of course. Her life, and the way she lives it." Margot winked at her niece.

"I don't understand."

"Well, she got kicked out of school for insubordination. Reads radical books. Mortifies her mother, blasphemes the Lord, gets drunk and causes scenes, amuses herself by telling people outrageous lies and stories."

Emma's mother winced as Gwen chimed in, "Don't forget the institution! Once for attempted suicide and once for drugs!"

"She behaves in ways that no one in the world could possibly understand, considering her good Christian raising. She's ahead of her time, it's positively living art."

The room was silent when Margot finished her tangent, Gwen tried not to laugh and Emma sat staring, unblinking, at her aunt. Her mother's face was a deep purplish-red.

"Margot, sometimes it's hard for me to believe we come from the same womb."

Margot blinked and set her tarot cards on the table. She sat down Indian-style and began to shuffle. Sensing the tension too late, Carol tried to break it.

"How's that handsome boyfriend of yours, Em?"

Lilly put her hand over her eyes and shook her head.

"He...He left. A month ago." Emma lowered her eyes as she felt everyone looking at her.

Her mother nodded and Carol mumbled some kind of apology. Emma waved her arm and accidentally hit her glass of wine. It ran and dripped off the table and created a puddle that spread, like red cancer, through the off-white carpeting.

\* \* \*

She had gripped him, sobbing, trying to claw his shoulders as he tried to calm her.

"Emma, I never meant to hurt you."

"Then please, please," she whispered, "Give me my break-up sex."

"No," he turned away in defiance, "It's over. Nothing you do now is going to change that."

"I'm not trying to get you back. I need it, for closure. It won't hurt anyone!" She felt her eyes starting to burn.

"Yes, it will hurt me. And for Christ's sake, you're crying!"

"Lips that taste of tears, they say, are the best for kissing."

"What?"

"Dorothy Parker, you idiot. The writer."

"I'm just an ignorant farm boy, remember?" He turned his back to her.

"Yes." She wanted her words to thrust into his heart and twist. She imagined it, the look on his face, and all the blood draining out of his body. She smiled.

"Look, I still want to be your friend. I know that everyone says that, and it's not supposed to be sincere, but I mean it."

"No. I won't have that. If you don't give me my break-up sex right now, I'll never speak to you again. I'll hate you until the day I die."

"Don't be like that, Em." He moved to get off the bed, and she leapt up. She couldn't let him leave, not like this.

"I'm too good for you, you know that, right?" She put her hands imposingly on her waist. A flash of lightning in her eyes told him not to move.

"Yes."

"And here I am perverting myself, begging for sex..." She picked up the heavy bronze lamp from the bed-side table, the one he had always said was garish. It was shaped like a naked woman. As the cord ripped from the wall, the light bulb made a popping noise and the room went black. She swung it once with all her love, and heard the thud of it hitting his head. She swung again with all her hate. She felt the sticky drops on the side of the lamp, then reached down to caress the warmth of the new hole in his head.

A month passed and no one came to question her about his disappearance. She started to wonder if it had really happened, what she had dreamt. But it seemed to her that she remembered quite clearly. She remembered the garage door had opened with the roar of a choir of demons, and she had dragged him across the snow, into the woods. She had built an altar and burned him like a sacrifice, shoveled up the scarlet snow, and thrown away the broken lamp. And all the while she was tormented by the vociferous whispers of God and Satan, both of whom looked like her lover. They whispered until she couldn't stand it, so she promptly murdered them, too.

\* \* \*

A wet towel was soaking up the stain on the carpet. Her aunt turned up the last of the seven cards - the King of Pentacles.

"Hmm..." Margot stared at the grape vines in the scenery of the card.

"I killed him."

"Pardon?"

"He didn't leave me. I killed him."

The four others laughed, uncontrollably and without nervousness. She realized they couldn't believe her. She didn't know if she could believe herself. She had done it before. Completely removed a lover from her mind, as if he was dead, to forget him. And it always became like they had died.

"Honey, we've all had to kill the memory of at least one man to survive our lives. It's perfectly normal." Margot put her hands on each card one by one.

"No, I mean it. I really killed him, with the lamp next to my bed."

"Yes, just like Sylvia Plath killed her father, dear." Margot winked.

She knows something, thought Emma. She knows and I don't. And no one else will ever know or believe me, no matter how many times I say it.

"There wasn't that much blood..." She whispered, her face twisted in the horror of someone who would never be the same.

"See what I mean, Lilly? Living art. She's ahead of her time, just like a painting by Picasso. Someday, I think, someone will pay millions of dollars for that."

## **The Light of the Dark Blue Sky**

Derek Andrews

A dark shadow of blue,  
Lit by two bright stars above,  
This beauty I could not construe,  
And in my heart did rise a love.

But then the darkness captivated me,  
I was unable to think of anything but that,  
The dark blue was all I could see,  
I did not know where I was at.

I grew to know the dark,  
For it was always there.  
Then, again I noticed in the sky a spark,  
Lights flickering in the air.

They grew and consumed my mind,  
Two lights engulfed the midnight sky,  
My world became so bright I was blind,  
With a beauty I could not deny.

These lights, these stars so bright,  
Within them I could see such love,  
Day became what was night,  
Lights from above.

This is what in your eyes I have seen,  
A love I could have never known,  
Eyes that make the world serene,  
For now I know I shall never be alone.



## Finding the Quiet

Phyllis Wax

Best of any song is bird song  
in the quiet, but first  
you must have the quiet.

--Simon Ortiz

Three tomatoes sit in a white bowl  
on my windowsill. Three on a stem.  
One is wrinkling, another slightly  
swollen. Once I would have said  
they are waiting to be eaten.

Now  
I say they wait  
to be drawn.

I sit listening  
to Dvorak's New World Symphony,  
the second movement, where horns  
and woodwinds call and sing.  
Once I would have sat and  
let the music soak in.

Now I reach for my pen  
to note the oboe's  
"Where are you? where are you now?"  
the dancing bird-like  
flute, the bull-frog croaking  
in the strings.

Sun shines through spaces  
between clouds. Hardly  
noticed back then.

The way clouds are stretched  
and squeezed, the slant  
and glint of the radiating  
light, the shadows –  
all part of my art  
now.

## The Show

JC Spagnolo

what do you think I should call again later maybe we could go out to dinner and a Broadway show me what you're about to say "no" I wouldn't mind picking you up at 8 great food at a restaurant last week ago Friday I was thinking maybe we could go there are plenty of other places to go out for a drink afterwards to my place in life is becoming much more fulfilling and better than I ever imagined this could become best friends and get married to our jobs so we could afford to pay the mortgage on our new home will have enough rooms for the children to grow up on the hill in the house with the white picket fence so the kids won't get lost or hurt in love because together we will live happily ever after we go out to dinner and a Broadway show

## Aspects of the Oak

Jodie Hlavachek

Deeply grooved crevices in gnarled bark  
Growing moss in green, blue, and yellow shades,  
Chipped shell reveals thick, white twigs underneath.  
Burly, black depths form shapes and figures  
Like a big collage of dense, layered skin.  
Each channel a different highway,  
All heading off the edge. Where does this edge lead?  
Is this edge the start? Grounded roots the end?

Winding, twirling, reaching for the sky  
Hanging so low, almost touching the grass  
Covered in foliage, luscious and green  
Mazes of twigs, swooping, waving, swaying,  
Pointing every which way, leading to  
The surrounding worlds, beyond and below.

## A Call for Justice

Jason Quane

I just busted out of this conventional thinking.  
Nothing good ever came out of my binge drinking.  
Is this my own personal hell I'm sinking?  
Hell no! It's all about these suburban cell bars I'm clinking.

This is just the beginning, There's a lot of pain to get off my chest.  
Everyday I push myself to a new level, taking a harder test.  
God knows all my sins; I have no need to confess.  
About to prove to the world I'm more Uncanny than all the rest.

Cause it's a call for justice I'm screaming for.  
Never shall I let my written words bore.  
Yes I'm gritty like a detective in classic film noir.  
I'm also the man all the lovely ladies adore.

I'm picking up the phone, giving a ring out to the best girl I've known.  
I'm about to show her the best night and call her my own.  
After eleven years it's time to reap the seeds I've sown.  
I'm not illegal yet I'm homegrown.

Baby doll what do you have slated? Yeah I know all your desires are out-dated.  
That joke of a man you're dating is over-rated.  
Just one kiss from me and you'll be elated, never again walking around jaded.  
In one night's time span my image will imprint on your heart and shall never be faded.

It's a call for justice I'm screaming for.  
I'm not gonna let these words bore.  
There is no creeping; I'm stomping through your front door.  
And before you hit the floor, I'll teach you the new score.

Soon the day will come that you have to lay this hero to rest.  
Remember I always pushed the bar to remain the best.  
Even during my Last Rites the Preacher will attest;  
"Today we lost a gifted talent and his work I must address."

His sermons always begin with my words that have become legendary lore.  
Cause I've spent my whole life teaching lessons on escaping poverty and sleeping with whores.  
Living was no longer a chore and fearing what the devil had in store.  
I stared down my inner Satan and asked "don't you have any more?"



## **The Beat of the Street**

Ben Hillen

Nothing so free as riding the sun,  
nothing so great as this board on my feet.  
Riding a summer day as a cowboy rode one,  
my prairie is an expanse of concrete.  
Tunes bathe my eager eardrums  
from hardcore to rock to R and B.  
J-rock spurs me to have some fun,  
from the street to the sidewalk I ollie.

Kik-tak my wheels meet the slats,  
expansion joints greet me warily  
like old friends united after winter spat  
ice between us. It's now melted and we  
can get on like before; everything ok.  
We'll rock through this summer our own way.

## **A Poem for Lust**

Paul Robert Ceretto

Frustration  
in the penetration  
eyes dimming in fading light  
soon to let loose, all you hold dear  
fearless body flies, on the wings of the mind

Consequences  
in the pretensions  
eyes open to the morning light  
foolishly broken a struggle to fight

Illumination  
in the attraction  
blind truth only sees desire  
obsession feeding a lusting fire

## **Back Alley**

Robert Kokan

In the bleak back of the diner is an alleyway no one's ever heard of  
and maybe even God doesn't know it exists  
lined with tin trash cans dented with dreams of leaving  
The shadows of brick buildings with huge hunched shoulders  
bend and peer down into the nativity of this holy dust-hole  
where all life is tiny and waiting  
and a one-eyed cat lives on dinner scraps  
not even bothering the mice because deep inside  
he knows they are brothers of the void  
Brown little souls trying to light up heaven  
but only shining a match-head moment of promise  
in this black back alley of forgotten pavements

Anyway, I like this little hide-away spot for its solitudes  
In the summer there is a warm wind that knows me  
and we have great grey discussions of sky and catch up  
on our where've-you-beens that take up most of the day  
until we are both blown out and return to our long slow breathings  
of time ticking away

Everybody should have a small piece of world like this  
where they can hide and be shrouded fog-like  
Because the world covers over sadness  
and doesn't want to see sorrow  
But we have no choice in worlds  
and anyway what's the difference  
it all leads to graveyards

## Let Me

James Cooper

Let me walk in the warm summer sun  
Let me know that all I have done  
Has truly made a difference, has mattered  
For I can't bear to think of a life shattered

He tries to talk, he tries to tell me  
Somehow, somehow I don't hear  
How could I be so blind as to not see?  
That all he needs from me is to be near

I think about all I could do  
Yet, some force denies me the chance  
Will I do what is right and true?  
I must make a move, let me take a stance

Yet, will I ever know the true result of this move?  
And do my actions matter to anyone  
We all have something to prove  
From the challenge, you cannot run

Let me feel the truth of this life  
I have begged for it for all time  
I need to know there was a reason for all this strife  
And if this feeling is truly sublime

We may never know the true meaning  
Of this life we fight for  
But we must continue our fight  
To allow the opening of the door

Will the door open?  
Will they let me?



## **Spewing Lies of Love and Happiness**

Michelle Murphy

I see you there  
standing all alone, save  
for your  
endless grin  
that seems carved from bloody stone.  
Your eyes have never been so cold,  
yours is the gaze of a dead man,  
you gave me more than you had known,  
it seems.

I am no longer bound to you,  
as your tongue has sharpened with  
age.

You lick your teeth  
as you leave,  
confident with the fact  
that I am broken  
and my wounds are  
filled with dirt and grime.

My shield of indifference  
has imbedded itself  
into my hands.  
I need no one but  
myself,  
although I would love to see you  
undone,  
to see you alone,  
bleeding.

Your words were like razors  
which I swallowed down to erase the pain.  
I can be content with myself  
knowing that if I spit them back at you,  
they will eagerly make their way  
to your tender skin.

## Just a Little Teapot.

Dan Fisher

My eyes snapped open. There was half a moment, no, maybe less than that, when I had forgotten, had let myself forget in the blissful blur of sleep-encrusted thoughts. Not that it was a deep sleep; those healthy delicious sleeps were a thing of the past. No, sleep now was liquor-induced hazy slumber, 2:00 AM binges leaving my tongue rough and dry. I drank till I couldn't see the bottle anymore, my lips too heavy to part, and still I knew. The inevitable doom that lay before me on my kitchen table, scattered on the floor, and locked in my mailbox.

I stared at a spot directly about my head. The apartment I lived in was too old, too loud, and too small. And now the fucking ceiling. Cracks every which way, a road map of worries. I laughed out loud. Last night, in a particularly horrible binge of tequila therapy, I had seen teakettles in the lines. Not the happy blue and white tea pots of serene youth but severe steel monstrosities just waiting to scream when it got too hot to handle in their metal bellies. But this was not a warped Fantasia, this was my life. No Mickey with a wand to make the broomsticks pay the insurance agency (though to be honest there had been several dancing elephants in my bed lately, thought hardly as graceful as Walt's ladies).

I rolled over and stared at the clock. I squinted and tried to make the numbers blur to oblivion but it was not to be. 9:00 AM. 9:00 AM and I was already hopeless. I started my mental list. The list that clicked off in my head every moment of every waking hour. With me in my bed (more reliable than any women had been), with me at work (if a college educated man working at Kinko's for \$7.35 an hour could be called anything but a disgrace), even with me in the damn bathroom. Not a moment's privacy. The insurance bills, electric, heat, oh, and of course rent for this penthouse deluxe. *I could feel the sweat build up on my lip, the salty taste of panic.*

The heat washed over me in a near insatiable wave. Great, the landlord had cranked the heat again. One climate control for the whole damn building and the man claimed his dog got the "springtime chills." *It must have been 90 degrees...and a damp heat at that.* Oppressive, like Louisiana in August. "But it's not Louisiana," I muttered half-heartedly as I rose to my feet. One glance out the window confirmed it. Milky smog smothered Baltimore; April never looked so wrong.

"Cozy living room, adorable kitchen," the landlord had said with a smug delight. He knew I couldn't afford anything better than this hole. I walked into the "cozy" crawlspace and stared at the calendar. The fifth. The anniversary of misery, school loans were now three months overdue.

The sweat got stickier on my forehead. I glanced from the bills to my shirt, it was disgusting. Traces of the red sea could be seen parting on the soaked tee. I peeled it over my head and splashed cold water on my face. *I swear I heard it sizzle.* I threw on a sweatshirt and headed to the door.

Two weeks prior I had hit a car at 2:00 AM after drowning my sorrows at some pub for scumbags. But that's what people who got into accidents while drunk were, scumbags. The police officer stared through the car window with complete contempt, as if I didn't graduate from Loyola at the top of my class. As if I had meant to do this, wanted to be stuttering drunk, terrified of a pitiless fate. At least I had a few weeks with my car until I would be forced by the Baltimore city court onto public transportation, fumbling for change while old ladies with purple tinted hair stared with smug smiles.

Their sons had just bough their third Honda, and this one from the NEW lot nonetheless. And there I would be, a grown man on public transportation.

I could have sworn the temperature outside the door said 52 degrees, but it was much more. *Millions of mercury measurements from that notch.* I shrugged off my jacket and began down the street to my soon-to-be orphaned vehicle.

Oh, and the car. The only piece of my dignity left had been disfigured by the wreck. Like a facelift gone bad, the car was reduced, embarrassed, obviously entrusted to someone who couldn't perform their required duties. It was a 1981 Mustang convertible, with a shiny red top. All of a sudden it became a 1981 piece of shit. And that didn't stop the tickets from being piled on top, shingling my dented roof with city fines. I believe there must have been twelve in all, oh, and the two under the seat...

*I was on fire now, seat pouring from my crevasses. I could feel the steam off the pavement as I stepped.* And since when had the car been so far away? I could have sworn I had parked it on this block.

The car. It wasn't there. Wasn't anywhere. My only piece of dignity left, my only speck of decency torn from its parking spot by the city tow truck.

*I couldn't breathe. The heat. The unquenchable heat.*

I was steaming now, my mouth opened without command. Just dropped.

I knelt, curled into a ball and screamed. A long, high pitched scream. Almost too uncomfortable for my own ears to bear.

But they weren't my ears and in a moment it was clear. I was nothing, I saw everything.

I screamed once more, tried to clutch the pavement with broad scraping motions but it was too late.

And as the steam rose and my panic boiled over I did what I could. On that 52 degreed April morning, as my landlord's "spring chilled" dog yipped from the window, *it all just evaporated.*

( and I exploded.)



## **The Ballad of a Wounded Doe**

Ramon Klitzke

A woodland nymph on early morn  
Cast about her eyes  
Her forest home, gray with mist  
Filled with anguished cries.

Wistful plaints of suffering  
Echoed through the pine  
Drawing her unerringly  
To a woodland shrine.

There she found a wounded doe  
Her body racked with pain  
A tiny fawn beside her stood  
Urged her rise, in vain.

The nymph knelt down beside the doe  
Stroked her heaving side  
Whispered magic comfort words  
Bade the pain subside.

The doe in deep-felt gratitude  
Eyed her kindly kneeler  
Embraced her with a tranquil look  
Thanked her woodland healer.

The fawn impatient urged the doe  
To rise and flee the place  
She arose and walked away  
In a measured pace.

Into the forest, gray with mist  
Into whence she came  
A forest, doe, wounded once  
Now whole, but not the same.

-Ramon Klitzke

## To Those Who Wait

Jodie Hlavachek

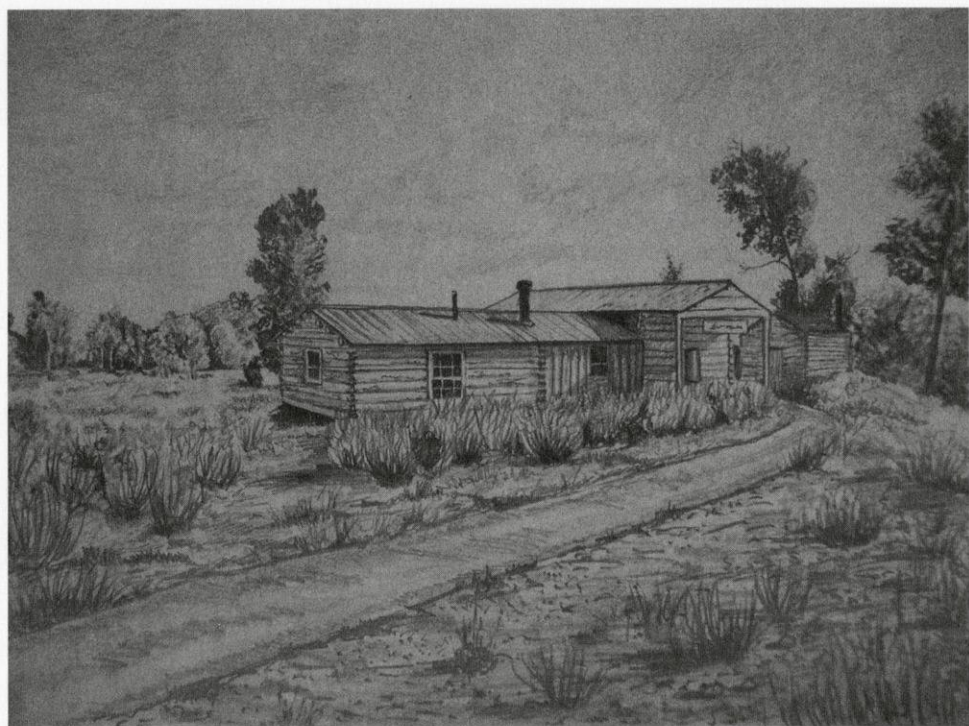
bare branch  
stands alone  
among luscious red surroundings

empty twigs point out  
the naked difference like  
a blade of grass revealed  
to a bed of roses

dull  
yet seemingly serene  
caterpillar waits to emerge from cocoon

dead cold silence  
never complains  
somehow knows will soon blossom  
like an oyster creating a pearl

bare branch  
Bring me your patience.



check their midnight watches  
their wives sleep sewing at the kitchen  
lumber along a riverbank in the deep shade  
of forest in America  
Everything asleep in shadows and we cut right through  
the shadows as angles  
flashed along by rock hard Pennsylvania coal  
on beautiful Pittsburgh steel  
On an incline now I can feel  
the tired pull of the engine  
straining for the top of the world  
The great grey crest of the west  
Suddenly I'm crying in a melancholy sadness of wishes  
that I knew some sweet girl in California  
out there on the last edge of the land  
in her evening dress  
waiting for my return



## Flat Nebraska Sky

Robert Kokan

Riding again all the old forgotten rails  
This boxcar berth my traveling home  
Crossing the great expanse of pre-western lands  
Clear night under flat-Nebraska sky  
Lights shining in the distant towns  
too far off the tracks to care about anything but  
the darkness and the toothless hopes of plains farmers  
in their boots and pipes lit by the evening fire  
Rustling the newspaper like leaves  
piling up by Autumn's interminable door

But we go chugging through  
tie by lonesome tie  
with a half-hearted toot at an old gravel crossroad (where nobody stops  
anyway)  
to chase the devil off the track  
and make all the old lumbago dirt-farmers  
check their midnight watches  
their wives slowly sewing as the darkness  
lumbers along uneventful in the deep cradle  
of nestled in America  
Everything asleep in shadows and we cut right through  
mysterious as angles  
Hauled along by rock hard Pennsylvania coal  
on beautiful Pittsburg steel

On an incline now I can feel  
the tired pull of the engines  
straining for the top of the world  
The great grey crest of the west  
Suddenly I'm crying in a melancholy sadness of wishes  
that I knew some sweet girl in California  
out there on the last edge of the land  
in her evening vespers  
praying for my return

## **Snapshot of Meadow**

Cailin Major

Fields full of green life  
Nothing artificial,  
But linear clouds dragged by jets.

Indigo to my left is disguised as asparagus,  
But it doesn't fool me.  
Prairie-Smoke at my foot waits patiently  
For me to appreciate Her exotic beauty-  
Fragile, but as majestically purple as a Queen.

Chirping birds, rustling leaves, swaying trees  
Sparrows flutter in and out of view,  
Chasing mates and clouds  
A hawk gracefully soars over the ground,  
Stalking a naïve victim  
Red-winged Black bird comes in the frame  
And is gone again

Hawk disappears  
One casualty.

### **Alone on a Beautiful Night**

Derek Andrews

This night is clear and dark,  
Stars and moon are shining bright.  
The only sound is the faint chirp of a lark,  
All is lit by the moon's glowing light.

Dew soaks my feet,  
My shadow is long and black.  
I'm alone in this empty field of wheat,  
All this beauty and there's still something I lack.

There's no one here but me,  
No one to share this sight.  
The stars and the moon are all I see,  
All alone on this glorious, beautiful night.

### **Verbal Barrage**

Barbara Bache-Wiig

Assaults to the heart  
create wounds which  
fester if not opened to the air  
cleaned and debrided to remove  
the noxious residue of  
sharp words exchanged

Tools different from the  
original weapons plus  
time, patience, and  
the will to forgive  
generate health that heals.



## Interrupting Everyday

Andrew Westbrook

It's warm out, not too hot, not too breezy either, just comfortable, just like usual. Another Saturday begins for me as I walk out the screen door of my house toward the Peaceful Plaines One-Stop convenience store, a small off-white stop in the middle of town. The sign on the door of the store says "ALWAYS OPEN." I push through the old glass door, hearing the all too familiar tone of the rusty bell as I walk inside. I see the doughnuts in perfect rows in their case, all iced in pastels and whites; I drop a couple into one of the complementary plastic bags. Walking toward the counter I grab two newspapers, a regular paper and a local one. The local sits on top and features some headline about a dance going on that evening in the town hall building. I set everything on the counter; my usual Saturday breakfast on top of two stacks of black and white print. The cashier smiles and rings the items up. It seems like she's here everyday; I half-wonder if her feet have been fastened down with linoleum tiles from the last time they redid the floor.

"How's the weather out there?" She asks as though it weren't the same nearly everyday.

"Not too bad." I respond, though I doubt she really listens to the answer anymore.

I step back onto the cracked gray street, and it must be about 10:30 because Tom Williams is walking his dog, wearing his jogging outfit, which always seems too small and entirely a bad idea for a man of his carriage to be wearing. I pass by old Mr. and Mrs. Hillman sitting on their rocking chairs. The same wooden chairs they've been in for 30 years, the paint flaking off as they move rhythmically back and forth. She smiles contently as she knits away, as if she knows full well that nothing out of the ordinary ever happens in Peaceful Plaines, and certainly nothing important enough for her to look up to see anyone walking by. Mr. Hillman sits as well, his eyes not focusing on anything in particular it would seem, sort of looking like he's waiting for something else to do, but realizing that there's probably no point in looking for it.

I reach my front door again. Fumbling with the knob, I drop one of the newspapers. I turn and stop to pick it up. Rising, my gaze moves over the width of the street to the houses across from mine, all of them similar to mine in a design and color, dull blues and yellows, and a few other bland hues, mine being sort of a grayish-white. The one directly across from mine happens to be green. In front of it crouches Jennifer, tending to her garden, while her boyfriend shines the hood of his car. Jennifer always seems to be in her garden, always with her boyfriend. I toy with the idea of talking to her, but I push the thought out of my head as always and open the door into the house.

I should expect the house to be as it is, the same as when I left it, but some days all the monotony in the world, even the smallest things seem to hit me in the face. I eat breakfast, though it's getting closer to noon. I'd gotten up late today, not feeling any real urge to get up early or at all. Swallowing the last bit of doughnut, I go to my familiar groove in the worn out, brown couch positioned in the center of my living room and play with the TV remote as the channels drag across my eyes; I'm

sure I've seen them all before, even the ones I know to be new. This is how Saturday seems to go; Sunday won't be much different either, never is. Then Monday will arrive and mark another week at the bottling plant; the thought drags me into unconsciousness as sleep washes over me.

*I see myself treading the concrete on the way to the convenience store, as I go along, the pavement wears away and my shoes deteriorate into nothing.*

*The scene shifts and I'm walking to work, the gray concrete walls and the expressionless faces working at their machines. I trudge to the back and find my punch card among the others in the rack. I place it into the machine; the motion seems to last an eternity. The white card yellows and the corners dry out and piece by piece crumbles away. I notice my hand holding the card as it ages and fades before me, the skin wrinkles and then turns a shade of gray. The gray flesh peels and falls away, leaving only the bones. The bones turn to dust and blows away with the wind.*

Suddenly I'm awake, wiping perspiration off my forehead, trying to catch my shortened breath. My mind races, trying to make sense of the images still lingering in my head, while at the same time trying to regain composure. The mental pictures are vivid, but confusing now.

Quickly to my feet, I run to my garage and grab a can of vibrant blue paint left over from the last time I'd planned to paint my living room. I tear the cover off the can and splash the paint all over the front of my house in protest of all its dull, unchanging nature. I search my mind for something, as if I can actively fight the impending doom my dream tells me is coming. People are walking by on the street, probably headed for the dance at the town hall. They walk by casually dressed in slacks and skirts, some with ties, shoes shining in the fading sunlight. I look down at my own clothes, fireflies light themselves over my head, and an idea hits me. I rip off my shirt and kick my shoes across the lawn. I unbutton my pants and slide them off along with my boxers all in one motion, and then take off down the street. I run by the Hillmans. If not for my hollering, Mrs. Hillman might not even have looked up, but she does and her knitting needles hit the ground, followed by her dentures as her mouth hangs open. Mr. Hillman looks on and screams with laughter as if it'd been building up in his chest until just this very moment.

I race toward the town hall; people's eyes trained on me as I run; a woman's hand flies to her daughter's eyes. The doors to the town hall stand open, and I soar through them watching people instinctively jumping out of the way.

Jennifer sees me running, and our eyes meet as a wide smile opens across her face. Her boyfriend, glowering, takes her arm trying to turn her away, but without much success.

Tomorrow will be Sunday, and Monday I'll probably head back to work. However, for the moment I can smile and yell, running through the crowd to the outside again, stopping only once on my way back to the house, eyes wide, as Mr. Hillman goes running by the other way wearing a suit to match my own. I laugh and continue running back to my house with the blue paint across the front door.

## **In Full Swing**

Carol Deprez

smoke-choked hall

congratulatory stogies stinging eyes

baring bass hammering drums

incessant tambourine

cacophonous voices volume raised

to compete with the band

a clutch of boisterous drinkers

sloshing their way to obnoxious

a vamp in molded and minimal red satin

enticing wandering male eyes

wired kids darting between clustered adults

a baby asleep in a car seat cradle

dance floor christened with beer

sticky soda and smears of cake

special-effect stroboscopic colors

video lights and point & shoot flashes

and the bride and groom—

oblivious to all

drunk with happiness

goofy grins on their faces

eyes glazed with love



## **Morning Pilgrim**

Ramon Klitzke

A slow journey across the campus  
his surroundings ignored  
a huge lecture hall and waiting  
minds stir his gray consciousness  
this early October morn.

Distant chimes urge him haste  
but the future is his enemy, the past his friend.  
He carries copious notes like beloved children  
begotten in late nights of scholarly labor,  
prepared for sacrifice to hungry intellects  
seeking truths which are not, never were.

Students hope his wisdom will one day  
sprout crocus-like from the snow of life  
but his grizzled words only war  
on battlefields of their captive minds.

Along this path trod generations,  
his now languishing in dust of the past.  
Still he pursues myths of relevancy  
in futile search for a great sextant of life.  
He does not know his time has gone.

Sadly, the chimes call  
sadly he does not hear.  
His journey is slow, measured,  
his students wait.  
He does not know his time has gone.

## Unheeded Admonitions

Ben Hillen

A peeling white board and  
batten fence plods across  
open pasture like an unwanted

semicolon amidst flowing  
prose muse. Funny how  
it boxes in nothing

to keep all the other,  
unruly nothings out. Like a  
two-by-four caught atwixt

two stones in a stream,  
unsuccessfully barring  
the water from passage.

An intruder upon  
the inevitable, it is  
A baleful mother

admonishing her teenager  
to stop hanging around with  
that Sullivan boy across the street.

## Seasons of Regret

Jason Quane

Before my flesh turned into steel,  
I thought I knew her and that our love was real.  
We were reunited underneath a blue moon.  
In three seasons time we would leave each other's lives in ruin.

I walked alone through a suffocating town.  
Looking up from the ground, I saw her looking at me making no sound.  
All strength left my body as I collapsed into her frail arms.  
I told her of the past and she promised me no further harm.

Late spring brought out our confessions of love.  
Finally after all our suffering someone was smiling down upon us from above.  
We spent our nights walking along an empty beach.  
So wrapped up in each other we kept ourselves out of our friends' reach.

Summer reigned over our lives singing us to sleep.  
It seemed so quick and painless falling into love so deep.  
The ties that bind secured around us.  
We placed our futures into each other with whom only we would trust.

By the end of summer we made our minds up in the rain.  
New Year's Eve we would elope and escape everyone else's pain.  
So we gave in to our every whim and passion.  
That night we broke our rules and new worries now crashed in.

Autumn fell down around us and dreams turned from green to brown.  
The love that I felt so deep in my heart began to make me drown.  
She told me I was the one that created a new life.  
"This doesn't fit the plan." "You can't support us." Most importantly "I can't become your wife."

Cold bitter winds blazed upon our hearts in fall's wake.  
I reached out my hand to her but all I caught was a snowflake.  
In those pretty eyes I saw the endless pain I caused her.  
I soaked her hands in blood and my vision was starting to blur.

Atop the bridge we spoke one final time.  
The fates cast judgment on us in dark reason and rhyme.  
She looked at me and said "This will make us stronger in the end."  
But we both knew no amount of time would ever make our hearts mend.



## Chess

Jess Lorin Finn

To bring about what is yet to come  
my un-love life wouldn't tell me what was to be.  
Some people will change—my life—just undone,

unraveled in time and withered, a plum in the sun.  
Only one small chance for me  
to un-bring about what was yet to come.

I didn't see it, never knew it, he would run.  
Just naïve I was, love stuck with glee,  
A pawn gone mad after the king only to succumb.

I would look at him and see what I wanted to become.  
He had the upper hand, took advantage of me  
To bring about what was yet to come.

I left myself open, forgot my place, where I was from.  
If I wouldn't have left him alone that one night—free  
I could have changed it. It would be undone.

I was captivated by the night and lost my queen—so dumb.  
Now I am left to pick up the pieces and the debris.  
To bring about what is yet to come,  
will take time which cannot be undone.

## **Behold the Stars**

Derek Andrews

Behold the stars.  
They prove His might.  
They cover the scars.  
They are a glorious and wonderful sight.

The stars are all I can see.  
They fill me with wonder and awe.  
They make me question what I am- and will be.  
They try to make me forget the pain I saw.

I know it shall never come about.  
They try to heal my heart.  
They slowly melt my doubt.  
They are more beautiful than any art.

The pain pierces to my core.  
They bring a peace to my soul- until-  
They are stolen by the day once more.  
They disappear and I lose my will.

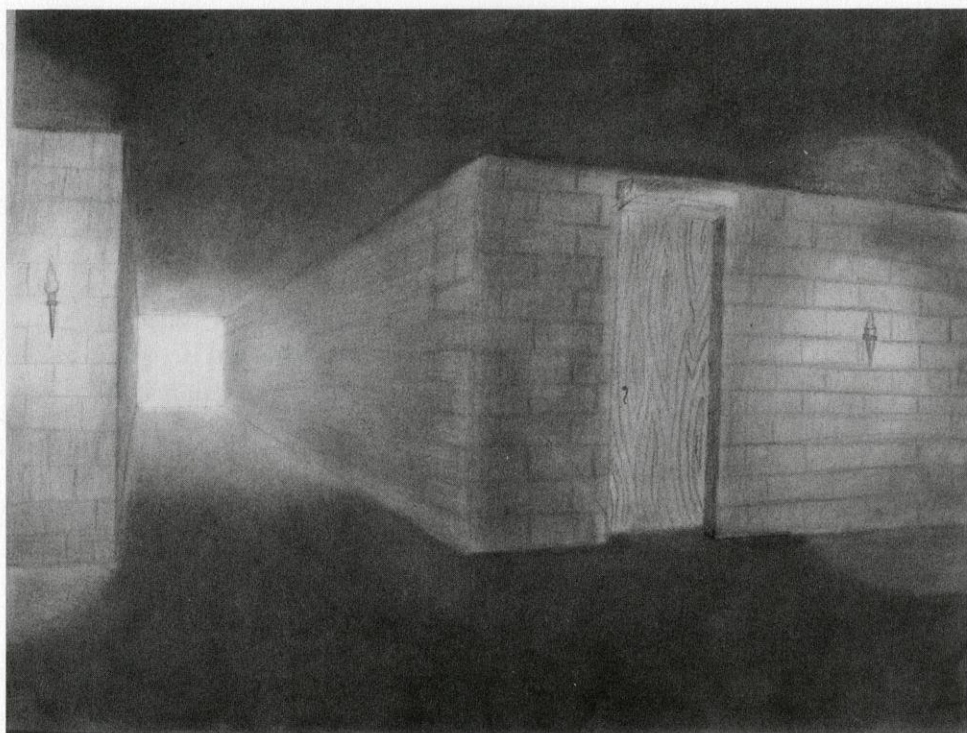
So if- your emotions sink like a stone,  
You have many scars,  
And you feel alone,  
Behold the stars.

## **The Gathering of the Skinless**

Michelle Murphy

being naked has never felt so vulnerable before now  
every little strand pulled to unravel the whole,  
revealing a little more.  
just one more piece, one more piece  
for your favorite whore,  
the one who makes you feel the most alive.  
how much love can manipulation bring?  
you know how it breaks down your core,  
squeezes your innards dry  
but you just can't give it up,  
up to the other whores that hiss at the  
constraints of their cages.  
it's an addiction that you love to be a slave to,  
something so filling to your insatiably filling organs.  
the purist ones have the best flavor  
as they simmer on your tongue,  
melting into feelings they've never been exposed to.  
can your religion save you this time?  
it saved an oblivious bystander from your wrath,  
another whore holy and untouched.  
hidden from your controlling hands,  
hands that are so experienced to perfection  
even they believe their creations are real.  
an attempt to regain innocence wouldn't be entirely futile,  
but the holy whore would be contaminated.  
tell me, is it really worth it?





## The Revolution

Rob Kirkbride

Ask me about the revolution and I will say;  
There was a time and a day  
When the whole world wasn't in peril  
And children's eyes never glanced down the barrel  
of a gun, shining boldly in a man-made sun.

A better time when a busload of people didn't  
have to be ignited to make a statement, and great men,  
thrived because prowess, not power,  
stood with pride and didn't cower.

There was a time when people didn't feel the need,  
The end the pain of the mundane that is existence  
with glorious passion and glamorous persistence.

A time when conflict was only for survival,  
Not merely to crush your shadow's rival.  
A time when divine vision was shared and paired  
together and there were more pressing issues  
than the days current weather.

A better era when things were fairer,  
and the only terror I knew  
were the terrible twos.

And there was a time before  
both my grandfathers and many more  
were marched off to war.

What about revolution as a solution?  
You say?  
The earth completes a revolution and it returns  
to the same place it started, as though it never departed.  
The dawn of another day.

There once was a place where you could live free for free  
and relish memories you hadn't yet made.  
A place where everyone worked but no one got paid.  
A place where it was someone's job to create scars  
and someone's son was watching stars.

A place of faces without races or mild cases  
of depression from repression of emotions  
or regression into potions.  
A place where quandaries become queries

and theories ride to absolution without dilution.

Where visions of grandeur aren't subject  
to slander, or pandering thieves.  
A place where everyone loves and nobody grieves.

I change my tense because I'm tense about what might be  
for everyone, humanity.  
Something needs to change.  
There's no one to blame  
Not your people. Not my people. Just people.  
We the evil, we the feeble.

I wish I could feed dictators to alligators,  
reduce the stares to and from people on elevators.  
Tell a joke to a joke of man,  
fix someone who is broken.

I want to erase the pace we've set as a race,  
of life, of strife, of coveting thy neighbor's wife.  
I want to tell gravity to be more grounded in its ambitions.  
And avoid incoming inquisitions probing  
Compromised positions and heart felt decisions.

And concerning the revolution, we missed it.  
We're on our path back to the point of attack,  
the birthplace of crack. We're right on track.  
On course, of course. Farther and closer from and to the source.

The revolution! gladly burnt out the blackening sun.  
But like always;  
There will be—  
Another one.



## Jenny, I've Got Your Number

Lindsay Bastian

It all started when my roommate moved out. Being friends since before high school could not resolve the fact that she was impossible to live with. I mean, so what if I got mud all over her new shoes that I forgot to ask if I could borrow. I got most of the dirt off before she even noticed. It shouldn't have mattered so much to her that they started out black and my hurried scrubbing reduced them to a dull gray. Gray was more in style that season anyway. It's not a big deal that the same thing happened to three of her shirts over the course of the last year. She was just a very angry person. Like I said before, she was impossible to live with.

Anyway, a few weeks after she up and left, I realized just how lonely my apartment was. The overflowing ashtrays, soda cans in the corner and eternally "on" television made me see that perhaps I needed someone to talk to, or at least companionship. I tugged my jacket from beneath the lay-z-boy reclining footrest where it was entangled and hurried off to the pet store.

I did not bother to torture myself by walking past the sad-looking puppies and kittens; the apartment complex wouldn't allow them. So I peered in at the furry lumps buried in wood shavings. There were guinea pigs, ferrets, any creepy rodent a person could want. It didn't take long for me to pass those by. Fish were the next possibility. They were quiet, didn't need a lot in terms of maintenance and the best part was, I could decorate their tank to look like the bottom of the ocean.

I was pricing small plastic castles when I looked up and saw him; the perfect new friend. The castle box fell from my grasp as I made a beeline over to the birds. The most perfect yellow and white cockatiel sat alone in a cage, sidling back and forth on his perch, watching me. He was silent, but the bright pink tag-board sign announced that cockatiels could acquire quite a vocabulary over time. I was sold. As I searched the aisles for a salesclerk, I imagined coming home from work and having my new pet greet me at the door.

I was debating between "Hello, Princess" and that 'check-you-out' whistle to welcome me home, when I nearly ran into an employee. "Excuse me, sir." I could not get the stupid grin off my face, "I want that bird. The white one over there."

"Alright, do you need anything for him? Food, a cage?" He pushed his glasses up with one finger and dropped a handful of dog leashes into a half-full cardboard box.

"Actually, I need everything." I followed him around the store, picking out all the necessities the bird would require.

With a backseat full of bird supplies and a new friend in a cage in the front, I sped home, belting out every song on the radio. I kept time with my fist on the steering wheel and ignored the bewildered looks of other drivers. The bag of birdseed in the back fell over as I careened around a curve in my neighborhood, and I was glad I had taken the time to seatbelt the birdcage in.

After several trips up and down the stairs, I was able to get my new friend all settled in. Once his food bowl was filled, newspapers were spread out and his bright red plastic mirror was snapped into place, I knelt next to the coffee table and peered at him. "What should we call you?" I asked of the small, silent creature. "You look like a Ralph to me."

The bird said nothing and tilted its head to stare at me from a different angle. "Ralph it is." I leaned back on my heels. "You sure are quiet, Ralph."

He still said nothing. Ralph's beady eyes focused on me, unblinking, and he clicked his beak, but made no other sound.

"Great. Of all the cockatiels in the world, I get the mute one." I flopped back on the couch and turning on the TV. For a few hours I dozed along to the infomercial channel, dreaming of blender-slicer-choppers and kits that could deep-fry a whole chicken in under a minute.

I awoke with a start to Ralph's gravelly voice. He was saying something over and over again, and I squashed the volume button on the remote, hoping to catch what he was saying. Looking directly at me, Ralph was repeating, "Eight six seven five three oh nine."

"What was that?" I asked, not quite believing what I was hearing.

He said it again, "Eight six seven five three oh nine."

"Well, Ralph," I chuckled, "you may not have the best taste in music, but at least you can talk."

As if to prove my point, Ralph said it again.

I glanced up at the television, as if to ask the man silently demonstrating the ab-zapper belt if he could hear my genius cockatiel speak. When he did not respond, I stifled a yawn and clicked off the TV. "I'm going to bed. I hope you like your new home. See you in the morning." I threw a towel over his cage and switched off the light.

In the bathroom, while brushing my teeth, I realized the song had gotten stuck in my head. "I tried to call you before, but I lost my nerve." I mouthed into my hairbrush, and slid across the tiled floor in my stocking feet. Still bobbing my head, I went into my room and closed the door.

Three days later, what I would determine to be Ralph's only phrase had all but lost its original luster. "Damn you, Tommy Tutone," I grumbled on my way to work, veering around other cars and flipping people off right and left. My radio may have been blaring and horns may have been blasting, but all I heard were the strains of that song roaring between my temples.

Now any time I walked past Ralph, he would say "eight six seven five three oh nine." He also would say it when he heard my alarm clock in the morning and when I'd snap off my bedroom light at night. Also, when I left for and came home from work seemed the perfect time to rattle off his phrase. Not to mention all the random times he'd just come out with it while I was watching TV in the evening. The song that was once a novelty to hear became my burden. I was constantly humming it, thinking about it or tapping out the beat. Nothing would pry those strains of music from my mind.

At work I was written up twice in the three days because of that bird. The first time, I came in an hour late because I overslept and needed to stop for a bottle of aspirin to kill the pounding in my head. According to my boss, oversleeping and needing to run errands is not a valid reason to be late. That's the last time I tell him the truth.

The second write up was related to my phone usage. See, I've read enough mystery and horror novels to know that when a pet is acting particularly strange, perhaps they're trying to tell you something. Like anyone in my situation would do, I tried calling the number. Instead of reaching someone with a cryptic message for my future, as I had hoped, I just reached a confused old man. So I tried calling within all the different area codes I could think of. When I was out of those, I went to the phonebook's list of every area code in the country. Ralph was only a bird. How could he be expected to give me foolproof information? I should have to do some work, too. Well, my boss caught me



somewhere between California and Colorado, and he was less-than-delighted to see my pursuit for the day. He sent me home.

For hours that day I sat in a greasy spoon diner, scratching out all the instances of those seven infectious numbers on my paper placemat. I even scratched out all of the letter O's for good measure. Thank goodness my bill came to \$4.12 or I may have flipped out at the waiter. As I walked out to my car, a sick feeling of dread materialized in my chest.

Once home and past Ralph's cheerful "eight six seven five three oh nine" I yanked a towel over his cage and turned on the TV. Right as Cynthia was about to wake up from her three-year coma and proclaim her undying love for Marco, the phone rang. I frowned and picked up the phone.

"Hey. I need to come by to pick up my box of movies. You gonna be home for a while?" It was my old roommate, Sandy.

"Yeah, that's fine." My thoughts jumped to the mass of tapes and cases decorating my living room floor. "See you soon."

I threw down the phone and all but forgot about Cynthia's long-awaited confession. The tape cases were disheveled and some were missing, but I piled the case-less movies at the bottom of the box and prayed Sandy wouldn't dig through them until she got home. I tossed the rest on top and dragged the box across the room.

The doorbell rang and I let her in. Sandy's ever-cheerful face was grim. "Hi," she said, looking around. "You still haven't picked up any housekeeping skills, have you?"

"Apparently not," my eyes narrowed.

The birdcage caught her eye and she asked, "What's this?" Gingerly, she lifted a corner of the towel. A cheerful "eight six seven five three oh nine" greeted her.

"That's cute." Sandy poked a finger into the cage. "What's its name?"

"Ralph." My voice was flat and emotionless. "You want him?"

Sandy looked at me critically. "What? Are you serious?"

"Caring for a bird is just too much for me." I gestured around the room, "I can hardly take care of myself."

She grinned, "Sure, that'd be great."

"Want me to help carry him to your car?" I could hardly hide my delight. The cage was already in my arms.

"Ok." Sandy took her movies and I followed her down to the car.

When I got back to the apartment, it was marvelously quiet. I leapt onto the couch and realized that could have been the best decision of my life thus far. They would get along great; both were impossible to live with.



## Self-Reflection (In Times of Discontent)

James Cooper

Time drifts

The unsettled feeling lingers

How can it be resolved?

*Do I change to make it "right"?*

Or shall I continue to drift with time

And hope that things can be "right"?

And who defines what is "right"?

Is "right" a universal conception?

Is "right" a universal perception?

Who sets things "right"?

Emotion pours over time like water over ice

My mind is stirred, like the boiling ocean

Clarity, can it arrive in my mind

Without the ability to make things "right"?

Others wonder what I am, who I am

Yet, at times even I cannot define myself.

My hands itch, my mind aches

Are they symptoms of something more?

And how would I know?

How can I make things "right"?

## Crossfire

Janet Leahy

small feet extend  
from a cover  
that drapes their bodies  
the perfect feet  
of young boys  
who will never again  
run

play soccer  
dance  
or wear new shoes

their mothers will  
never hear  
their sons' footsteps  
never see  
them kick up their heels  
or walk beside a pretty girl

but for war  
they might have worn the shoes  
of a teacher  
a doctor  
a cleric  
an artist  
they might have worn the shoes  
of a peacemaker

today  
caught in the crossfire  
they left only  
footprints

## **From the Collection**

Helen Padway

Poor bedraggled feather  
only your peacock eye is bright.  
The thin herringbone fringe sprays  
attached to a central spine are  
limp, droop like a damp curl  
on a sweaty neck.

You were once part of a living  
strutting fan that waved, swooped  
and swept the ground. A proud  
single supple structure in a row  
of identical eyes. Were you lost  
in a fierce battle over some

unworthy hen? Or did you part  
during spring molt skittering away  
to be plucked into the box of the art  
teacher's miscellanea? I grieve  
for you, frayed and worn out  
abandoned beauty.



## Vampiric Kisses and Parental Wishes

Ben Hillen

This doesn't seem right.  
It's the funerals eve, the sky is weeping.  
I don't think we're going out tonight.

He was so young, and the bite  
came softly as he was sleeping.  
This doesn't seem right.

The darkness swelled, obscured the white  
of his skin, receded and took his soul creeping.  
I don't think we'll go out tonight.

His white face, the sight  
of which sent me screaming.  
(It wasn't right.)

Before we die, we might  
find his keeper.  
When I go; I know I'll bite the reaper.

It still doesn't feel right, and just  
in case, "We'll stay in the light tonight."

## Untitled

Michelle Murphy

The rain falls hard  
into our unblinking eyes,  
piercing our past  
like shattered glass.  
We cry out the shards  
and our bloody tears are  
nothing but a relief.  
I need you  
but I do now have myself,  
so I can never hold you down.  
Even when in your arms,  
my future has never been more  
than my past,  
and, again, my dreams  
are something to look forward to.  
My eyes are brown  
but they are never empty,  
even though I feel so hollow  
and I need a reason to breathe.

## Holding On

Krista Mueller

We hold each other in my dreams at night  
He knows not to ever let me go  
I never let him out of my sight.

In my dreams, we never have a fight.  
We just let our relationship flow  
We hold each other in my dreams at night.

I look at him with his smile so bright  
I love him so much, but he doesn't know  
I never let him out of my sight.

We run with each other in the evening light  
And as we run, the wind starts to blow  
We hold each other in my dreams at night.

That night, the moon was shining with such delight  
The time seemed to go by so very slow-  
ly I never let him out of my sight.

Soon I will wake up and see the light,  
I will see that he left me long ago.

We hold each other in my dreams at night  
I never let him out of my sight.



## **Under Destruction**

Jason Quane

This is the sound of a world erased.  
Go underground with haste, hide in your base.  
Or stand up and proclaim your weak case.  
Justice has a new face and you can't ride out this race.

It takes time to build up these words of destruction.  
You have to plot and plan to make those you hate not function.  
Examine your clique and see the dissention.  
Act quickly otherwise you won't grow old enough to collect a pension.

I'll no longer be held down or shown the door.  
I own so many coolness points, I obliterated the high score.  
All I had to do was stop passing out drunk on Momma's floor.  
Just had to step up, open my mouth, unleash this new war.

Because this is the sound of a world erased.  
Even with a Ferrari you couldn't keep up the pace.  
Any pile of human trash that gets in my way I lambaste.  
The clock is ticking, one day I'll find a girl that isn't a waste.

The spirits up above have commanded me this way.  
Blessed me with the prose to slice, dice and slay.  
It's up to me to bring about the end of days.  
I will expose all that oppose their feet of clay.

Bolts of truth stream through the storm cursed skies.  
Leaving the lesser sect dumbfounded wondering why?  
Tuck your children in and kiss them goodbye.  
For attempting to kill a hero you're sentenced to die.

Finally you have learned this is the sound of a world erased.  
No matter how many times you plead innocent you have no case.  
If you've seen my true visage, then you know it's only the guilty I chase.  
Now you've met your executioner and realize justice has a new face.

## A Man I Never Knew

Andrew Balgord

A cold wind whipped through the late autumn afternoon, sending yet another chill down the back of my legs. It had been a difficult week: I sure as hell didn't need any more trouble from Mother Nature today. The low hanging clouds overhead cast an even drearier light on an already difficult day.

Looking around, I took in all the tear-streaked faces, my mother to my immediate left, my father and sister on the other side of her. We had flanked her purposefully, in a vain attempt to shield her from the grief she had had to bear for the last five days.

My attention wandered, focusing on the first somewhat cheerful thing in view. A flock of geese flew overhead, heading to warmer climates for the winter. It suddenly struck me as odd how much that flock of geese reminded me of myself, the way they instinctively sought warmth and comfort. I'd sought those things all of my life, had run from the family who had raised me to get to warmer climates. Now I was back, wishing that I had returned sooner, just a few days sooner would have made this all so much easier. I'd have been more of a help to the family if I'd been there earlier, then wishing that I'd never left them in the first place. There really had been no choice for me back then, but I wished to God that I had stuck around, wished I'd had a chance to know my brother as he grew up. I hadn't had the chance, and it was my fault I'd gone away.

The memories of my leaving wouldn't stay away, how could they when it was the last image I'd held of my brother in person? I was eighteen years old, with delusions of grandeur in my mind. My father had been so angry when I told him that I wasn't joining the service like all of those generations before me. He'd never been so disappointed in me, told me that I was no longer his son, that I wasn't welcome in his home any longer.

I tried so hard to explain to him that I had plans of making a fortune by penning thriller novels, and had enrolled in New York University to pursue the dream. He called me a fool, told me that I'd never amount to anything without the help of Uncle Sam's military.

I'd left that day anyway, with a small suitcase and a crappy old car. My siblings Tom and Mary stood crying in the front door as I drove away, my mother trying to console them. My father never even said goodbye to me, and I didn't bother to give him the courtesy either.

My thoughts jumped four years forward in time to my graduation from college. None of them had come, my father forbid it. I hadn't talked to him in those years but I had kept in constant contact with the rest of my family.

I left New York and moved to Maine to find the solitude needed to produce my masterpiece, always knowing that he didn't approve, always wanting to prove him wrong. The only thing I regretted was leaving the rest of them behind, knowing that they missed me as much as I missed them.

My gaze slowly lowered as I lost sight of the flock, catching upon the grave markers I had grown so accustomed to in my youth. We had come here as a family every Memorial day to honor the soldiers of the past who had defended our freedom. My father had been one of those men, like my grandfather before him, and this was where grandpa had found his final resting place. Grandma had joined Grandpa here last February; they had laid her to rest right next to him. I hadn't made it back for the funeral, hadn't taken the time out of my "oh so important life" to attend the funeral of my last living grandparent. I felt so guilty now that I was back, not just for missing her funeral, but for missing the last opportunity I would have had to see Tom alive, to get to know my little brother who had grown up so much in the years since I'd left.

One of the last times I had spent with Tom had actually been here, in this town, on one of those Memorial Day weekends we had all so enjoyed. I remember it all so clearly, my siblings and I chasing each other around that tree, Tom climbing on the old stone cannon in the middle of the cemetery. He'd always shared our father's interest in anything that had to do with the military, always wanting to play war or build a fort he would then defend to the death. I'd never shared that love, but I always indulged my little brother in his quests to be a hero, always have in to his pleas for me to play the bad guy.

We built a fort every time we came here after he had turned five. After a few years it seemed silly for my to still play with him, me being 10 years older than he was. I just couldn't help but revel in the



joy those blue eyes of his had while constructing some new fort or bunker, and standing here I convinced myself that if I listened hard enough I could still hear our voices carrying on in the wind while we worked. Closing my eyes, I let myself slip back to the days of old, back when all of us were together, never knowing what the future would hold in store.

*Tom lay on his belly in the dark shadows of a ring of pine trees near our great uncle's house. This was his favorite spot to defend; it offered access only through a three foot break between two trees. We had strung a blue tarp over the top of the eight foot tall trees, and it had become one hell of a fort, something the eight year old was incredibly proud of.*

He now stood watch over his charge, protecting some piece of information vital to the war effort, some bit of knowledge that would be devastating if it fell into the enemy's hands.

*I was that enemy, but I never tried my hardest to steal the "Intel." He was armed with a stick that somewhat resembled a military rifle, and he made a machine gun sound like no one I'd ever heard, rolling his tongue as he pulled his imaginary trigger. He looked so happy in there, as if the rush of adrenaline was a fix to him, like he was hooked on the way the action made him feel, as though he was destined for this type of life...*

The bark of the vintage rifles dragged me out of my solemn memories. The seven men fired into the air again, and I shuddered even though I knew the second shot was coming. The third had the same effect on me; I don't think I could get used to that noise after a hundred tries.

My mother wept audibly now, and the trumpeter started in on his rendition of Taps. The honor guard removed the American flag that covered my only brother's casket and ceremoniously began to fold it for presentation to my parents. I watched as they crisply folded the edges, snapping the material over and over again until they had formed a tight triangle of red, white, and blue. The flag was handed to my mother, and the condolences of a mournful nation were offered to a family who had made the ultimate sacrifice.

I felt my face turn red as the Marine tried to console my mother, a woman who'd just lost her last born son to a war on terrorism. I never thought that I could feel any kind of hatred towards a man who'd chosen a life of service to freedom, but I felt myself resenting this Marine for drawing the duty of handing my mother the flag that was supposed to make her feel proud of her son's sacrifice. It seemed like such an empty gesture, one that carried little or no real sentiment towards my brother.

The Marine finished his tribute with my parents, and with a sharp salute spun on his heel and marched away. His fellow soldiers joined him in lifting my brother's casket to carry it to his final resting place near my grandparents. As they moved toward the newly dug hole, I finally felt the tears coming to my eyes, the salty drops making their way down my cheeks into the corner of my mouth.

The Marines gently laid the casket onto the elevator that would lower it into the ground, taking the utmost care to show my brother the great respect that he deserved.

He'd grown up so much since I'd left; my mother had done a wonderful job of keeping me up to date on his accomplishments throughout high school. He'd been a solid athlete, a great student, and pretty popular with the ladies. My parents had been so proud of him. I was too, and I found myself feeling even more remorse for not being here to tell him.

The casket was slowly making its descent into the cold ground now, and I felt as though the weight of the guilt would break me in two. I looked over to my father, studying his green eyes. Those eyes had held nothing but anger and contempt the last time I'd seen them, now they held nothing but the guilt and despair that filled my own heart.

The casket reached its destination, and those gathered took the time to pour a handful of dirt of the grave. My mother's hands shook so badly that my father had to help when it came to her turn. I lingered over his casket after finishing my turn, so many thoughts running through my head that I forgot the people waiting behind me.

I felt a hand pulling on my shoulder, gently steering me toward my remaining family. We stood watching as my brother's friends paid their last respects. I held my mother's shaking hand, my sister held her other; my father never released his gentle grip on my shoulder.

We stayed like that for a long time after everyone else had gone; never saying anything, just remembering who Tom had been to all of us. We stayed until the dark of night had been drawn across the sky by the terrible weight of the sinking sun, and then we left, each of us with a terrible weight of our own to deal with.



## Nocturnal Comforts

Rob Kirkbride

What happened to my world while I was sleeping?  
What's the shadow's reason for weeping?  
What dark thoughts are slowly creeping?  
In my somnambulism I am king.

What is it that happens behind closed eyes?  
Why does the dark tell secrets the light denies?  
Why does midnight feel like a blanket made of cold  
An icy hug from a mother, pulling you into the fold.

Why does the moon smile like it sees into my soul?  
Does it really know what I really think it knows?

The night sees through my shallow façade  
it offers up endless deities and demigods  
it holds me close like a dying child  
apologizes for leaving me in the wild  
promises it will make all the wrongs right.  
With darkness as my guide, I fade into night.

Where does the star hide when the satellite rises?  
Why does the orbit release angry surprises?  
Blue bolts of moonlight energize my hollow being  
The rays collapse the house of god, souls being fleeing.

Why does my sight at midnight become 10 fold sharper?  
Where does logic go as it slowly gets darker?  
Old and damned souls all out for a stroll,  
Wandering for the lost piece to make themselves whole.  
Whose vantage point will gently linger into my sight?  
I love the moon like a lost stranger father.  
I the bastard son, longing, but no bother.

## **Velvet State of Mind**

Todd Ruehmer

February

A man tells me to find a home  
He reminds me there is a tomorrow  
But alas, time is not infinite.

I laugh to myself as I dismiss him  
Live life without concern, I say  
Just do as I please, and as I may.

Sunday

Bright new horizon on its way  
Seems as though I'm on the sun  
And the next day will be great.

A new faith faith from deep within  
He is there and keeping me close  
But still I have no home to stay

5 a.m.

I've made friends with the ceiling  
Sharing with it, how I am torn  
Can't decide where I am going.

I can't forget how much I want  
But what I want, I do not know  
My white painting ceiling says "hi".

Days ago

Should I forfeit for the fourth time?  
Homeless, boundless, mindless  
But I can't let it break my neck.

Once thought on a rock to collect  
Looming overhead, a missing half  
What I cannot seem to get right.

Fifteen hours before

Light dancing upon my day to come  
I open my eyes to the usual things  
"Get up" says the man from before.

You've only begun.

### **Supplication**

Kate Ahles

Climbing up my mountain,  
I falter.  
The sky bleeds.  
My footing goes visceral,  
My body rigid.  
The haze impugns my thoughts.  
My unconscious fights to take over.  
My fingers tear at the jagged wall.  
Desperately trying to justify the ascent.  
Praying for delusion,  
I close my eyes,  
and lean back.

### **An End to Our Deception**

Michelle Murphy

you and your lying eyes  
make me double-over and vomit  
up all the recycled words that you  
shoved down my already raw throat.

my tongue will spear your eyes  
and I'll spit the residue in your face—  
you've used me for the last time.  
you can be likened to a corpse that  
I used to hold in my arms.



## **Freeze Frame**

Ben Hillen

A bubble caught  
in the stream of time  
when the world threatens to crush in.

Inside, innocence is  
captured before it died.

Before the weed of sarcasm took seed,  
before the jaded young man who's to be;

There was a boy who kept hope alive  
although you can see the hurt in his eyes.

When the world rushes in;  
the interval is bittersweet,  
because then years down the road

this boy

becomes me.



## **Our Intimate Hour**

Robert Kokan

ending

Your head lying on my chest

listens into me for my heart

Your hair a damp dark tangle

where I hide whispers and kisses

The warmth of you

still surrounding me

holds me to this moment

This is what I have lived for

This magic

This quiet

where we are the only two

the rest of the world fallen away

How easily my arms wrap around you

hold you into me

We talk of nothings

enjoy the slow return of our breathing

Is it our soft voices

that brings the world back to us?

Gives it permission to continue?

One by one the noises of life

rise up to our window to tell us

that nothing has changed

while we were gone

so very far away



## Love & Wonder

Derek Andrews

My heart is torn,  
Because the love for you goes deep.  
Soon I will mourn,  
For what my actions might reap.

Within me a battle rages,  
A conflict between love and wonder.  
Love that will not be contained by pages,  
And wonder that could tear us asunder.

I do not know what love can be,  
For I have loved you only,  
Why can you not see?  
Come what may you will never be lonely.

One day I hope to find.  
The love you claim to feel.  
Through all the years you have been so kind,  
Good-bye my love,  
I know one day the pain will heal.

## Poise

Rob Kirkbride

We are born of ecstasy.  
Poison hopes, fatal dreams are spoon-fed  
by hand alluding to agony.

From this life we are set free  
to graze in the pastures of our head,  
for isn't question ecstasy?

Knowledge and visions of atrocity  
darkened to the buried dread  
sought for the sake of agony.

To derive brightness from brutality  
and deny the hurts I've bred,  
is the irony of ecstasy.

To be content with mediocrity  
and comply with the path we tread,  
is the definition of agony.

Echoed vibrations of malformed harmony  
Whispers of fire, words never said  
Balance the burden of overwhelming ecstasy  
by indulging in pleasures of well earned agony.

## The Gates of Dawn

Molly McGuire

Rachael and Emily walk past your station and give you dirty looks. You realize they are probably giving you dirty looks due to the music that is blasting from your CD player. You shrug your shoulders and keep working. Who are Rachael and Emily, anyway? Just two more people who work here. You don't see why you should care about their dirty looks.

*Welcome to the Gates of Dawn*, you think to yourself. It's 3:35 am. Only five minutes since the last time you looked at the clock. You've been working all by yourself for eleven hours. But you really don't mind working alone. It's better than working with that crazy Leslie, who needs to talk to maintain brain activity. The same way the rest of us need to breathe. It's not the constant flow of words that comes from Leslie that really frustrates you. It's the way that everything she says has less meaning than the random chirping of a bird.

You've walked up to Leslie before and tried talking about the weather or asking her how she was. She always bypasses your comments and says something about her medication or her daughter. Her responses never make sense, in the context of what was said before. You often wonder if she knows what words mean, or if they're just the conditioned responses of a parrot.

You see Leeann walk by and you cringe, hoping she won't stop to yell at you, or worse, stare and write something down on her clipboard before walking away. She passes by, but you're still uneasy. You've seen a lot of her tonight. Earlier you saw her hiding behind some stacks of pallets, directly across from your station. You know that you're being watched.

You try to turn up the volume on your CD player, but the swarm-like buzz of the huge ceiling fans still make it hard to hear your music at the other end of the station. The lighting in the warehouse makes everything look annoyingly yellow. You walk back to the front of the station and scan the barcode on a box that says "Made in Cambodia." A button lights up on the console, indicating which box gets the giant bag of underwear in your hand. It's all the way on the other side of the station. You walk down and press the button, then try to smash the underwear into the box. You give up. Who cares if the underwear doesn't fit right now? You'll make it fit later, the same way you always do. You'll close the box as much as you can, then beat on the top with a tape gun until it's relatively fit to be taped and shipped off on the conveyor.

You never buy anything that goes through the warehouse. You don't want to generate any work for yourself, even if it's just one more item. You look at the clock. It's 3:45. If Leeann wasn't watching you, this would be the perfect time to walk to the break room and get a snack. Management does everything it can to keep employees from leaving their stations. You predict that, soon, you will be chained to your station and catheterized so you won't be able to wander. You close your eyes as you walk back to the front of your station, just to see how far you'll make it before you run into a something.

Leeann once told you in the middle of a bad review that you don't show enough interest in your work. You wanted to ask her what was so interesting about a job that a chimpanzee could do. You didn't say anything, just stared at your gray work shoes that used to be white.

You cut yourself as you try to open the flaps of a box that says "Made in India." Paper cuts made with cardboard are terrible, but they're always the worst when inflicted by the boxes from India. They're a darker color than the rest of the boxes, and they seem thicker and heavier. You wonder what kind of trees they have in India.

You're listening to *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. Very early, very little-known Pink Floyd. It's the experimental noises and fairy-tale lyrics that illicit stares from your passing



coworkers. You really don't care, because you listen to *Piper* every morning at 3:30. It sounds like children's music, written on acid.

Every now and then you get product with a smell that inexplicably offends your nose. You don't know how clothes come to the warehouse smelling so bad, or why. You come to the conclusion that they must be sprayed down with some kind of pesticide, and wonder how they get the smell out of them at the stores.

You continue to smash underwear and undershirts into the boxes. You know that it will all get to the store wrinkled. But Leeann never mentions the quality of your work, just that you need to go faster. Always faster.

You don't have time to care what gets wrinkled or broken. In the past, you've thrown heavy jewelry boxes on top of sensitive beds of sunglasses, knowing that most of them will break. You didn't have time to rearrange the boxes, moving the sunglasses to the top like cartons of eggs. It's not your job to make sure that things get to the store in one piece. It's your job to get them there as fast as possible.

Leeann walks by your station again with her clipboard. You sometimes fantasize, when you daydream, that you know where she lives. You would follow her around all day with a clipboard and make notes as she did her dishes and dropped her kids off at school. Silently, without a smile or word of approval.

Sometimes, when you can't get back at Leeann for being your very well-paid babysitter, you take your frustration out on Target instead. You like to think of it as a kind of guerrilla warfare. Instead of throwing your garbage in the garbage can, you put it in the boxes ready to be shipped. You stick little cartoons on the boxes depicting smiley faces, always saying something sarcastic, like "I want to pack giant bags of underwear forever and ever and ever."

Shirts often come in boxes with extra packaging to keep them from wrinkling. It's such a nuisance that you sometimes wad them up to make sure they look awful by the time they get to the store. The most satisfying attack is the conveyor. It automatically shuts itself off when there isn't a whole lot of weight on it. That way Target saves a few pennies on electricity by not having the conveyor running at low-traffic times of the night. When you're at work, Target never saves those pennies. The instant it turns itself off you flip the switch to turn it back on. You do it as often as you can.

Leeann ducks into your station just as the CD gets to the best part - where it sounds like thousands of ducks are quacking. You have to turn it off so she can talk, then you look down at your black fingers, wondering how cardboard could make your hands so dirty. She tells you that you got a review tonight, which comes as no surprise.

"You did very well," she says in her subversive way, "I only have one complaint. Do you know what it is?"

You hate it when she makes you guess. You roll your eyes toward the ceiling as if you're searching for the answer there. You can't even remember what color underwear you're wearing.

"No, I can't think of anything."

"You took one forty-three minute break, and your second break was thirty-two minutes long."

Your ears are getting warm with confusion. You get one thirty-minute break and one twenty-five. You left and came back at the same time as everyone else. You stare at her.

"You see, while I was watching I noticed you went to the bathroom from 8:20 to 8:26, and from 12:20 to 12:25. Right before you left for your breaks."

"I don't understand. Aren't I allowed to go to the bathroom?" You ask.

"Of course you are," Leeann smiles, the fake smile that tells you she's lying, "but I've noticed that you go to the bathroom at the same time every night."

You have never mouthed off to Leeann. You usually just stay silent while she threatens your job. You've never really pretended to be friends with her, either. You wonder which was the bigger mistake.

"Does it make a difference what time I go to the bathroom? I thought . . ."

"You can go to the bathroom whenever you want, it's just hard to believe you have to go to the bathroom at the same time every night."

"I don't understand. Why are you telling me that I can go to the bathroom whenever I want, then turning around and saying I can't? Which is it?"

"Well . . ."

"Leeann, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Who - who follows you around with a clipboard, keeping track of when and how many times you go to the bathroom?" You're finding it hard not to stutter, but you have more to say.

"Uh . . ." Leeann shifts her eyes uncomfortably.

"Who times you in the bathroom? Who makes sure you're not just wandering around?"

"No one, but . . ." She trails off and smiles nervously.

"Do you think I - I pretend to have to go to the bathroom? Do you think I really didn't have to go?" You feel your throat getting tight, your voice sounds more and more desperate.

"No," Leeann shuffles her papers and looks at her clipboard to avoid your eyes, dismayed to find out suddenly that you have a voice, "You know, I wouldn't really have problem with it if you were getting your numbers. You're only working up to sixty percent tonight."

You never work fast enough for her, it seems.

"What do you expect, putting me in men's bulk underwear all by myself? What do you expect? What do you want, damn you?" A few tears roll down your cheeks and you realize you just swore at your boss. You bite the inside of your cheek to try and stop the tears, you don't want her to see she's getting to you. If only you weren't so angry, your eyes wouldn't burn so much.

You see Leeann draw herself up. Her eyes lose the soft helplessness they had a few minutes ago. Your chance has passed. She's won.

"Tell you what," she says, "why don't we forget about this. You can go to the bathroom for a few minutes and calm down, if you want."

You would like to thank her for her permission to use the restroom, give her one more sarcastic jab. Instead you nod silently as she walks away. You know she has no intention of "forgetting about this." It will go down on your permanent record. You wipe your eyes and blow your nose. You refuse to go to the bathroom.

Pressing play, you hear the ducks quacking again. You start the song over from the beginning and sing, "I've got a bike, you can ride it if you like, it's got a basket, a bell that rings and things to make it look good . . ."

You see Leslie walk by, checking which station number you're in so she can fill out your information in the log. She fills the log out for everyone, every night. You wonder if she does it in anticipation of a smiley-face sticker, as if she were in first grade filling out a math test. You look at the clock. It's four in the morning. You can start getting ready to go home. You hear the "whoosh" sound of the conveyor shutting itself off, and walk all the way to the end of the station to turn it back on.

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