
River Bluff Review

Volume 16
Spring 2007

A collection of previously unpublished works
composed and compiled by students of
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

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Funded by
SIUE Office of Student Affairs,
Department of English Language and Literature
and the College of Arts and Sciences

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
EDWARDSVILLE

Dear Readers,

Perhaps you picked up this issue of *River Bluff Review* intentionally. Or perhaps you saw it on the floor and decided to rescue it from a tragic dumpster-fate. Or maybe you just wanted to read. Whatever the reason, we hope you enjoy this collection of poetry and fiction submitted by your fellow students.

The process behind creating this seemingly simple collection is absolute insanity. Even writing this editor's note, this blurb you're reading right now, was a difficult process, but not nearly as difficult or time consuming as choosing which pieces to publish and then deciding on how best to order them. Should we put the authors in alphabetical order? Should we organize by theme? By genre? In the end, we chose to order them in a way that allows the pieces to converse with one another, so to speak. Each piece can certainly stand on its own, but they also work together as a unified whole.

We'd like to thank our professor, Valerie Vogrin, for putting up with all the hiccups we encountered, from artistic disagreements to wanting to smash the computers with sledgehammers when they wouldn't do exactly what we wanted. Thanks to Geoff Schmidt for enlightening us on the decision-making processes of publishing. Thanks to Heather V. Kniffel, the manager of Marketing and Communications, for her help with the business aspects of our endeavor. And special thanks to the Office of Student Affairs, for the extra funds given to *River Bluff Review*, hopefully making this issue the most successful to date!

Happy reading,
Editors of *River Bluff Review*

Cover photo credit: Katrina Boogerd, *Remnants of the Cycle*

Roadside Bomb

Bennett Wood

i.e.d.? r.p.g.?
another exploding
acronym perhaps.

ringing in the ears
pick up, it's for you.
this call means
you're not dead
yet.
snap, crackle, pop,
it's the sizzle and smell of
bacon fat and
burning hair
sickening sweet.
stomach lurching,
vomiting through clenched
teeth and open
nostrils fighting for
breath, face down
in the dirt.
look up to see
Death personified
not robed in cartoonish
black and white,
but grey, gray
matter speckled
red and spilling
like egg whites
from the corporal's
empty eggshell helmet—
retching again
a dry heave
fetching again
the last breath
should have been
death would

have been
mine
had it only
been so kind

Walk

Laura Dempsey

My father drove on a winding country road, and the midnight sky was dark without a moon. We were struck by a car that night when I was nine. I was asleep when I flew out the window, and I woke up far from my family, alone in the cornfield. Curled in the fetal position, as if I could have protected—something. My mother found me like that (face down in the mud). She helped me to stand, to walk. I had broken stalks—in my hair; I could feel them through the skin of my hands. My feet could not support me, they were raw, bruised. I had nightmares after that. Awake in my bed when I was twelve, I watched the time roll away—minutes turn to hours. At fourteen, my feet began to swell without reason. The pain felt like my skin was too tight. Piercing, itching—and I couldn't move my toes. At sixteen, I could not sleep unless I filled the sink half full with ice, the rest with water—and plunged my feet in. I sat on the counter until my feet were so numb I could no longer feel the cold at all. Then, I was ready to try to sleep. All I could ask was to fall asleep fast; if I didn't, I would have to do it all again.

Happiness is a warm car seat

Nate Jones

I miss when I was a kid,
riding in the backseat
of my mother's Pontiac
with my whole family
on a trip to the mall.

My thoughts focused
on the new plastic monstrosities
my parents would buy for me
from K-Bee.

I didn't have to worry
about getting lost
behind the wheel,
and the sunshine
and spring breeze
through the automatic windows
didn't bring me back
to the broken air conditioner
in the apartment,
or the missed rent
or the abated renovations.
I didn't think about
how much gas we had left,
or worry about
the next Conoco sign
questioning what we had left
in our wallets.

My parents kept me docile
by acting like they didn't worry
either.

I could fall asleep on the way back
because I didn't have to worry
about keeping my hands and head
steadily placed behind the wheel.

I didn't concern myself
with the pride
of an adult occupation
or with making statements
about how well I was doing.
I didn't have to think
about work,
because with my eyes closed
and head drooped
I hadn't dreamt yet
of a young man
careening across
the highways
with a retreat from
deadlines on his mind.

Eyes open, staring up
through the back windshield,
I never looked up towards the sky
and thought
of limitations.

Economics

Robert Rohe

When I was a kid
there was a soda machine
just down from my parents' house
and my friends and I thought
it was magic.

During the winter
if you bought a soda
you could get five for free.
And if you caught it
just right you didn't have to pay
at all. Then, when winter
hit its coldest, sometimes
the machine would keep
dropping sodas until it was empty.

Every summer, to recoup his loss,
the vendor jacked the prices up.
And we'd swear
that next year
we wouldn't liberate
what so badly wanted to be free.
But every winter it still got cold
and we thought if we weren't taking
advantage of this mechanical mishap
someone else surely would.
So we broke our promises
for our own good reasons
and took the supply for our demand.

I go back to my parents'
at Christmas to see if it still works.
It does.

Pounce

Laura Dempsey

As a child
I must have looked so feline,
content to sit
on the back of the couch.
From there I could watch
the hummingbirds visiting the feeder
and chasing each other in the tree.
They could not escape my eyes then
no matter how fast they flew.

If there's reincarnation
and I have a choice,
I think my spirit
would like to be a cat,
not a bird.
Someone who sleeps when she wants.
—all day.

Maybe that's why I'm so fascinated
with birds, always
I've studied them closely,
listened to their songs,
watched them dart and dive
seen their graceful show—
they would be a challenge.

Because, if I were a cat,
I'd stealthily approach,
I'd crouch in the dead leaves
and without a sound
I would listen to their music.
If they tried to hide,
these eyes could still catch them
and my claws too. I'd pounce
with terrible, graceful perfect timing,
have a bite or two—tear with my teeth

until the thing grew quiet.
Blood on my lips, hands
I'd lick myself clean.

Fun Bags

Ashley Luster

I have seven reasons why I really hate her. I wrote them all down on the back of a napkin, one with teddy bears printed on it. She loves teddy bears, and I carry it everywhere I go, safely tucked in my back pocket with my wallet, so when I need reminding about why I left her, I can read my napkin.

When she got a job shaking what she has at Bobby's Bar and Chainsaw Repair, she thought I would love it, that I could sit in the front and watch and drool over her shaking what she has. That's when I knew that she no longer had a name. Only fun bags. Her new name. Fun Bags.

I was driving by Bobby's when my friend Chris, sitting next to me in the passenger seat and fidgeting with the radio, said, "What are you gonna do with all her stuff, man?"

I stared at the road, and all the winding. I was on the sharp turn where a guy on a motorcycle lost control and severed his head on the guardrail, and I couldn't say a word. What was I supposed to do? Box it up with care and bubble wrap? If only that guy had worn a helmet. If only I could be lovely like her. Lovely enough to wrap her precious knick-knacks, those little teddy bear collectibles that she cherishes so much, in bubble wrap, protect those silly bears, protect a human head even, maybe a human heart, with bubble wrap.

1. I hate those fucking bears. They're everywhere. In the bedroom on shelves that I built just for her, just for those bears. Somehow the bears trickled down the stairs and occupy the living room, the dining room, and the kitchen. I used to have a room all to myself, where I kept my high school football jersey, the letterman jacket, a pompom that the head cheerleader, I think her name was Rose, gave me the night of my last high school football game, the night I remember more because I fucked Rose in the back of my pickup rather than for the game, which we lost anyway. A room full of my things, my trifles, my memories, things I don't know why I still had, but liked nonetheless, and a place I could go and sit and think and wonder. The room Fun Bags took over with those fucking bears, bears in tutus, a girl bear dancing with a boy bear, stupid worthless pieces of porcelain shaped into those pointless fucking bears.

"I don't know," I finally said.

Chris landed on a station playing The Rolling Stones, *you can't always get what you want, but you get what you need*, and I had to turn the radio off.

He began to say something, but he stifled his first word and instead stared at the horizon, tree, tree, tree, his right arm dangling out the window.

“We can skeet shoot with her knicky knacks,” he said, not breaking eye contact with the trees.

I said, “Maybe,” knowing that I couldn’t do that, as appealing as it sounded, because even though she burned a hole in my letterman jacket with one of those long cigarettes she likes to smoke, it was an accident (though she was pissed at me for accidentally breaking a teddy bear holding a pink petunia). I just couldn’t do it, I just couldn’t. Fucking bears.

Chris’s little yellow house looked uninviting, so when he asked me in for a beer, I said no and drove away, going ten miles an hour over the speed limit. The siding was a dingy, yellow color, like it should’ve been white, as if there had been a torrential downpour of cigarette smoke on that little house. My face was getting hot. I began to wonder if Fun Bags had spent time behind my back with my best friend, tinting his little white house that hideous shade of dark piss yellow with those long cigarettes that are making her lungs black and driving me over the edge of sanity because I can only think of those fucking bears and those fucking cigarettes and her fucking my best friend.

2. I hate the cigarettes. I smoked cigarettes when I was a teenager, thinking I looked cool, but I grew out of it, which is rare in this town because practically everyone smokes from the time they turn twelve, and even if they don’t have a cigarette in their mouth, smoke seems to follow everyone everywhere. She smoked those long cigarettes, they matched her long, skinny, sallow looking legs, and she thought she was real hot stuff, puffing them slowly and letting the smoke seep from between her thin lips, sometimes even making giant circles and laughing at the loveliness that is her.

I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I was afraid to go home because I thought Fun Bags would be there, and even if she wasn’t, those bears would be there, staring at me, plotting against me, waiting until I fell asleep on the couch with a half-eaten pizza sitting next to me, to kill me with pink petunias. Or she could be at the bar, shaking what she has, and I didn’t want to see that either.

The car was driving me, and I ended up in the front of my house. Her car wasn’t there, so I got out and went inside, despite those horrible, frolicking bears and the freaky happy smiles that are plastered on each of their faces.

I went to the room that used to be mine, the room now occupied by dozens of those bears, and sat on a cold, fold-out chair that was in the middle of the eight by eight foot space. A box holding dozens of trophies, almost all of them featuring a football player, mid-throw, perched on the top, sat about a foot away. I grabbed the edge of the box and pulled it toward me, dumping them all onto the floor, gazing at the gold and silver treasures that were worth absolutely nothing monetarily, and then stood up and began to put the bears, the invasive bears, inside, trying not to look at their faces as I did. The porcelain chilled my body more than their languid smiles, and I felt like I was violating their territory and their lives and their daily happy habits, which sent shivers down my spine.

Mindlessly, I boxed the little bears, stopping only once, to stare at one that my fingers instantly recognized, a bear wearing a pink dress and holding a parasol, the one and only bear I ever bought for Fun Bags. The bear smiled coyly at me, one shoulder turned slightly in the opposite direction of the rest of her body, the position of the parasol revealing her shyness. Letting it slip through my fingers, the figure broke in three clean pieces on the worn hardwood floor. I left the room right then, leaving the pieces exactly as they had fallen. Rushing to the door, feeling as if those bears knew that I had broken one of their wonderful friends, I grabbed my jacket and the keys to my truck and left.

I never even got into my truck, I just kept walking, my eyes looking down at the sidewalk, my stride long and fast, and in just two minutes I had reached the community park, where I sat down on a yellow park bench that had been sloppily spray-painted green and thought about rushing home to glue the little bear back together.

3. I hate how I always feel bad about things that I shouldn't feel bad about just because of her. Like that time she burned my letterman jacket in what was surely an act of revenge for me accidentally breaking one bear figurine. It was an honest accident. I was cleaning up the kitchen and I knocked one over, my clumsy hands fumbling to keep it from dropping, but it did, after which she yelled at me for twenty minutes because that was her favorite figurine, or so she said, though I think it was only her favorite because I broke it. I think about it now and I feel bad, and I know that I shouldn't because I went out the next day and bought her a replacement (which I broke about four minutes ago), kissed her, apologized, and told her that she could unpack the rest of her bear figurines and display them in my room, and now all I can think about is how I just broke the replacement figurine and whether or not I should buy a re-

placement for the replacement.

I loved Fun Bags. I used to love Fun Bags. I remember when she was still in college and how many dreams she had, how she had wanted to one day have a huge brick home with dozens of curio cabinets just for her little bears, a home where she could lie on a porch swing and drink iced tea and love her life and everything in it, including me. But that was before, before she quit school on a whim because she “didn’t feel like going” anymore, before she took a job in a bar shaking what she has, before the little bears became her lifeblood, her essence. And why? Why those cold, hard, nothing bears?

“We should have a baby,” I had said to her one day.

All she did was laugh and pat me on the knee and light up one of those long cigarettes. I wondered why not, why not have a baby, because what else is there in this town besides getting married and making babies and making families and being happy and going to the park on Saturdays and church barbecues on Sundays? My idea of what our small life could be, a teacher and a bricklayer, a mom and a dad, was suddenly no longer what she wanted to be a part of, and it made me feel like trailer trash because this town is full of trailer trash guys and their wives that shake what they got. But I never had the chance to marry her, because I had yet to ask her, because when she dropped out of school, she spent my ring money on a clothing shopping spree, a red halter top, fishnets, crotchless panties, all so she could shake what she had.

4. I hate that she shakes what she has. I wanted to ask her to marry me, that sweet girl who wanted to be a teacher. She would’ve made a good one, always really understanding with small kids and what not, always the substitute the kids really loved because she was young and hip and fun, but now her interests are those little bears and shaking her ass on a stage, giving titty dances and probably more. More that I did not want to know about. I just wanted to remember her the way she used to be, not the way I knew she now was. I wanted to call her “my sweet bride” and have a big church wedding and buy that big brick house and live out that thing people call the American dream, but that was all bullshit because the American dream is bullshit. They should just call it American bullshit, because just when you think you’ve got it figured out, just when you think you have it all, you realize that things aren’t as black and white as you thought, that everything is really Technicolor, and it’ll blow your mind. Technicolor’s pretty until you realize that you just want to go back to your sepia-toned room in sepia-toned Kansas just like

Dorothy does, and she has a little Dorothy bear standing next to a Scarecrow bear.

I pulled my jacket on slowly and zipped it up to my chin. The sun was beginning to set, brilliant oranges and reds and purples and pinks, because of pollution, Chris had told me once, which I thought was strange. Something so beautiful, something so natural, really isn't natural at all.

My feet were suddenly walking, straight toward downtown, straight toward Fun Bags and her gyrating, glistening body on Bobby's stage. Chris would probably be there, hell, everyone would probably be there, it was a Friday night, and everyone who isn't anyone would be at Bobby's. It was a ten minute walk, I was counting the seconds in my head, losing count several times and beginning back at one, and I felt like I had walked from one coast to the other by the time I got there.

Sure enough, she was there, serving beer and liquor and pouring vodka down her body and sexily rubbing it in, which kind of turned me on, but I averted my eyes and scanned the room for Chris, finding him in the corner alone, nursing a beer and checking out the female bodies that were just out of his reach.

"She looks pretty hot tonight," he said, pointing his beer toward Fun Bags.

I really began to wonder if they had fucked at some point. Maybe while I was still with her even, surely after we broke up, which was only two weeks ago. The way he looked at her, the way his body would turn to face wherever she was standing, began to irk the shit out of me, and suddenly all I could picture were his hands all over her body, his mouth and his tongue working her into feverish screams of pleasure.

"Did you fuck her?" I asked. I was surprised that it came out so quickly, so bluntly, so horribly, "did you fuck her," that I felt like an asshole, but I really wanted to know, I felt like I needed to know.

Chris stared into my eyes, sitting back in his chair, and said, "No," and I believed him because he is a really horrible liar and because I began to calm down enough to realize that he wouldn't do that to me because I wouldn't do that to him.

"We solid?" he said a couple minutes later.

I shook my head yes, feeling like a chump, a jealous chump, but jealous of what? Fun Bags? Of her newfound freedom, the freedom to shake what she has, to let men grope her and caress her with one dollar bills? Jealous of her ability to not feel anything while I was left feeling every-

thing?

5. I hate how she never shared anything with me. I never felt like I really knew her, knew her well enough to read her facial expressions, her body language. What did it mean when she sat curled up on the couch with one of her long cigarettes hanging out of the left side of her mouth, her eyes staring blankly out the window? What was that mind thinking? I was always on the outside looking in, always forced to look at what I didn't really want to see. What I really didn't understand I was seeing anyway. I'd tell her anything and everything, but she was always tight-lipped, always staring, smiling, like one of her porcelain teddy bears.

"What can I get you?" Fun Bags said to me, balancing an empty tray in her right palm, her cheeks sagging, a half-smile on her face, her eyes, annoyed.

"Nothing," I said. "Absolutely nothing."

She rolled her eyes and strutted away, her hips shaking with the beat of the crackly song playing on the jukebox.

"Did you do anything with all those goddamn knicky knacks?" Chris said.

"I'm not gonna let you skeet shoot with them, as much as I hate those damned things."

"I was only joking before," he said, finishing off his beer. "You could sell 'em."

I wouldn't do that. I would box them up with bubble paper and drop them off at wherever it was she was staying, probably with her parents, as much as I didn't want to admit that that's probably what I would do. She used to tell me that I was too nice, that people walked all over me, that I'd do anything for anyone if they asked, even if they asked impolitely. I had always thought that was one of the reasons she loved me. Turns out it was one of the reasons she hated me. The day she left, screaming and ranting, even breaking the table lamp I'd had since my freshman year of high school, she told me that I was too goddamn nice, that I should do more things around our own house, which she called "a dump," instead of helping the neighbors with mending fences or fixing drainpipes or cleaning gutters. I was a sap, she had said, a worthless sap, who obviously didn't love her because he didn't spend enough time making her happy.

She had also been upset that I wasn't more supportive of her new job at Bobby's, that I really didn't want to drool over her fun bags while she served beer and pretzels to men who *were* drooling over her fun bags.

The day she quit school (she only had six classes left) shocked me because I thought she was better than that, more than just fun bags who only wanted to shake what she had. The family, the house, the picket fence, maybe a dog, the fucking American dream! All for nothing, all so she could quit, quit everything except collecting those motherfucking bears.

She was walking towards me, and I quickly looked away, realizing that I had been staring at her for the past five minutes, staring through her, through the fun bags, through the fishnets, *through* her. She was preening herself as she walked, raking her fingers through her hair, adjusting her bra, tugging at her apron in an attempt to straighten it out.

6. She's vain. There were dozens of mirrors around the house, not quite as many mirrors as there were bears, but still plenty of mirrors for her to stare at herself in. She complained about the cellulite on her thighs (what little there was, she was a stick), she was concerned about the wrinkles forming near her eyes (she owned every anti-aging product known to man), she whined about age spots on her skin, yet she would lie out in the summer sun for hours at a time to get the perfect tan. She strived for perfection with her face and her body. Everything else was superficial. I was superficial, ectoderm, the surface material that helped her look good to everyone else.

"Maybe we should talk," she said, pulling out a chair.

I nodded at Chris, who nodded at Fun Bags and then left the table, making his way to the bar where he sat on a barstool and began talking to a shapely brunette wearing nothing but leather.

"I'm going to come and get my things tomorrow."

"I packed some of your bears," I said.

She just nodded and folded her hands together on the table and then said, "I miss you."

I ignored what she said, focusing instead upon the napkin, my seven reasons that were burning a hole in my back pocket, those reasons. Bears, cigarettes, vanity, all negative words in my mind, were becoming my mantra, repeat it, repeat it, know she really isn't the one. The one. And I knew that she wasn't. If she was I would have seven reasons, hundreds of reasons maybe, why I loved her, but was I being picky? Was I asking too much of her and of myself?

"I broke one of them little bears," I said.

She didn't respond immediately, but her face sunk when I said it, her eyes becoming thin, her lips pursing slightly. She looked tired, old even, worn out and done with everything around her, this bar, the bears,

me. I knew it wouldn't be long before she disappeared from this town, moving thirty miles closer to something that she's not sure exists.

7. I hate that look. Her thin face, the dark hair that falls in front of it like a curtain, hiding that look she wore, that pissed off, I'm done, irritable, never happy with anything look. It frightened the hell out of me, and made me want to hide out in the closet until the porcelain bears and everything that reeked of her was gone. She was a ray of cancer-causing hate, and I always felt like she was aimed directly at me, and I could feel it right now with that look she was giving me, her eyes burrowing into my forehead, and I could hear her laughing at me in my mind, and I wondered if she could read minds or if I could read hers.

"Which one did you break?"

I wondered if she would care that I broke the only bear I ever bought her. Or if she would shrug it off and thank me quietly to herself because I did something that she was planning to do anyway.

I said, "The one that I bought you," and stared intently at her face, trying to read the expression, but she never wavered from her cancer-causing hate look. I guess she had planned on breaking it herself, skeet shooting with it maybe, proof that she really didn't care, nor did she ever care, about me or anything that had to do with me and anything that I had wanted for us.

She let out a small, "Oh," and stood up, wiping at her white apron that had "Bobby's" printed on it, a little chainsaw logo next to the name. Her face suddenly changed, softened, into a look I had never seen before. She no longer looked sallow or ghostly pale, her features were striking, her big green eyes, highlighted with light purple eyeshadow, her thin lips pursing outward to make themselves look bigger, her cheeks rosy and plump. And then she said, "goodbye," and that was the last time I ever saw her. I had thought the look was something new and different from her when it was really me that was different, right at that moment and that moment only, a moment of clarity that told me I was ignorant and in love and blind. She did collect her things from the house, but only when she knew I wouldn't be at home. I'd be at work, far from her and focusing on the bricks and not whether I'd made a mistake, whether my list, my reasons, were all completely wrong.

Sheet Music

George Grenchik

Empty streets
Smothering smog, covers the mindless streetwalkers
Who meander the village of cougars
Akin to the smoke stack jungle wanderers of ailing industrial islands
Staggering, influenced by cans of cheap honesty
Notice not, the mattress music
The squeaks resound from the ensemble under the sheets
Jamming behind closed drapes on center bunk
Miles smiles, blowing gently through the speakers
As the CD skips
Sketches of Spain fill the atmosphere, in a silent way
No one can hear behind the open door melodies
“Oh, the beauty of companionship in isolation”

The melodies intensify
Tongues tangle, tap to tempo
Air pressure burns the cheeks
Feeling the crash on the ride
Exhaling crescendo
Satisfaction in a sigh

The duet parts
Emptying all clogged valves
“Excuse me, please
Watch where you release your horn”
Denim tainted by the labor of sound
Clothes exchanged
Keeping false prudence strutting in loose fit snugness

Hidden, in a shady place
Mattress music left untitled
Unstable notes finding home between bars
Harmony held, until change in breath
Recording the faint, feeble sounds, of minute music
A playing session for private ears
Suited,

Finding no coda
Musicians head into the isolated atmosphere
Not repeating the same measures

The Two

Martha Davis

Two lovers sit naked in the winter,
feeding each other teaspoons of snow.
They exhale their smiles
and make beds out of frozen branches
and iced blades of grass.
They mix martinis in bird nests
from the pieces of a frozen pond,
and decorate each other's hair with the spires of a cedar,
heavy with fleshy cones and blue leaves.
White-crowned sparrows float
while dangling light from their beaks,
illuminating the intimacy of the two.

The night is frozen
and sends glints of light flashing across
a blanketed substructure of crackling limbs
and soft shard winds.
The lovers make toast
with the concentrated light of a magnifying glass
and spread jam with the feather of a purple finch.
They disperse fragrant flowers of saffron to passersby,
dying their lips with the orange dust
from their fingertips.
Each touch creates veins of heat
that melt their thin skins of ice,
and a glow returns to their cerulean cheeks.

Naked Lady

Bennett Wood

We painted the room with hopes,
and the even roller of my father-in law,
that the deep purple
would bring inspiration.

Our brown spinet
piano takes one wall
entirely to itself. The strings
sound slightly out of tune,
frequently making a flatted fifth
far too sour and leaving
the tonic lacking somewhat
in sweetness.

And the piano is laden
with sheet music,
the filing long forgotten.
A trail of reeds,
ancient artifacts discarded
along the path towards
the sound.

Dexter Gordon roosts royally
above the piano,
in New York 1948.
Saxophone in hand,
with his cap
tipped back,
smoke rings
curling out
from his nose and mouth.
Rising
ever upwards and outwards.
Following a widening spiral
“stairway to the stars,”
or in this case to

a broken light fixture
with one burnt out bulb.
The working bulb revealing
a gold trimmed mirror,
left here by prior owners.
Reflecting,
I wonder what might
this mirror have seen
and do mirrors remember
such things or do they simply
live in the moment
outlining the changes
as they pass.

In the middle of the floor
lies a badly battered
brown case.
The corners of the heavy canvas
frayed to reveal the wood beneath.

Beneath the crushed blue velvet
lining lies a thing of beauty.
The lacquered brass gleaming
with the warmth of buckwheat
honey dripping from the comb.

Opening the case,
the smell of cork grease
and old leather wafts upward
to my nostrils, filling them.
The curve of the neck
as familiar and sensual
as the line of a woman's breast.
Does this naked lady¹ remember
the touch of another's hand?

¹ "Naked Lady" is the name by which saxophonists affectionately refer to the model "M" series Saxophone manufactured by Conn. This popular model (played by Charlie Parker and Gerry Mulligan among others) was thus named because of the engraved outline of a bare breasted woman on the bell of the horn.

Does she recall the mingling
of bourbon and cigarette smoke?
Will she still sing
of Stardust, remembering
it's Almost Like Being
in Love and April
in Paris?
Seems like only Yesterdays:
"youth was mine,
truth was mine."

Does she still recall
the bass drum thump
of artillery shelling,
or feel the cold sting
of December in the frozen forests
of Europe? The ratamacue
and rim shot
of rifle fire whistling
through the trees.
Is the love affair
that brought her lover
back alive, still warm
beneath the smooth
pearl keys?

I exhale,
blowing life
through her
and as we dance she sings
"I can't get started," as the song
fills the room, I know
these foolish things
remind her
of him.

Innocence and Orange Kittens

Andrew Crider

When I was three or four my brother's older friend sort of forced me to
drown
an orange kitten. He didn't threaten me,
but he expected my obedience.
And so I grabbed his fragile terrified body and dunked him in a dirty
manila bucket
full of icy water.
The older boy laughed, but I did not.
Determined and mostly innocent I dunked him for a minute, but my
mother
saw or heard and ran outside and snatched the limp soaking kitten
from my clutched grip.
She ran inside and I followed.
She cried and so I cried.
The kitten did not move as my mother dried it on her bed.
My mother turned and looked at me with a kind of heartbroken rage, and
with a fierce and angry blow she struck my face with her open hand.
I was scolded and I cried and I was mostly innocent,
but when I saw my mother weep the way she did for that small orange
animal,
that innocence fled from me.

The kitten revived and lived.
—But I ate of the fruit offered me by my brother's bastard friend,
and I knew of the great evil in the world,
and I knew it lodged soundly in me.

Pulling the Bobcat Out of the Lake

Robert Rohe

"You gotta write pomes about what you know" -David Lee

The ground was soft and he turned too wide then
the back side slipped too close to the waterline and
the mud was too sandy and he was going
too fast cuz the ass end sank while the treads
kicked up muck then the boss showed up
and he tried to look calm, but
I know inside he was boiling and raging and
praying that this \$26,000 machine
wouldn't sink to the bottom of Dunlap Lake and
that the good man driving wouldn't drown, so he
threw a chain to the driver and wrapped the other end
'round a thick tree and the excavator arm pulled that
big bastard free and we laughed for a minute and
clapped hands on backs 'til the boss told us
to get back to work.

Digital Camouflage

Katherine Davis

My husband's new
all-terrain
Army Combat Uniform
camouflages
him in all
environments.

He is draped in
desert sand
beaten-thin manila folders
his gold wedding ring scratched and dulled.

I see his uniform
in my dusty, sage tablecloth
dirty tan sidewalk
moldy, days-old dishes.

Infrared invisible—
he fades out
of our pixelated photos.

In a V Formation

Hannah Anderson

My great-grandfather Shorty (real name Edgar)
was a pot-bellied stove of a man (or a troll)
at five feet one inch. But when charged
by a goose he grabbed it by the neck
and lifted it from the ground. The
goose beat its wings. Shorty shook
it, asking “Hah! What are you going
to do now?” Grab the snake behind his
head, not by his tail. Try not to tease or
tweak. Not a day goes by that I don’t imagine
that docile Canadian goose bull-rushing me. His
neck is a cat’s tail and a snake’s body. The world
halts for his honking. Bystanders stare at our tangled
dancing, “Won’t someone think of the children!” Security
escorts me off the grounds. Imagine strangling a goose that
way. Now, imagine him nipping you when you put him down.

Hold Fast

Laura Dempsey

Once, before I left
Dad raised that strap to me,
had me cornered in the kitchen.

I don't right remember what I'd done.

I grabbed the cast iron skillet
from off the stove.
I held it up, high as I could—it bein'
heavy—
just like he held the strap.
I said, "No. You're not hittin' me."

He took a step back.
He fell into a chair at the table.
The strap slid from his hand
and fell to the floor.

Still don't know what got him, my words
or that skillet.

Fireflies

Jarrett Kaufman

My stepfather woke me in the middle of the night. He sat down on the edge of my bed and rubbed his cold hands across my face. The room was painted in night and I tried to blink the darkness out of my eyes.

"I want to show you something," he whispered.

"Not now Earl," I said. "I'm tired."

He stood over the bed.

"Get up, now!" he said.

I kicked off the blankets and Earl lifted me out of the bed and took me across the room. He sat me down on the floor next to my schoolbag and told me to put my boots on.

Earl opened the blinds in the window next to my bed. The sky was red and hazy and bars of crimson light slanted through the cracks of the blinds and colored his face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Shhh," he said pressing his finger to his lips. "I'm going to show you."

"Right now?"

"Be quiet, okay?"

"Why?"

"Because, it's a secret and we don't want to wake mommy, okay?"

We walked down the hallway and through the living room. He took me through the kitchen and out on the front porch. I followed him around the carport to the backyard. The air was cold and Earl helped me button my coat.

"Earl, where are we going?"

"I'm going to show you."

I followed him down the gravel alleyway that ran behind our neighborhood. It was quiet and I listened to the rocks crunch underneath our feet. My breath floated out of my mouth like smoke.

Earl stopped walking. He grabbed my arm and shook me. "You're not going to tell anybody about all this, right?"

I told him I wouldn't.

"I'm not kidding boy," he said.

"I won't say anything," I said.

Earl grabbed my chin and looked into my eyes.

"You promise?" he asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Say it James. I want you to say it.”

“I promise, Earl.”

“Good,” he said.

I looked down the alley and the sky seemed alive. Thick, rolling clouds moved around like ocean waves and all the houses were illuminated in light yellows and oranges and different shades of black.

“You see that?” Earl asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?”

“What is it?”

“It’s a surprise, son.”

The alley veered off to the left, then stopped at a tall fence. I could hear people screaming on the other side.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Quiet now,” Earl said, walking towards the fence.

A porch light came on and people were looking out of their windows. A man in pinstriped pajamas walked out onto his patio and a woman stood in her driveway looking at the gray and orange-tented clouds.

“I’m going to let you stand up on my shoulders,” Earl said.

“Why?”

“So you can look over the fence.”

“No, Earl. I don’t want to,” I said.

“You going to be a little baby?”

“No,” I said. He hoisted me onto his shoulders.

“Then grab onto the fence,” he said.

“But Earl, I don’t—”

“God damn it. Grab the fence,” he yelled.

I pulled myself up off his shoulders and looked over the top of the fence. A two-story building was engulfed in fire and a portion of the roof had collapsed. The windows were popping from the heat and shards of glass fell to the ground like snow crystals.

There was a bitter smell in the air. It stung my nose when I breathed.

“What’s that smell?” I asked.

“It’s burning insulation.”

There were people hanging out of the windows screaming and flailing their arms.

“Tell me what you see?” Earl asked.

“I don’t know, Earl.”

“Just look James. Now tell me,” he said.

The fire had spread to both floors and dark gray smoke bellowed out from the windows and stretched up into the sky like octopus tentacles. There were glowing red particles of smoldering ash, tiny yellow shining wood fibers and small pieces of burning insulation floating above the building.

“Look at those embers,” said Earl. “They look like thousands of fire-flies.”

He began to laugh and I did too, but I didn’t know why.

“What is this place?”

“It’s a hospital for crazy people, James.”

I told Earl that I wanted to go home, that I didn’t want to be here anymore. I felt strange watching the fire. I felt ashamed. He wouldn’t let me down off his shoulders.

“It’s beautiful, don’t you think?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t you help?”

“James, I’ve already helped them,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“One day you’ll understand,” he said. “One day.”

There was an explosion and the ground shook. I looked back over the fence and there were people on fire scrambling through the doors and jumping out the windows.

“Keep watching, James,” Earl yelled.

“I don’t want to,” I said.

“Just watch.”

I saw fire trucks and ambulances. They were coming up over a hill lined with tall cedar trees. The sirens blared and I could feel the red and white flashing lights splash across my face.

I felt dizzy and the cups of my eyes began to burn.

“Let me down,” I said. Tears ran down my face.

“James, just wait—”

“No let me down. Let me down,” I screamed.

I ran down the alleyway. When I got back home I ran through the porch and into the kitchen. I took my boots off and undressed in my room. It was dark and my eyes hadn’t adjusted.

I could hear Earl in the kitchen and I crawled into bed and waited for my eyes to come back to me. I listened to him walk down the hallway. His steps were soft. They seemed paced and reflective.

He stopped at my door.

“James,” he whispered. “Jaaammmeesss,” He whispered again.

He lit a cigarette and the smoke snaked in the air above his head. He leaned against the doorframe. I could feel my chest tighten. I had never seen Earl smoke before.

He put the cigarette to his mouth and the burning tobacco lit his face for a brief moment. His eyes were absent looking. His forehead was folded and wrinkled with expressions that I had never noticed before.

He took the cigarette from his mouth and his face went black again.

“James?” Earl said.

I closed my eyes and pulled the covers over my head. Blood pounded through my temples. I could still hear him smoking and breathing. He kept calling my name. But when I lowered the covers he was gone. Silence.

I rolled out of bed and went to the window. The horizon had turned a light blue just beyond the dead cornfields. The sky had opened up and morning was coming.

Orange and black clouds still rolled across the sky and over the rooftops, and the little red and yellow fireflies floated along in the wind. They fell against my window like snowflakes and twirled across the pane down to the sill. They were beautiful.

I crawled back in bed and pulled the covers up over my shoulders. The wall clock ticked and ticked and ticked. I laid as still as the pillow underneath my head. It was 5:46 a.m.

Becoming a Child

Heath Luster

I remember the spring of the vinyl seats,
Under my toes they felt like rockets
I could jump into space back then.
And he never made me wear a seat belt.
Standing on the shoulders of a '78 Dodge.

He smelled like Brut and engine grease.
It was the smell I knew as father,
Never can that be separated.
Walking through dept. stores or
Picking up my car from a garage
I feel his presence, his glare upon my shoulders.

I can see clearly in my mind
The arrangement of union stickers
On his lunch pail and stitched to his vest,
Local 183.
The way he wore that dingy hat
Tilted with the pride of a night-shift man.

Wordsworth once said...once wrote
The child is the father of the man.
I wonder if I am more or less than him.
Often I gauge his motives, his desires,
And wonder what he was like as a young man.
Like me?

How will my hat be worn, and how will I arrange my stickers,
What will ever be my 183?

Sons of the Midwest

Rob Love

The boys who rumbled and slipped through the numb
suburbs, calculated gardens of corn,
and puddles of sacred lonely woods from
which the bleared patchwork of Illinois was born

and thrives, these fearless boys who took dusk in
from the tops of trees, wondered sadly
at the sun's suicide. But, the grinning
night lay just beyond and they rushed madly

at it, hungry for the shadowy thrills
and imagined heroics that build
the moments that are immortal, that fill
the space in between regrets. But, the fields

weep slowly in the wind for the boys who
are dead now. The sky mourns in steel blue.

Death–Giver and Friend

Andrew Crider

He came in cold November and left in early August,
taking back what he always possessed.
God he smelled terrible, like rotten organs and a piss-soaked mattress.
He brought only a pale yellow paint;
he gently smeared it into my father's eyes and lathered it into his skin.
He gave my father comfort and stayed by his bedside when I would not,
and spoke to him when I refused.
He gave my brothers inspiration,
gave them a will to curl up into that hospice bed so
stenched and stained with plague, spooning the love
from my father's soul they had never received before.
He gave my mother hope,
hope that eternity is eternal and worth some penance after all.
In July he gave my father silence and the thin frame he always wanted.
So thin my father's underwear hung from his waist
like an upside down parachute,
one that hanged from a high tree.
My father could not pay him for all these wonderful gifts,
so he gave him his life and three words he gave to one else,

To no one else.
"I love you,"
He whispered in short meaningless gasps.
And with this that fucking tyrant
Gave to me
Only a grin,
And stole the secret dream of children.

Ring of Fire

Kevin Eagan

Ring of Fire
keeps turning. One
by one the ride's
"forty inch or taller"
children plaster
the wired caged
vehicle with vomit
from funnel cakes
or sugar coated
pigs ears or
something glazed
on a stick.

Now that asshole
carnie yells: "Who
wants to go 'round
for one more spin?"
I'm at the top
Overlooking the
makeshift rusted
attractions. And

suddenly I
feel a flood of
orange puke from
the kid above
my vehicle.

It's rolling off
my pants and cakes
my shirt and now
my neck smells of
stomach acid
mixed with fruit loops.

The Dogcatcher

Heath Luster

I used to think I was your Jesus
And I believed in God too
Till one night I dreamt of all of you,
Hundreds of you barking
Thick matted necks
Bloodied like crimson halos
From the noose pulling.
Way I figure—you don't have no soul,
And I don't neither.

I don't dream no more.

I'm saving you from the world,
Restless nights shivering
In the alley—hungry, starving,
Pellet gun wounds
From the toe-headed boy
That lives in the apartment
Upstairs.
That all sounds real good.

So that's what I tell my family at Christmas time.

They don't know the man
That signed them job papers.
I smile wide my gap-toothed grin
When I'm holding you to the ground
And you wriggle—the blood vessels in
Your eyes heaving, bulging, bursting
Like fireworks in an ivory sky
Same way a bug squirms
After you squash it,
Writhing on the pavement.

I am your master now.

Sometimes I stay at the pound.
I watch 'em lay you down
On a stainless steel death bed
And I say,
"Such a shame, poor guy."

But that ain't why I stayed...no sir.
I stayed to watch the light
Leave from your eyes.
No more balls,
No more bones,
No more bitches,
You grow cold—cold as me, cold
As a city street.

You don't have no soul and I don't neither.
Least that's the way I figure.

Saturday Night

Kevin Eagan

you can buy happiness
it's \$1.29 a box for
shells and cheese
the kind with the melty
cheese not the powder

also happiness can cost
\$1 for 10 ramen noodle
packets that will last a
whole week if you're

good and sure coffee's
a little pricey and it costs
triple what you spend in
groceries to drive to the
store and back and then to
work to make \$7.91 an
hour selling tractors

but at least I'm happy
for \$1.29, oh and a
night's rental for another
dollar to waste a night
in my basement apartment
alone with the smells and
sounds of the party upstairs
that I wasn't invited to, but
wouldn't go to anyway

because they don't have
shells and cheese.

Pseudo-Girlfriend

Kevin Eagan

We were walking along the Thames
in January. You were ahead of me
and every time I went to touch you
your hand slipped away like the
black ice on the pavement, and your face
was as angry as burnt toast

*(I admit I burnt the toast
for breakfast and
didn't apologize).*

And as we continued to walk a breeze
came in off the river, and a branch cracked
ambivalently under the pressure
of the ice and landed in front of you
as you fell and went slick looking
for my hand and I dropped my cup of tea
on the pavement beside your boots.

*(After I burnt the toast
I made your tea too strong
on purpose).*

Good Bryan

Ashley Luster

They stare. They're staring. He can see them. He keeps his window blinds closed, no sunshine, no clouds, no girls. They're eleven, twelve maybe, and they like to stare. Their curtains flutter when he's outside. He knows it's them, watching. Wondering.

Polly and Joon like to watch. They like it very much, their eyes sparkling, their toes curling in their little mary-janes, watching Bryan Good walk home from school, his blonde hair in his face, his hands resting in his jacket pockets, his messenger bag swinging at his hip.

"He's a surfer from California," Polly says.

"No, he's a Broadway actor from New York," Joon says.

They're only eleven. They don't agree on anything. Except that Bryan Good is a good neighbor to watch.

The Good Family Newsletter came today. Bryan sits on the couch his father sat on when he was in college. A big, brown leather thing that all women hate, Bryan has come to learn. He flips through the newsletter, a few printed pages about the Good Family, the family he used to know, the family that lives 700 miles away.

Something happens: newsletter.

Nothing happens: newsletter.

Once a month: newsletter.

Everything looks to be good. Lovely. Brilliant. Great.

His cousin Jenn Good is marrying a man named Malcolm Loomis.

She won't be a Good anymore. A Loomis.

Everyone will call him Mal.

Mal. Spanish for bad. Horrible. Tragic. Icky.

Bueno, bueno, bueno. More Spanish.

Bryan tosses the newsletter on the floor. He'll step on it later and leave a shoe print, Nike size elevens.

Polly is playing outside when Bryan walks by, and she stares at him, not wanting to, but not being able to help it, and he doesn't even glance at her.

She's a phantom. He doesn't look at her. She's not here. She's a phantom.

She wonders if Joon is one too.

Bryan is walking to school the next day. He's a med student. He doesn't really like helping people. He likes the good feeling he gets from helping people, the endorphin rush, the happy feeling patients get when popping Xanax (he took it once and it made him jittery and not particularly happy because, he decided, he was happy to begin with), but not actually helping them.

He hates that good feeling. That bueno, a little Spanish here, feeling. That bon, a little French there, feeling.

It makes him feel mal.

He thinks of his sister, Phoebe, whom he called Phebes.

She used to say, "I'm going to be a prima ballerina."

And he would say, "I'm going to be a doctor," and he'd hit her on the knee with a wooden spoon to watch her leg jerk up in reflexive response.

She would giggle. And he would giggle.

And then they'd belly laugh, hearty, from the pit of their stomachs laughter, and everything was just the way he liked it and you can guess how he liked it.

Very good.

Silly Polly asks Joon if she feels like a phantom, like a ghost, like a sneaking ghost, and Joon laughs at Polly and calls her a silly, stupid girl and tells Lucy up the street what her silly sister said, and they both laugh for a good long while.

Another Good Family Newsletter comes, and Bryan takes it inside and sets it on the coffee table, but doesn't look at it just yet.

He doesn't like looking at cadavers either, and he had to today, and he knows he'll have to if he wants to be a good bueno bon doctor.

He thinks about taking Xanax, he has some in a little baggy in his medicine cabinet, but he doesn't.

He sits and thinks of his sister again.

And the girls next door.

Polly and Joon. He knows their names. They wrote them on the sidewalk with yellow chalk.

They have the same color hair Phoebe had, dishwater blonde. He knows because he looks at them when they're not looking. Just to see.

And he sees their eyes, focused, deep, light blue, so light that they're scary and not pretty, and that's just like Phoebe. Pretty but scary. Pretty scary.

He sits on a blue yoga mat that has a permanent spot on the floor. He doesn't do yoga, but the mat is soft and squishy and he likes it.

He flips through the newsletter. Nothing. There's nothing about Phoebe. He wasn't sure if he was expecting there to be something. Maybe. A paragraph? A sentence? A little Spanish? A little French? Some bueno, bueno, bueno?

It'll have been ten years in only five days, an anniversary without a celebration. Would September's newsletter say anything? It had to, he knew it had to.

Would there be another Phoebe?

Phoebe is dead. Phoebe, age eleven, forever and ever and ever.

Polly is angry at Joon, angry for making her feel like a stupid, silly girl, but still plays with her and pretends like nothing ever happened because that's what Joon does.

Polly sits on a swing hung on the big oak tree. Joon sits on the sidewalk, drawing a rainbow with chalk, Roy G. Biv, she tells herself over and over, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, Roy G. Biv.

Joon looks up at the sky and sees a rhinoceros. She looks at Polly. And for a moment, Polly isn't on the swing. The swing moves, but no one's there. But then just like that, there she is again, swinging, staring at Bryan Good's apartment building.

It's a fleeting moment, a feeling that lasts for ten seconds, maybe fifteen. But in that moment, Joon feels like neither she nor Polly exist.

Bryan Good cannot, and will not, ever see them.

He stops and admires a chalk drawing of a rainbow on the sidewalk. Colorful, like Phoebe. There, but not there.

Like Phoebe.

Polly is excited. Something blew in the yard, she yells to Joon.

Polly waves sheets of paper at Joon, the top one says Good Family Newsletter.

Joon suddenly gets excited and tries to snatch the papers away, but Polly pulls them back and holds them behind her.

"We have to look together," Polly says.

Joon lays the paper out on the rug in the living room. The girls sit side by side, scanning the pages carefully, feeding, learning about Bryan Good.

Polly stops. She tries to put the paper back together, to not see anymore, but Joon won't let her, Joon wants to see.

And then Joon sees.

The September newsletter doesn't come. June, July, August, blank. Bryan wonders, but doesn't think much about it, he thinks of the side-walk rainbow, and about Phoebe, the prima ballerina. Phoebe is dead and eleven forever.

They were just playing.

They had been in the treehouse, not even a house, just slats making a wood floor, in the V of the tree in their backyard, built by their father, who loved them and played basketball with them, Phoebe on his shoulders. Or he'd play dolls or street hockey or cops and robbers.

But not that day. That day he was working, out of town.

Phoebe was the bad guy this time.

"I'm not really bad!" she had said.

Bryan had said, "You are in this game," and continued to fiddle with the white rope their mother used as clothesline.

"I'm Phoebe Good, and I'm a good girl," she had said, laughing.

The rope was around her neck, she was being hung for robbing the bank, back then you got hung for stuff like that, Bryan had said, and the rope was tied tight, tied for real, to a branch, and looking back Bryan hates himself for not being the bad guy in the game because he feels like the bad guy everyday anyway.

It was just pretend.

She was only pretending, he was only pretending, it wasn't for real, it wasn't supposed to happen, but she lost her balance practicing her ballet, there were no walls, no railings, on the tree house, and over the edge she tumbled.

She slipped and the rope went taut. She slipped and yelped for a split second. She slipped and is eleven forever.

She slipped, and it had been a good game, probably the best ever, but it went wrong, very bad, not good bueno bon, not gut, not buono, not anything good at all, only bad, bad, bad.

Phoebe Good had died at age eleven.

The newsletter said so, said, "To our darling girl," said, "ten years ago," and there was a little poem with lots of ellipses, an unfinished life, an unfinished sentence, and Joon cringed and Polly's eyes watered.

Eleven. Just like them. Maybe they would die, too, maybe they would die and nothing good would ever happen to them. Bryan Good would never say hello. Or they would never meet their very own Bryan Goods or marry their very own Bryan Goods.

They wonder how she had died.

Maybe she had been riding her pink bicycle, one that had the long silver tassels dangling from the handlebars, and a car hit her and splattered her all over the street. Or maybe she had a disease and all her hair fall out, like their cousin Thora's did.

"This isn't good," Joon says.

"No," Polly says, "it's not at all."

The rainbow is still on the sidewalk, a little faded. Only now the names Joon, Polly, and Phoebe are scrawled underneath.

Bryan Good stands amazed, wondering what this means.

He realizes: they have the newsletter, the one that never came, the one he never saw.

He marches up their walkway, thinking he'll bang on the door and demand it back and yell at them for being stupid, silly girls who never do anything good or goed or gut or any other word that means good in any other language in the entire world.

Standing at the door, he raises a hand, and pounds on the thick wood, the barrier between him and something else, something that he doesn't understand. Two girls. Like Phoebe. But not.

One of them opens the door, he doesn't know which, the other one stands off to the side, her fingers sprawled across her face like she wants to cry, but won't in front of a stranger.

He opens his mouth to say something, but nothing comes out.

The one who opened the door holds up the newsletter, but he doesn't take it. He turns and walks away, jumping over the bit of sidewalk that has the rainbow drawn on it.

He doesn't care because it is not that personal.

He cares because it is personal.

The swing hanging from the oak sways back and forth in the breeze. For a moment he sees Phoebe hanging from that limb, swaying in the breeze, but then she's gone, lost and gone forever.

Polly and Joon stop watching Bryan Good. Maybe because they feel bad, maybe because they don't know why they watched in the first place, maybe because they feel like phantoms, ghosts, of something Bryan Good once knew.

Bryan Good goes to med school, like he always did. He pokes at cadavers and gets yelled at by the chief of medicine when he doesn't respond fast enough to simple medical questions, like he always did.

He averts his eyes from the home Polly and Joon live in.

Like he always did.

And he knows that it's damn good that he cannot see Polly and Joon, that they avoid him or have perhaps disappeared, disappeared for real, lost and gone forever, just like Phoebe.

Good. Bon. Buono. Great. Gut. Bueno.

He wonders if they're even there, if they're even real, those two wide-eyed girls, dishwater blonde hair swirling around their faces while they jump-roped or pushed each other on the swing.

The sidewalk chalk drawings are gone, never to return, never to shed a rainbow again.

The Taste of Rust

Lauren Gerber

It's the taste of biting a rusty chain-linked fence,
It's the feel of rust-bitten nails tearing at water-wrinkled flesh,
It's the awful stench of burning bodies when
today, he sees me and he
Tells me how you've been, and
he tells me how you are.

We say these things as if they are nothing,
Sighing the hollow words that turn you on a potter's wheel,
The petty, empty cradle of words that
mold you and mold you
Until you are not you,
But a lifeless object,
An entity of my past,
Some royal Memory
Sitting upon your dusty throne
In the dark crevices of my mind,
Some rusting cadaver I must brush cobwebs off to recognize.

We talk of you like this;
I ask questions, and he answers.
He tells me all I want to know about the
distant something you have become.

And darling, darling,
He says you're doing well,
So I say, that's great.
Say, I'm so glad,
As I wipe the tears from my broken eyes.

And I, I am the cadaver,
My moth-eaten eyelids rusting over by the spoonful,
And the you in my mind becomes more and more real,
As I, myself, drift outwards, toward oblivion.

Not a Cherry Tree

Robert Rohe

Be the daffodil to my springtime.
Unfold against the sun;
soft yellow petals bathed in golden shine.
Dance on the breeze,
sway seductively to the tune
of growing grass.
Stand straight and bow to no one
and please don't cry
when I pluck you
and place you
in a vase for all to see.

Away on a Dirt Path

Rob Love

The leaves talk in Autumn,
they speak
in brittle crunching gasps
under lonely
footsteps.

I pick a single leaf off the ground,
a sandpapery brown fellow
long since dead.
Staring at his bowing and dipping shape,
his sharp fingers and dried veins
I wonder
has anyone ever looked at you before?
I crumple him in my hand.
From dust to dust.

Am I ever really more than dust?

The breeze blows waves
into the patchy fields
of burgundy and orange and yellow above me,
and I am stopped
by the roaring whisper
of an uncountable number of voices
singing to me,
telling me
if the wind wills it
(and it does)
there is something incredible
between the dust
and the dust.

Learning to Love Laundry

Bennett Wood

Our love grows
like this pile of laundry
spread out
on the bedroom floor.

I keep going back
to look for the
“clean” pair of jeans,
the pale blue shirt
with the pinstripes,
or maybe a match
for this lonely old
grey sock
and each time
find something I
don’t remember
having before.

It creeps,
this laundry
kind of love
into the corners
and out into the hall
slouching over couches, sofas,
spilling across the floor
stretching wall to wall.

And beneath its surface
we find hidden obstacles.
In the middle of the night
while I was away
(perhaps adjusting the thermostat)
a high-heeled shoe
leapt from the closet
of your childhood past.
Now lying in wait,

beneath layers
of cotton and denim
for an ambush
on my unsuspecting
big toe.

The black stiletto
stabs at my foot, an
assassination attempt
I thwart by
fishing the
hostile heel
out of the
laundry heap.

Together we can
sort it all out.
Lights and darks,
occasionally putting a
pair of pumps
back where it belongs.

We must keep our heads
over these aggravating heels.
As we fall deeper into
laundry.

Thoughts in front of a mirror at 2 AM

Nate Jones

I'm gasping for a word,
for something to say right now,
but the best writers
in the office of Cerebellum and Company
have closed up their doors.
I'm left
with sweating arms that reach out
to stroke back brunette hair
(blazed black with the lack
of light
and abundance
of night time lavender)
and fingers that run along
the side of her temples;
her eyes closed
and mouth gaping
as both my thumbs circle
gently around
the button of her chin.

But before I kiss her
and retrieve
the pleasantly unnatural taste
of fresh mint toothpaste
—there it is
it's something about that face she made.
Somewhere between the preconceived image
of serenity and passion
its gesture waddles.
It stares back at me
and all the poets in the world are speechless.
For don't we all remember that face?
Of all the things to think about
and all those supposed connections we've made
between alpha male and female—
it's that face we keep looking back at—

I mean, we had a conversation
just hours before.
We had a game we were playing
she was asking "why?"
as inquisitively as a doe eyed young child
who doesn't understand.
To everything I replied,
she just kept asking why
as if to test my ability to bullshit on the spot.
I would take a few seconds
(looking at the vinyl edges of the black booth
in the diner)
to answer in my best 'matter of fact' tone of voice,
ripe with exaggerated grunts of aggravation
but still eliciting a loud giggle
from the other side of the booth
with teeth bared in a loving grin.

What of those bits of conversation?
Like everything else that passes our lips,
like all the beautiful prose that you imagine
when you don't have a pen to capture it,
will all these moments fade so easily?
Will all the words she says in time
turn to nothing but vague lines in bad memoirs?

But those moments of facial ecstasy
sailing above the piles of conversation
meeting up with the 'other' moments
from unnamed 'others.'
After a lifetime of the thing you call love
comes to pass,
those faces grace you silently
in an orgasm of nostalgia
never saying a word.

Fireflies

Rob Love

Fireflies,
golden lanterns over a black pond,
try to mimic the star pinned sky.

And my dad explains to me
there is no shame
in being big.

But fat is a distinct concoction,
two parts shame
and one part regret.

I daydream
about pushing it all out of my belly button,
I imagine it to be like creamed corn
through a hole in a plastic bag and
it falls away from me.

Somewhere a firefly writes
poetry in golden, fading ink
on a blank canvas night
and tries to fall into the sky.

Thursday, October 27th, 2005

Nate Jones

The click of a remote
signals the end of signals
from tubes bringing to you
the end of bad news.

You, on a cloth chair
reclining without concern
because the fists fell
and were beaten down
with curfews
and quiet clubs
on flaming streets.

The details got lost
in the pixilated faces
on the headlines.

Ministers and presidents
presented as if they
were on the frontlines
in the midst of chaos,
narrowly avoiding
the thrown rocks
and hard glass bottles.

Watch the camera
zoom in on
leader's hands
itching on the hilt
of bloodthirsty blades

rather than

lying on the silk sheets
of a commander's quarters
hands on the soft legs
of safe, secure lovers,
as the leader's thumbs
rest on

the click of a remote.

*** CLICK ***

The grass under the feet of children
is pummeled back into the earth
both playfully
as when the goalkeeper falls
(failing to protect the virginity
of a rope net pen
and rousing the victory
laughs
of neighborhood friends)
and frantically
as when one's identity comes into
question;
the question rising
in the wail of police sirens
with the hands of the Republic
white-knuckled behind the wheel.

In Clichy-sous-Bois,
under the currents
of transmission lines
two boys die
of fear.

*** CLICK ***

The singed skin
of lost sons
takes the shape
of a neighborhood
protected by the sovereignty
of nightfall.
And the neighborhood
moves on the fast feet
of youths
taking to the streets,

treading through black asphalt seas
reclaiming the grounds
that led them back
from disappointing interviews
and away
from uptown buildings
full of unattainable suits.

The night doesn't tell them
"the vacancy has been taken,"
when they say where they are from,
when they speak their native names
or wrap their mouths around an immigrant
inflection.

Instead, the night envelops them
and the streetlights of grieving corners
resemble the flames of cocktails
once the kerosene dampened edges
of cotton corks
meet the flicker of a lighter.

*** CLICK ***

France:
2nd largest global colonial empire
behind the British Empire

8.6% of world land area
French

2nd Colonial Empire:
Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia

12 centuries of African Muslim culture
interrupted

...

10% of French population
North African

21.7% of 15 to 24 year olds
unemployed
(4 times the national average)

Prisons filled
to 119% of the
intended capacity
(60% of inmates
immigrants)

2 boys dead
in 1 night

and it takes the post-mortem exhaust
of 8,973 cars
for you to realize
something's wrong?

*** CLICK ***

Days before, a junior high school
lit on fire
the bricks for learning
burning
as the steel skeletons
of enflamed cars
lined the streets
like candles on an altar.

Now,
behind the safety
of a department store window
and the distance of television signals
Nicolas Sarkozy calls
for the street to be cleaned
with a Karcher.

Zero tolerance
for “scum” and “rabble.”

What’s more insulting is that they think
we are “terrorists”
or “organized gangs.”

They can’t fathom
that these raised fists
in the night
could be ubiquitous.
Falling from the sand
castles of empires
grains gathering
with torrents of years
of being denied
an identity
void of a three-color
flag.

* **CLICK** *

The Beauty Dreamt

Katherine Davis

I spent three years believing there was no color in the world, just light and its absence and I could feel its presence beyond its warmth. There was a small weight, a sound, and a smell to the light. I swam in a vast silver lake and the light smelled like the great blueness I know now. There was always a light taste of grainy dirt between my teeth. Everything was texture; smooth, sharp, rough, dull, crisp, soft, knobby. In the whole light and dark world it was just me and the sun and plants and water. I was the only being to enjoy the world and so I did. I recall it all. None of it was real to anyone but me. Everything is color and others now. With so many others to enjoy the Earth, I feel as if there's no longer any for me.

I fell asleep so sweetly, was such a virgin, had no thoughts of the demands of the future—and I lived. Lived a life free of restriction. I dreamt for years at a time and the experiences were whole, an integral part of me that slips further from me every second I don't try to remember.

I touched flowers to my stomach and my tongue and I lay with birds out of curiosity and a unity of identity with my world. My mind was my body and I was never a slave to any needs. I would taste and swallow but it was never eating. It was always just living. I am a slave to a system I cannot control. I can't look at the world with pink sapphire eyes and I can't taste anything without worrying it will make my lips pale and cold.

Before that tower and that old woman, before I started sleeping, I wandered freely around my parents' castle and I walked barefoot on the stairs and the rugs. I listened to the soft balls of my feet plop on the stone. I felt the carpet under my toes. There were places in the garden that I knew only I visited. So often I wanted to be apart, in the quiet.

I dreamt of people. I had a little daughter. I raised her until she was five and that dream ended. She had cheeks the color of a kitten's tongue and black hair. She was my legs and my fingers, my lungs and my blood.

She was a rabbit running for the joy of it, not out of fear. She hugged me like the sun on a grassy hill and our hair blew everywhere.

Each world was its own to be learned, free of any ideas of the ones that came before. Except those that just slipped in, like words and a familiar face. This is how I know this is no dream. He kissed and woke me. I watched the world. I kept myself in my own head. I never let any experience onto my face. He asked me so much but I wouldn't answer, it took me so long to figure out where I was, where I am. His voice was strange and his words sounded wrong. I couldn't figure him out.

There is a stability, a certainty, a predictability now that never was before. Yellow sun always follows the silver, pockmarked moon. There is no coral horse to look for in the stable, no glowing flower in the field. I see everything here for what it isn't and what I can't do with it.

The wind beats against me and never flows from me or whirls around me and everything is so temporary. I dreamt that I had no solid body. I wafted. I flitted. I flipped and glided. I flew. I split in three or seven or twelve pieces. I could know so much at once.

I bathed in the clouds. Now I have to lay in a bucket and use stale water.

I sang in the ocean. Now the water chokes me.

I spun a cloak out of fallen leaves and felt them brush my skin. The leaves crumble at my touch. These fingers are too coarse.

My back was sore from digging in the garden and dirt stained my calloused hands. The texture was lively. I am not allowed to dig.

I imagine that my parents and the people of my castle are having trouble adjusting too, but they have each other to tell. Why did they give me away so easily? How is it rescue when there is no danger? Why were they so thankful to be wrested from their dreams? What did they imagine they had awakened to?

My shoes click and rub against my heels and I hate them. My hair is braided up and spun around my head and my scalp hurts. He insists I

keep it this way. All the past princesses grimace in their portraits and I understand why.

In some families here four generations have been given life while I dreamt about people who should be dead by now. No one here will know me. I want to be known. They will never have faith in me and let me share. They don't even share with each other out of fear of losing some mysterious, scarce feeling of power and control. I wonder why those women cursed me. Would it have been better to die at fifteen or to be as I am now—alien in a land that's aged while I have not? I used to know this place, the king here was my mother's distant relation and sometimes we visited. I see the shadow of some of those people I knew in the ladies in the market and the apprentices in the shops, but they don't see any shadow of memory in me. We had a common history.

There was one long dream in which I never slept. Days, weeks, years of waking experience. Day and night flowed seamlessly from and into one another and I knew the creatures of the moon as well as those of the sun. I was privy to owls and bats, opossum and foxes. I sat, and ran, and flew with them. I've lost the close night. I rarely found myself chilled those evenings and I would walk barefoot in the dewy grass, not concerned about hurting my feet. They were made to be walked on and to be on the ground. I spent all my time alone free. The sun burnt me at first, but we learned to live together.

The garden here is short and small. The castle is so well shut up that the air stands still. Here is his grandmother's piano and there is his great aunt's favorite loom for making decorative tapestries. Here is my embroidery hoop so I can decorate handkerchiefs.

I dreamt of a man named Donald. I swept the dirt floor of our home. I hemmed my rough dress and his torn trousers. I can't remember what his work was, but he enjoyed it and was pleasant. I loved his sinewy shoulders. When he brought in wood for the fire the muscles in his collarbone would be tight. The bark would get on his shirt and I would smile and brush it off. He would lay with me and run his fingers over my arms and neck. He was mystical.

How long can a soul put up with hanging around in a body? If my body doesn't wear out for forty more years, might my poor old soul? Or has my lovely soul fled me already; refusing to bear the conditions of my being any longer? I don't think I could blame it if that were the case.

My husband wants a son. It's been sometime since I came here and he has tired of me keeping him away. The people need another generation to hang their desires on. Why should I contribute to the progression of their line when it has done so well without me all this time? They didn't need me 100 years ago and I don't see why they should now. I imagined there would be something gracious here to learn and love but I haven't found anything yet. I will never have my night haired little girl again.

I am a gem and I would rather be stuck in a rock than cut, polished, and mounted.

I spent the afternoon walking in the forest near the castle and lay down to see through the water as it passed me. Little glinting fish shimmered in the stream and the gentle sound of wind in leaves and the splashes on the mud and the water tripping on pebbles lulled me into a light slumber. I dreamt. I dreamt that I was watching a fire burn and speaking with Donald. He held me by my finger and I still felt his grip when I woke up.

How many dreams will I have to untangle from one another and how many more times will I have to wake up?

No one here knows that the sound of night wind over long grass and through leaves is the same as small waves coating beach rocks. Or if they know it they never say it.

Once I dreamt I was worried about my parents. I hadn't heard from them and missed them. I went in through the secret tunnel to keep from waking the guards and the townspeople. I had to cut through roots every inch and I sliced my palm with the dagger. It bled and bled and stained my dress and my hand. I fainted. I have no scar. No marks from years and years of sleepily imagining.

Am I the only thing keeping myself out of the community here? My insistence that what I saw and heard was significant, different? How are dreams any different than sound or sight? I have no record of what I saw, heard, dreamt. But if I don't insist, if I let that sensation go and don't hold onto it as unique, what happens? Can I throw away my memories as flippant and useless? Or do I just hide them, keep them only for myself? Thoughts linger and dreams linger. People linger. I can't see the things I want to. Not when I'm awake and not on the rare occasions when sleep stops me for a time.

Our bed is gigantic. Five people could comfortably sleep in it and never even feel the heat from each other. He sleeps on the side that is open to the room and I sleep up against the wall. How did his kiss wake me? His hand on mine is never precisely right. The beard on his chin scratches me. He has his way.

Maybe I am three people—or I have been two already and must become a third. They have even renamed me—Rose—for the flowers that barricaded us. Maybe this is who I must become—their idea of me, what they know. There is nothing of my prior selves here – no old friends, no old pillows. Maybe both curses came to be—I slept and I died. But I still live in a way and for some reason hope to continue to. But what is clinging onto life good for? I have no hopes for advancement or gain here. No future of meaningful relationships, no great tests left to endure, no sense of responsibility. No fantastic skill. But maybe there is hope in the assurance of change. Hope in its unpredictability. Oh, but what change am I looking for? What change would Rose hope for? There is change in everything, always—even the leaves move, grow, fall. How is that enough for a tree? How is that enough for me? Why is that not enough for me?

Victimization

Hannah Anderson

I. Desecration of Nature

They mow my surfaces, drill for blood in
my veins. They will build a new, inorganic
me in my place: A me with safe, gently
sloping wooden sidewalks, guardrails, and
information signposts of things you did
not know. A woman needs a man is like a fish needs
a hook. Not a hook through your lip—A hook
in your eye that curves through your brain.

*You fit into me
like a hook into an eye
a fish hook
an open eye*

-Margaret Atwood, *You Fit Into Me*

II. Remodeling Architecture

They are building condos in my ovaries.
I want to be pronounced a historic
sight, a natural beauty, a national
monument. I will be sleek and smooth,
Like all modern architecture. A friendly,
curly haired man with buckteeth will sell
t-shirts and snow cones.

*Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.*

-Sylvia Plath, *Lady Lazarus*

III. Industrialization

My body is public property and
an eyesore. Tomorrow, I will be torn
down and sold as scrap organs. They will build
a new me in my place: A me with
handicap access and windows that adhere
to the fire codes. We are all trying
to sound jaded, trying to be sophisticated.
For love or money. For God and country.
For duty and humanity. Just lie
back and think of England.

A Villanelle for the Numb

Rob Love

He is reaped when he sows, fading as he goes.
Eroding clay.
Surviving, just barely, the way the wind blows.

His eyes where the soul hides, show
what's been taken away.
He is reaped when he sows, fading as he goes

on hoping Jesus knows
the people who are drowning everyday.
Surviving, just barely, the way the wind blows

will surely, in time, expose
the why and the way
he is reaped when he sows, fading as he goes.

He is wrecked and his spirit bows.
His heart has turned ashen grey,
surviving, just barely. The way the wind blows

nobody knows,
it's a test for the brave.
He is reaped when he sows, fading as he goes
surviving, just barely, the way the wind blows.

California Dreaming

Ashley Luster

The furniture talked. Sometimes it bothered Paul, sometimes he wanted some quiet time, but most of the time the furniture had a mind of its own. And it wasn't even just the furniture. A picture frame talked, too. Paul had four picture frames, but only one ever talked. And the 1950s-style metal heater in the corner of the room that Paul painted green, because green was his favorite color (but not the favorite color of the heater), occasionally shouted obscenities should anyone touch its knobs.

Jerry was the leader.

Jerry was the couch.

"Is it okay if I sit?" Paul said. He was holding a paper plate with a bologna sandwich on it in one hand and holding a Pepsi in the other, half-way squatting, but not making contact with the couch. You couldn't just sit. Jerry had to invite you.

"I suppose," Jerry said absent-mindedly. "Just don't spill anything on me."

Paul sat and put his soda on the coffee table.

The coffee table's name was Neal.

"I love soda," Neal said.

Paul could hear a vague excitement in Neal's voice. Soda, or any drink really, was like coffee table cocaine. Neal loved it, he loved every minute of it, he loved the water sinking into his wood grain, making visible blemishes as if he were a meth addict.

Sometimes Paul put a napkin under his drink. Sometimes a dirty t-shirt. He didn't have a napkin. And his dirty t-shirts were piled in the corner of the room, and he didn't feel like getting up so he put the drink directly on Neal, who squealed with a satisfactory joy, he had his fix for the day.

Paul stared at the black screen of the television.

"Do you have the remote?" he said to Jerry.

"It's tucked in the left corner under the cushion," Jerry said. "I had to watch Springer."

Jerry loved *The Jerry Springer Show*. He was named after Jerry Springer. Paul wanted to name the couch Carson, after the guy who used to host *Total Request Live* on MTV, but the couch insisted that he would

n't be driven by meaningless consumerism, which was everything MTV represented or so he had said. So he named himself Jerry.

"Yeah, I heard it last night. Turn it down next time," Paul said, tearing the crusts off the bread of his sandwich and tossing them on the floor for the mice.

"The mice are getting bad," Jerry said.

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," Paul said.

Neal shouted happily in condensation delight. They ignored him.

"I hate this place," Jerry said.

"Don't have much of a choice."

"You could write something snappy," Jerry said, pausing a moment, then adding, "something like *California Dreamin*."

"By The Mamas and The Papas?" Paul said. Paul wasn't really a fan of The Mamas and The Papas. They were *too* melodic, *too* 70s, *too* frighteningly easy.

"We live in California," Jerry said.

"Yeah."

"Not much dreaming."

"Yeah."

Paul bit into the sandwich. The bologna tasted old. Everything always tasted old, and he hated that and decided he would hate everything from now on because there was nothing else to do but like something and there was nothing worth liking. Not even the mice, though he thought they were kind of cute.

He put the sandwich on the coffee table. Neal made no protest. He never cared when he was high, which made Paul wonder if maybe he should take up meth or crack or maybe a little heroine. He stood in the shower once for two hours, letting the water beat down on his pale-skinned back, hoping he could get the same high from condensation that Neal did.

Of course it didn't work.

"You should do something," Jerry said. "You could play your guitar on street corners."

"Why?"

Jerry thought about this, wondering why he bothered to offer advice to someone with a boney ass that could never sit exactly still. "It's just something, Paul," he finally said.

Jerry felt bad for Paul. He had heard him play a few times around the apartment, and it wasn't bad at all, not bad, but not good. No, Paul

wasn't like The Mamas and The Papas, and Jerry doubted that Paul could ever write anything that would make him a one hit wonder, which is better than nothing. Or so Jerry believed.

Jerry gently sang, "*Stopped into a church, I passed along the way, well, I got down on my knees, got down on my knees, and I pretend to pray...*"

Paul sighed.

He pretended to pray everyday. Yes, he wanted to write music. Yes, he wanted to become famous because of it, to show everyone, his mother, his father, the mama, the papa, even those fucking horses his mother loved so much. He just wanted to *show* them.

"Excuse me," the picture frame said. "I have something to say."

Paul looked up toward the mantle where the frame was sitting.

Jerry stopped singing. Neal was giggling and muttering something about purple horses.

"Independence."

That was all the frame said. That was all it *ever* said.

It was an empty frame. There wasn't even one of those fake photos in it. Paul's parents used to stand in the frame, holding each other around the waist in front of their Nebraskan home, two horses standing in the distance. But the frame wouldn't hold that picture. It refused, said it was independent, that it didn't need a picture crutch, that it could stand on its own, empty.

"Good for you," Paul said, raising a fist into the air, then staring blankly out the window. In Nebraska the trees would be brown, but in California they were green, always green, like they had something to hide, and everyone and everything has something to hide in California.

Paul couldn't hide anything in Nebraska.

Everyone knew exactly what he was in Nebraska. And he hated that. Hated that he always felt like all eyes were on him. Even his mother's horses eyeballed him when he would walk through their pastures. He prayed for them to die, he hated them so much.

He liked to make himself believe he could hide something from everyone, a temporary relief from constant exposure, hiding from everyone always knowing each detail about him, right down to the hair on his big toes.

Even if he could never bring himself to shoot one of the horses in the eye with an arrow, he could imagine it. How bereft everyone was, especially his mother, that beautiful appaloosa on its back in the middle of the pasture.

But he couldn't hide anything.

Paul pretended to pray, pretend, pretend, because that was what his mother would want, for him to be a good little boy and pray to make things happen. She used to say that to him—"make things happen." And she believed that it worked. Prayer worked.

But he never killed any of her horses. He prayed and prayed, but it never happened. He couldn't make that happen, no matter how much he wanted to, oh how she loved those horses, the palomino and the appaloosa. She'd give Paul a spit bath, trying to comb down his messy hair, but she never complained of the horses' hair, no, she would never do that because their hair was wonderful and shiny and silky.

So Paul pretended to pray, knowing damn well that nothing would happen while crouching on your knees at the foot of your bed every night, begging, pleading, wishing to someone or something that you're not sure is out there in the first place because your mother told you to. Kill the horses. Make me famous. Get me a girl. Get me laid. Give me something, anything. That wasn't making things happen. That was pretending.

It felt good to pretend.

"Make things happen," Jerry suddenly said.

"Fuck you," Paul said.

"Play something."

Paul reached behind the couch, gripping the handle of the worn-out guitar and gently placing it into his lap. He strummed a few chords, nothing special. He thought about writing a song, something snappy like Jerry had said, but he couldn't think of anything good, anything worthwhile that any person would want to hear. All he could think was the word melancholy melancholy melancholy over and over and over, and that was driving him insane because he knew how stupid and melodramatic he was being. Paul the penniless guitar player in his shit-hole apartment complaining about life and his talking furniture. It made him feel like an asshole.

"That was horrible," Neal said.

"That's not snappy at all," Jerry said. "That's sad. You're sad, Paul. Real sad."

Paul wanted to slam the guitar into the cushions. Then he wanted to rip the cushions open and spill Jerry's guts all over the floor, let the mice run wild through balls of fluff, they would love it, they love to nest. He thought of his mother, her soft smile and gentle hands, the way she al-

ways looked just right, like nothing was ever wrong even though everything was.

"I'm a fuck-up," Paul said.

"Everyone is," Jerry said.

"I shouldn't play," Paul said.

"Maybe," Jerry said, "maybe, you're right."

"Yeah."

"You're still here," Jerry said.

"Yeah."

"Your mother would be ashamed."

Paul said nothing. Neal laughed, but quickly stifled it. The picture frame made an inaudible grunting noise. And the heater shouted, "God fucking dammit."

Paul began to play his guitar again, barely letting his fingers graze the strings. He wondered if he even had the right to play at all, he was so horrible.

"Three years, man," Jerry said.

Paul kept playing, trying to let everything fall away from him except the music, the feeling of his fingers on the strings, the soft sounds reverberating in the nearly empty room. Jerry, Neal, the picture frame, the heater. He had to pretend. Pretend they didn't exist, more pretending, more praying, make everything go away, make it easy and simple and beautiful. He had been doing this for three years, three years since he left Nebraska, three years with the talking furniture and the mice and the praying.

"That sounds pretty good," Jerry said, but Paul wasn't listening.

All Paul wanted was peace. All he wanted was to live a Zen-like existence, simple, easy, but nothing was simple or easy. At first he blamed California. But then he began to blame himself, the stupidity of being eighteen and stupid and irreverent, the stupidity of being twenty-two and too cautious, so cautious that you confine yourself to your apartment, far from street corners and open guitar cases full of change, far from studios, far from fans, far from home. Far from anything.

Oh, god, he didn't know what to do. He didn't know, not at all, and his stomach was sick with anxiety, so sick that he stopped playing and laid the guitar on the couch and sat back, letting Jerry's cushions wrap around his body. He liked it, and he never wanted to leave and felt guilty for wanting to rip open Jerry's cushions and spill his guts. He rubbed his eyes, then sat silently with his hands covering his face.

“We’re both addicts, man,” Neal said.

And Paul thought of his mother again. Back in Nebraska, riding her horses and watching the leaves turn other colors, not just green because Nebraska leaves have nothing to hide.

He was addicted to not making things happen. Because his mother so desperately wanted good things for her boy because that’s what every good mother wants. Fucking pray, Paul, fucking pray, he told himself.

“I’m a green leaf,” Paul said.

“You should write that down,” Jerry said.

“Yeah,” Paul said, knowing he should but knowing he wouldn’t.

“I’m independent,” the picture frame said once again. “I do what I want. And I will not hold *that* picture.”

Paul got up and walked to the mantle, picking up the photo lying next to the stubborn frame, the one of his parents. And he wanted to jam it into the frame, duct tape it in there, but he couldn’t, it felt wrong, that’s not the way it’s supposed to be.

He could handle that. He could.

It was the way it was supposed to be. He was here. And his parents were there. And he might pray and it might not work, pray fucking pray. He could handle that.

The little boat-wood picture frame knew what it wanted. Paul was envious.

Make it happen. Do what you want. Pray, damn it, pray. He listened to the furniture more than he listened to himself.

“I’m a walking cliché,” Paul said.

“So is everyone,” Jerry said.

Everything was backwards, and Paul knew it, his mother knew it, his father knew it, the fucking horses probably knew, too, and the furniture was smarter than he was. He felt like a kindergartner, scared and crying on the first day, unsure of everything, but sure that he never wanted to let go of his mother’s hand, her other hand gently patting him on the back while repeating, “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

He was under an iron thumb. But this time it wasn’t his mother or father or the leaves that turn brilliant shades of red in autumn. He was scared shitless, he had no clue what to do or what to say or where to go or what to sing or what to pray. He wanted to curl up inside himself, tuck his guitar under his arm, and pray everything away.

Contributors' Notes

Hannah Anderson is a native of the St. Louis/Alton area. Anderson has one more year to go before she has a B.A. in Psychology and a minor in creative writing.

Katrina Boogerd is a senior Art Education major with a Psychology minor. She enjoys being active both on campus and in the community, through groups such as Making Waves, Alpha Phi Omega, and Project Read.

Andrew Crider is an English Education major and plans to graduate in December. He hopes to become a successful teacher and aspires to a career in writing.

Katherine Davis is a senior English major and creative writing minor at SIUE. Her piece, "The Beauty Dreamt," was the winner of this year's Mimi Zanger Memorial Award. She has thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience of being involved with this magazine and thanks her classmates, professors, friends, family, and husband for making it happen.

Martha Davis is originally from Edwardsville and is a senior majoring in English Education. When she graduates, she plans on becoming a high school teacher in the Chicago area while also pursuing a career in writing.

Laura Dempsey will receive her B.A. in English this May. She will be studying at either Columbia College Chicago or University of Missouri St. Louis to get her M.F.A. in creative writing (poetry). Friends... she thinks she's found her edge.

Kevin Eagan is a senior seeking a major in English and a minor in Speech Communication. When he manages to find time between two jobs and a full class schedule, he likes to write poetry, fiction, and micro-fiction. He is inspired by the brief glimpses he has into the lives of people around him, and tries to capture these on the pages of a small notebook he carries in his back pocket. He would also like to thank his wife Katie for her constant love and support.

Lauren Gerber is nineteen years old. She loves horses, mountain

climbing, reading and writing. She has recently finished her first novel, *Serrated Soul*, which is currently undergoing publication.

George Grenchick is a junior who is a History and Psychology major. He would like to thank Cinderella for the inspiration; sorry that the slipper doesn't fit. He'd like to apologize to Tamika and thank Jesse for the help. "Cheers!"

Nathan Jones is a Bachelor of Fine Arts student at SIUE with an emphasis in printmaking. The works of 50s beat poets and more contemporary sociopolitical poet initially sparked his interest in writing. After taking a few classes under the instruction of English Professor Allison Funk, his work has developed greatly and grown to include both the personal and political in a blend that sometimes speaks of love, loss, inequality, and the stifling of revolution.

Jarrett Kaufman is a B.A. English major and creative writing minor from Nashville, Illinois. After graduation, he plans to enter an M.F.A. or M.A. creative writing program.

Rob Love is a junior from Rochester, Illinois who is here studying Secondary English Education. He would like to thank his parents for being a constant source of love. Rob would also like to thank Mr. Charlie Brown and Ms. Lisa Wycoff for the substantial support they gave him and for inspiring him to teach, by being teachers who make a difference.

Ashley Luster, a procrastinating undergrad majoring in English and minoring in creative writing, finally completes her degree this semester. She looks forward to graduate school and fulfilling her ambition of becoming a starving artist.

Heath Luster is a senior English major at SIUE. He is originally from Vandalia, Illinois, but now resides in St. Louis. He will be pursuing a Masters Degree in creative writing (poetry) upon graduation in the fall.

Robert Rohe is an English major/creative writing minor who will finally graduate this May. He wishes to be great in the writer-ly sense, but will settle for greatness in other avenues.

Bennett Wood currently resides in Edwardsville, Illinois. He plans to graduate in May with a Bachelor's Degree in Jazz Performance.

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