

VINE LEAVES

LITERARY JOURNAL

“Addiction 1” by Eyejacker

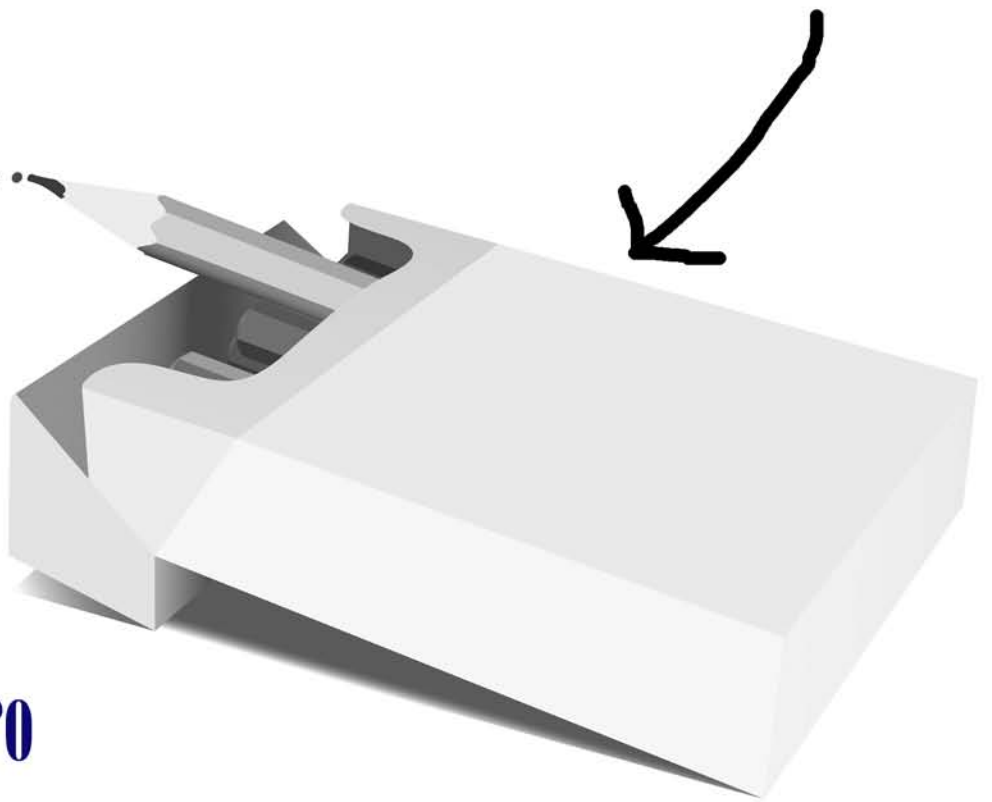
featuring ...

Paul Cuclis

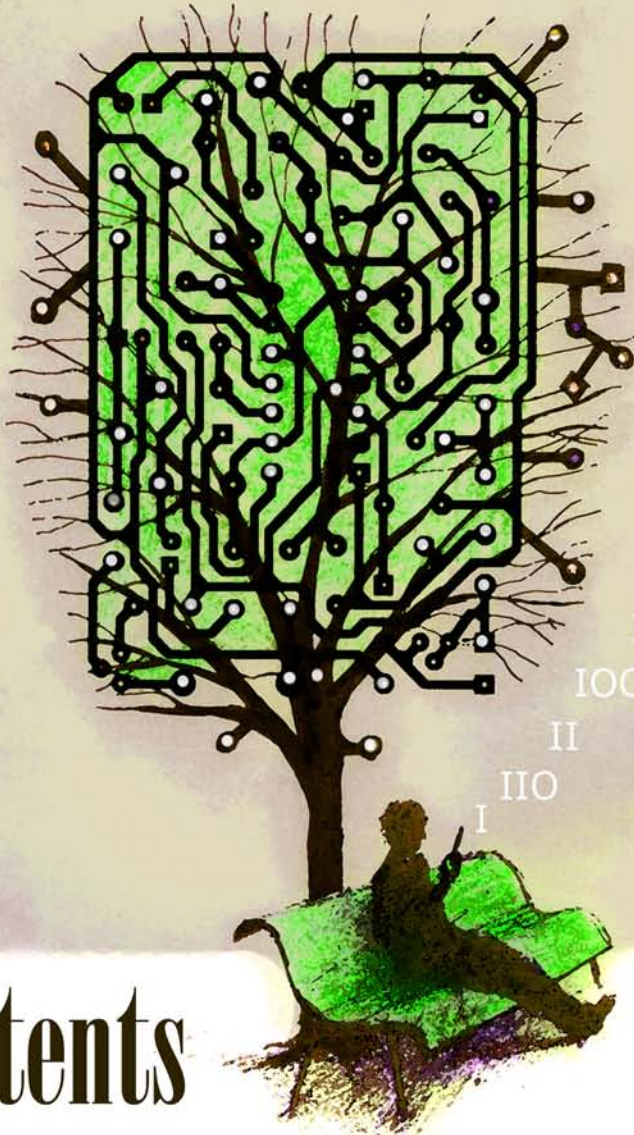
Colleen Wells

Eleanor Bennett

Robert Scotellaro



ISSUE #04



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Letter from the Editor

Within the purple mists of *Vine Leaves Issue #04* you'll read about the pathological effects of cigarettes and apple seeds, ice sculptures and mental illness, a lovable old man named Joseph, and how the good old washing machine can change one's life. Oh, and how could we forget *The Man With Many Skulls & Only One Piano*?

We are always dumbfounded at the amount of talent that gifts the *Vine Leaves* submissions inbox. It is a pleasure to read each and every submission and to be inspired by YOU.

If you would like your writing/art/ photography to appear alongside other awe-inspiring creations, then please submit to *vineleaves.submissions@gmail.com*.

But please be sure to read the guidelines on our website first: *www.vineleavesliteraryjournal.com*

~Jessica Bell & Dawn Ius

The Man With Many Skulls and Only One Piano

She went out with a biker who collected skulls. Miles from her cello, growing up, her bed full of stuffed animals, her pink, pink, pink...

She felt it a ghoulish but compelling decor: the laughing skull on the TV, whose teeth chattered, the ashtrays, clocks, skull decal on the toilet bowl lid, he always left up. The skull lamp she watched (with a red light in it) on his dresser—when she peeked out from under him—floating, suspended there in the dark.

His Harley had two. She liked the roar of it. The heads that turned when she was on back. All those skulls, concealed—decorated with skin and hair and lipstick and hats, turned toward her.

She told him of a time in her life she played cello. A sorrowful beast she gave voice to in her little room. It was like a sin she confessed. He grabbed a beer and took her into his garage. Past boards and pipes and broken boxes, to an old piano in the back. Beat up, with two yellow keys dropped down like sinkholes at either end of it.

There was an ax on the floor, a big one, and he picked it up. She stiffened, anticipating the wild swings; his massive body splintering it in a fury. Those skull-inked arms, shiny with sweat afterwards. But he tossed the ax aside, and sat—played Beatle songs, singing—looking up at her to sing along. *Hey Jude* and a few from *Sgt. Pepper*. And that's when she knew she would leave him.

Water in Still Life

He did ice sculptures for fancy restaurants: seahorses, peacocks, and swans.

"Doesn't it make you a little sad?" she asked, as he sat with his feet up on the coffee table, watching her tropical fish bubbling about past a castle and pirate treasure in that giant tank against the wall. Their neat little prison, he thought. "I mean, the impermanence," she went on. "All that work—that beautiful work—and then what; a puddle?"

He watched the fish swirl and pause at the glass, as if fascinated by the strange universe on the other side.

He could hardly believe nature had come up with so many amazing colours. When he fashioned his peacocks, hueless against a tablecloth, colour was only a suggestion. The finely chiseled feathers, the details, merely conjuring a *notion* of it.

He turned his gaze and clicked on the TV. "I don't know," he said. "Not really." He switched through the channels without hesitating. Too fast for her to make sense of what she was seeing.

"*Not really?*" she said. "Really?"

"Right," he told her, feeling her eyes on him, as he pulled up the TV guide from the side of the couch, and ran a quick finger down the page.

MY FATHER'S SIGNATURE STAMP

by Sarah Brown Weitzman

Only if held up to a mirror can it be read
PHILIP E. BROWN, JR.

a handsome Hancock, four inches
long, nearly two inches high.

What could he have used it for?

The grand "P" loops in two directions
as he was bountiful.

He treated both "i's" fairly
and was always even handed

with small letters. A strong man
who could do cartwheels
until he was 65 shows in the bold strokes
he gave to all the capitals.

Football at his ivy league college,
later basketball coach, then referee,
before gym teacher revealed in
the bounce he gave to all the dots.

A third son, but the one named
after the father, he put a flourish
in the "J." Always "Jr." and not the II.
Had he known he couldn't start a dynasty?
Truly chaste in the way he closed
the "o," he was priestly in a Spencer
Tracy way. Apparently he repressed
the Edward in him. But he created two
open drawers in this large jovial "E"
where he could have kept the endless jokes
he loved to tell. His "r's" seem like gulls
in the distance of a painting, slightly pinched
as it's true he carried his lunch
to work every day on the train.
After fifty he got portly like his "B."

This is a formal signature as he wore a tie
and jacket every night until he went to bed.

In balanced, even strokes, we see
he was steady, honest and clean.

A signature so easily read tells us
he was forthright about everything

but my adoption. Moderate
in small, tall letters "h" and "l," moderate
in everything but anger and ice cream.

He spanked me once and
ever after was my repentant slave.

His old-fashioned signature discloses
he was born in 1895 but still shouts *young*
at heart. Despite great disappointments
his heart never failed him until the very end.
He was a Richard Cory who bore it bravely
and never pulled the trigger.

THE COBBLER by Lydia Kang

The cobbler grips his awl, the curling fingers browner than the
tanned leather on his worktable. Though the beach calls to him, he
shifts his back to it, letting the fine salt mist dampen his shoulder.
"Bah." He says this to no one in particular, but the hardwood peg re-
ceives a ruthless whacking, nonetheless.

He pounds it with a rhythm more perfect than his ancient clock, not
thinking of her, not thinking of the pastel candies he'd left for her to
find in a plastic bin. Slowly the boot comes to form. First a sole;
then a tongue. It will speak before dinner, if he keeps up the pace.

Julia trips up to his shanty, spreading sand from her dirty toes
around his workbench.

"Go away," he grumbles, but she knows better than he that it's all
fog and feigned irritation.

"I got a dollar. Look." She holds the furry disc in her palm. The
scalloped edges are irregular. Perfect. Julia leans in closer as if to
embrace it. Her curls, molasses-brown and just as thick, bounce
against the creature.

The cobbler lifts a hand to brush the sand off a ringlet. He hesitates,
and wipes his face instead.

"Go," he says again, but this time, it's less urgent. She's more likely
to listen to this tone, though he means none of it. As she cradles her
sand dollar, he watches her skip to her papa's table by the beach.
Julia's neck bends over a bowl of bananas. He wishes his eyes were
good enough to count the bumps of her spine.

Someday, he'll tell her. When she's old enough to see snow softly
curving into a tree in a land far away, or have the muscles and
strength of a woman, like her mama had. It will be like atoms
coming together, to make a piece of water. From gas and
nothingness, into an ocean.

He'll let the truth out, and be whole again.

LYRIC by Susan Azar Porterfield

I

A black horse yawned the moment I drove by
on Cherry Valley Road,

my hands solid on the wheel,
my foot all go, go, go, Chopin on the radio,

and everything suddenly
pink and cream inside the dark. ~ continued next page ~

LYRIC by Susan Azar Porterfield

II

In the Target parking lot,
I walked past a mash of bird

and heard traffic's bump and grind
behind me on the five o'clock street.

We all rushed together then,
though toasters were why I'd come.

III

Between the outer and inner doors, me
in a hospital robe, my things lockered away,

no magazines in the rack,
no trash in the can, nothing

save the crying of a child
somewhere beyond.

IV

Alien color cut the corner of my eye
despite a deliberate turning

from the earth-scraping, fire-ball moon.
I'd tried an inky walk

unshadowed,
but how impossible that seemed now.

V

Eating it, the apple formed the core
of my life, I and the salted fruit

alone, teeth clacking
along its flesh, desire grinding

in the ear, which stopped
my hearing the casual rain.

BIRD WOMAN

after *The Crane Wife* (a Japanese tale)

by Joyce Goldenstern

At a young age you saw a goddess. She lay on white sheets, red crosses on her wrists. You offered tears and apples, but nothing would rouse her. And so you carried an old tired sack over your shoulder. One day I appeared on your doorstep. Hotohoto, I knocked, dressed in a christening gown, needles and red thread in my pocket. I didn't play the games of children. All summer I sat on the steps and cross stitched on linen. We seldom looked at each other. From time to time, I pricked my finger. I did the best I could.

When winter came, I hid in a closet. "Don't look," I warned. In the dark, I became a bird and with my beak tore out my own feathers. Tonkara. Tonkara. I wove a down blanket, white with a thread of bright red. Tonkara. Tonkara. At night I tip-toed out and covered you with it. Still you shivered in your sleep. I wove another and another. White and red. Red and white. All my feathers gone. Plucked skin smeared with blood.

What does it mean when a woman grows thin? Interpret the sign of a vanishing woman. The long neck. The stick legs. The cage of ribs. What you saw when you peeked was no longer human. A gentle fluttering. Basabasa.

A gentle fluttering of wings. Sorrow into beauty. Heaviness to light. Something into nothing. Point your finger toward the distance. A crane in flight.



"Addiction 2" by Eyejacker

Paul Cuclis

SHIFT, RESET, BEGIN CYCLE

She learned the secret of life from the battered washing machine in the corner of their basement. As the older sibling, it was her duty to help mom manage things. Twice a week, she'd measure and pour the perfect amount of Cheer into the machine's plastic container. After setting the dial to rapid spin, she'd collapse the willows of her legs and sit and watch the clothes collide the way other kids would watch TV. Clean clothes came out, got folded, got worn, and came back to her dirty and stained. When she was twelve, Sarah suspected the laundry's wisdom was the most important truth of the world. It took another twenty-three years before she knew for a fact that it was.

Shift, reset, begin cycle.

Sarah always makes sure to fold Jimmy's clothes carefully, even though they are the messiest. She likes to press her hands firmly on the crease of his small blue trousers, pushing out the wrinkles until they look fresh out of the kids Gap store. Jimmy's favorite Mickey Mouse shirt somehow seems to get worse every week. Its grassy color turns spilled mustard into a puke brown green and makes ketchup look like dried blood. She would spend hours cleaning them, because Jimmy didn't know how to get the stains out.

She watches her brother giggle as the magician pulls another coin from his nose. Only 9 years old, Jimmy still loves magicians, even the ones mom could afford; the kinds with watery eyes, two dollar gag mustachios, and breath that smells like dill pickles and cigarettes. Jimmy looks back at his friends, making sure they could see the magic happen. He holds the magician's overly long suit tail, so that the man couldn't make himself disappear.

Twenty-one and in Las Vegas, another magician does tricks at a party. Sarah sees that this time Jimmy is ignoring the man completely. Instead, he is focusing on the blonde girl next to him. She's wearing a low cut green dress - green like their mother's eyes. He slaps her ass. She slaps his face and walks off. Laughing hard, he pinches open the top button of his polo and pulls out the vial that is connected to his neck by a chain. After unscrewing the top, Jimmy spoons several heaps of cocaine onto his hand. He looks back at his friends, making sure they could see the magic happen. And the last bit of Mom's inheritance disappears back up his nose.

At thirty-eight, Jimmy is Jim and magic is dead. Sarah remembers how, when she last visited, his eyes bored into the back of the skulls of his two children, product of his poor judgement, cause for his shotgun wedding. She tries calling him on his birthday, but he ignores all of her calls. She imagines him shifting through static channels with a can of stale beer in hand, occasionally glancing at the closet where he keeps his suitcase. His clothes are wrinkled and dirty. His wife doesn't do his laundry anymore, his daughter is too young, and he still doesn't know how to get the stains out.

Shift, reset, begin cycle.

SNOW LIES

He fully understood the enormity of what he did. Each flake was unique, likely never seen before and never to be seen again, and he was turning them into muddy slush with each crush of his boot heel, snuffing them out with his soulless rubber soles.

"I am," said Amadeus to the snow. This was his apology. This was his accusation.

"I am—*Mud*," Amadeus said, but that wasn't what he was going to say. What was he going to say? He tried to sound it out. "We pledge allegiance to the—*mud*. Blessed be the—*mud*, Our father the progenitive of—*mud* and *mud mud mud*."

The wind picked up and he felt their thermal collisions collapsing against his face; tiny wet kisses, kissing him goodbye.

"I am the Grim Reaper," he remembered, and he heard the crunch again.

Amadeus didn't want to destroy anything. He was tired of random chance naming one a victim and the other a survivor. In the darkest moments, Amadeus would try to convince himself that it would be better if the flake had never fallen, but he knew that he could never wish for the snow to end. There are some agonies too beautiful to touch.

He walked down the snow blanketed road for many minutes. He was bowed over in a hunch, with his gloved hands straddling each other behind his back. The snow stopped falling eventually, trickling out until stillness settled itself on the world.

~ continued next page ~

SNOW LIES by Paul Cuclis

Then the sun reached the center of the sky and began to burn through the clouds. The ground glowed in its reflected light.

Amadeus halted when the lake came into view. It was frozen solid and covered in a thin layer of snow, and if weren't for the small dock on one side, he might have thought it a field tucked away in the naked woods. Some wisp of summer memory surfaced in his mind, and then faded. He began to walk towards the lake.

At the bank, where a few frosted tufts of grass poked through the icy mud, he moved without thinking. He took off his clothing piece by piece, his thick woolen coat, his gloves, his shirt, his pants, his rubber boots. By the time he was done, his hands were already numb. His unfeeling digits struggled to fold the clothes for several minutes. He placed them in a neat pile on the bank.

The white expanse stretched out before him. Silence sustained itself, but just barely. He inhaled a deep breath of fiery cold and took a step forward, then another, out over the frozen lake. It was a balancing act, and he used the balls of his feet to distribute his weight evenly. Occasionally, the ice would pop and groan underneath him, and he felt the vibrations as if his legs were taut wires plucked by an unseen hand. He never stopped his walk once, not until he reached the center of the lake.

He stood there silent, shivering, watching the exhaust of his breath escape and evaporate. His mind was as numb as his body, and he enjoyed the simple pleasure of being without thinking. After a while, the steam of his breath became less and less apparent. Parts of his arms and legs, especially his fingers and toes, began to turn a light pink color and swell. His genitals clung tight to his body, trying to find warmth there.

Amadeus heard another pop beneath him, looked down and saw that where he had shuffled his feet a layer of the frosty dust was scraped away, revealing the glass of the lake beneath, dark and deep and terrible.

He looked back towards the way he had come, and each of his footprints had created the same effect, following him like black teardrops. He crouched on his stiff aching knees and with his forearm wiped away the powdered snow until there was a large circle, the iris in the center of a blind eye.

The lake regarded Amadeus, and Amadeus regarded the lake. Something glinted in the ice. It was a fish, small and streamlined. One of its dented silvery eyes stared up at the sky, and Amadeus suspected that on the other side of its flat head another eye faced down into the deep. He looked down and down, and the fish looked up and up, and Amadeus smiled and opened his hands like a conductor.

"Oh, how I wish I was a fish!" he said, and he began to laugh. The straps of the unseen weight he carried began to pop and snap off his back. He stared up at the sun until it burned purple spheres into his vision, and he filled his burning lungs with cold air and shouted, "and I think I may just be!"

Then the eye blinked.

POLITICS AS USUAL

by Howie Good

1
Looters fled through your dreams with armfuls of gewgaws and groceries. Someone born without hands grew one. You pulled a small alarm clock set to Mountain Time out of your pocket. It hummed like a faint blue quasar.

2
You allowed only friends, and not of all of them, to call you Dick. Everyone else bowed their heads to read the headlines. Who couldn't use a drink first thing after waking up? Preposterously tall, you held onto the kitchen counter when the tree in the window shook.

3
The severed head you discovered lying on the carpet spoke a language you hadn't bothered to learn. His face was familiar, but his name eluded you. You may have noticed the sun slobbering all over the windows. Then it was time again for sleep.

throes

by Ruby Mahoney

**you'd wrapped my present
in Christmas paper, cuts
burning beneath your dress,
a minefield in winter**

“spit55” by Eleanor Bennett



Masks

by Michael Onofrey

I could smell the Wild Elephant before we reached it and it was sawdust and spilt beer. And I could hear it, a jukebox threaded with the sounds of men in various stages of alcohol.

Rachel and I walked in and stood at the bar. In an alcove, a bevy of men waved cue sticks midst the green hue of a pool table. A man on crutches with a full-length plaster cast on one leg was careening off the pool table and yelling profanities. The man's one crutch slipped out from under his arm and went onto the floor, the man ricocheting off of the pool table and losing the other crutch. He went down in a thump.

The bartender placed a couple of cocktail napkins down in front of Rachel and me.

The man on the floor wiped sawdust from his face while spitting sawdust from his mouth.

Rachel said, "I'll have a shot of vodka and a beer back. Whatever you have in the well is fine."

The bartender looked at me.

"I'll have the same."

He lumbered off.

Two men helped the man with the broken leg to his feet and jammed the crutches into his armpits. He shook off their help and swung over to a counter and grabbed a bottle of beer and took a swig. When he lowered the bottle he looked around and said, "You assholes."

The bartender set our drinks down, chest hair escaping from his tank top like seaweed.

"Six dollars."

I paid him and he went away.

Three men in business suits, at the center of the bar, stood in discussion as if having just come from a brokerage firm, pitcher of margaritas between them. A few men were dancing, others leaned against the jukebox, others sat at tables. A Patsy Cline tune wept.

Rachel sipped her vodka and her beer, eyes dancing. She leaned in to tell me a secret. Vodka sizzling down my throat, Rachel's lips at my ear, I listened.

"Oh, Raymond. This is different."

We left that stinking bar and walked down the street, darkened storefronts, second-hand clothing and bric-a-brac. Gauzed headlights crept through a misty night. There appeared a door with one laughing and one crying mask, white and black effigies. We shoved through that opening and entered a low hum of conversation.

A bar, tables, and a booth along a wall were all directed toward a ledger raised plywood, while from above a bead of light shone down upon that scarred wood like a summons, its calling entertainment, its source fantasy, its naked presence an edict whose force was make-believe, the luxury of imagination.

We were met by a slim young man in a white shirt and black pants who led us into the congregation where he seated us at a disk-like table. Soft cologne, pleasing voice, porcelain-like complexion.

"And what can I bring you this evening?"

I glanced about and saw no particular drink. I said, "What do you recommend?"

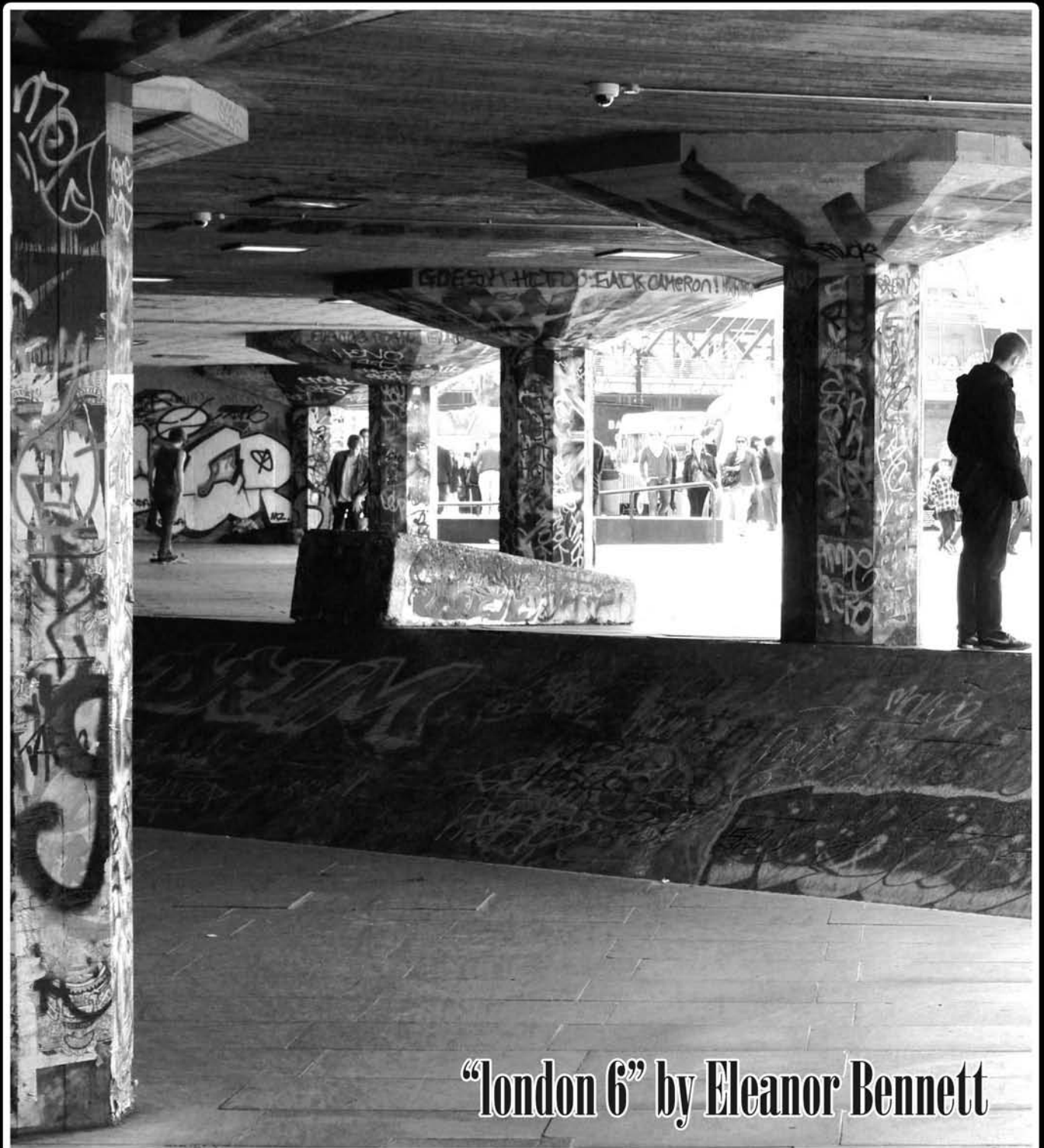
"Well," he began, dark eyes darting as if we were in conspiracy. "Tequila sunrise. Larry does a very nice job of it." He nodded in the direction of a middle-aged man behind the bar, glasses and bottles and a mirror as backbar, while in front customers sat atop padded stools. A woman, legs to the side and crossed, was perched with the sheen of nylon and a pair of high heels as if extracted from a black-and-white movie, Casablanca perhaps.

I looked at our waiter and said, "Yes, a tequila sunrise." His eyes shifted to Rachel, who said, "Me too," utterance easing from her mouth like mischief.

"Very well," our waiter replied and withdrew.

A diverse crowd dominated the room: a gentleman with a bowler, a pimple-faced youth in country-western gear, a brown-skinned lady in indigo cloth, a gaggle of four young men tucked into that booth along the wall with a middle-aged man at their center, a couple of women with long-stemmed cigarette holders and white gloves, a woman made-up like Suzy Cream-Cheese with a man in a body-builder's frame, a skinny fellow with a mammoth snake draped over his shoulders, and a pair of beautiful female twins, both petite. The room was glamour and fetish, gender and chimera, comedy and tragedy, each table inviting further examination as if staring were permitted.

I looked at Rachel and found her dark eyes stirring in elongated slits, dimensions cast in Central Asia-wild horses, pulsing blood, genetics forged in a yurt. Freckles over her upper cheeks and onto the bridge of her nose marked her face like intimate seeds. Hers was a deep complexion framed in jet-black hair. Her skin was aglow. I realized then that people were looking at her. It wasn't the attention. It was the freedom. She was posing.



“London 6” by Eleanor Bennett

Falling Asleep after Watching the News from Iraq by Russell Reece

I see two young boys, around five and seven, in camouflage pants and tan t-shirts, wade into a swollen stream. They stop behind a large rock where the current swirls and pushes aggressively against their legs. The seven-year-old twists a plucked weed and gazes at flowers on the far bank. His friend, giggling, drops to his knees and with a bubbly splash, lies face down in the muddy water.

I laugh.

Long seconds pass. The boy should come up for air soon. But he isn't struggling and the other kid is right there. He rolls lazily onto his side.

Come on. Get up.

Still submerged and barely moving, the five-year-old rolls slowly back. The older boy looks down. Discarding the weed, he drops to his knees. The current pushes against his waist and arms as he reaches under. But then he flattens his body and puts his head in the water. His legs hang loose. Several inches beneath the surface he positions against the younger boy and both undulate in the current like clumped spears of river grass.

Panicking, I scan the muddy bank and adjacent field, look across the stream to the thick marsh with rows of cattails and plumes of purple loosestrife. Why are these kids out here alone? I yell for help, yell until my throat is raspy and raw, but the words just bounce off the screen and float away like glistening bubbles.

The first boy is now a shadow, and the older one is fading as the muddy water flows over them. And then they are both shadows; black and wiggling behind the rock like large tadpoles. The murky liquid rushes past. I can't see them anymore. They're gone. My God, they're gone.

The sound of birds drifts up, and the sunlit flowers gleam. And suddenly I realize – it had all been planned! They were young. They would not struggle. And I don't know why, but everything is okay. That's what they said on TV. Everything is good now.

NEVER MISSING A NOTE

by Bel Woods

Ellie sleeps for most of the drive.

Mary plays Cher in the cassette player, singing loudly to every track, never missing a note, not even when she's lost and slows down in search of signs. In one of the brief moments she's awake, Ellie jokes, 'And you wonder how I ended up this way.'

Her mother, to her surprise, starts crying, 'I did my best with you.'

'Mum,' Ellie puts her head against the window, 'I know you did, Mum,' she closes her eyes again. 'Does something smell strange to you?'

Mary doesn't say anything about Ellie mixing up her senses, just concentrates on the road. The drive was going to be a hard one, with Ellie so weak now. The town creeps up on them.

It was meant to take much longer. They needed more time to prepare. What would they say to them? What words were best?

Mary pulls the car into a cul-de-sac lined with pretty yellow-leafed trees.

Bodies & Faces

Sometimes they are
the same beast:

Both open in the sun
and rush to expose

the other
using appendages

or time.

Both hold rage

like a mature disease
in a new animal.

Both haunt both,
torture with compassion

and laugh in fits
like an ocean's skirt.

And when bodies and faces
come together they do

with the same near-ritual
of epileptic grief.

Routine

Whatever helps
bends. The way
I assume a ligament
might.

When I feel
morning and reason making
cold love on me
I reach

for the wicked bones
of my routine's
sad anatomy.
I cannot be better

than those strange, ripe
patterns which wait
so often while I pretend
I bend.

BARRIER

by Christopher Lowe

Pentecostals have bought the YMCA. They've gated it off and use it now for revivals, picnics, outdoor services. It's deserted now, in the middle of the day. I want to go walk the old soccer field, pick a few dandelions like I did as an eight year old, but the tall hurricane fencing keeps me out. Still, I can see they've left the low metal barrier at the edge of the field. I want to be back in uniform, to run hard across the wet field, mud spackling my legs. I can feel the dank sweat from phantom shin-guards, can hear the sound of hard plastic thunder as we use the metal barrier to kick dirt free from our cleats. When I close my eyes, I feel myself echo against my life.

Karina van Berkum



“spit65” by Eleanor Bennett

Morning lines in the 4:30am dark. I can see nothing. I sit outside, and the nothingness envelopes me. But it is this forming dust of light that pulls me. Where I sit and write and hope to be able to see the look of this writing later, to look at the words and be able to feel them, how I can sense the text scrawling out of my blind fingers now. What I feel now: the birds in their morning hellos, the one car six miles away that churns its engine up the hill. And I can feel, not see, but feel how this writing is small, compacted in this haze of a dusty sky waking.

In this light in which I cannot find the outline of my pen, the words, I write. I can angle my notebook just so, so that it's in the light. But not now, not while it's on my knees, not while I'm comfortable in this blind submission. So I fully close my eyes, and I write.

My friends and I played a game when we were little. It was to write your name, or a phrase if you were gutsy enough, with your eyes closed. To tap into that unseen space of knowing where the hand is in relation to the world, how you could form letters that would hopefully and intuitively surge forward on the page.

Writing as an event, as a fascinating way to capture one's attention. It was not a game, but a learning. To see how the thick colored marker could be blindly pushed. With your eyes closed, you could feel more of a deep connection you had with that something inside of you. That writing.

Most games were played to try and disorient you. "Pin the Tail on the Donkey", hitting a Pinata, holding your breath and spinning around with your eyes closed until you fell down. The latter I remember most, the memories I have with my eyes shut off from the world.

But there was something more about the blind writing. The scrawl of the marker, the way the black ink pooled and spread out like vines on the yellow construction paper during a pause while you were thinking of which way to go. The rough lines you tried to make feel casual. The way speed connotated accomplishment. The paper was rarely clean, but had been used before for portraits of flowers and houses. The blind name spelled scraggly in the yard. But when you got serious about the endeavor, you ripped out a new piece of paper from the notebook, the pad of construction paper. You wanted something clean, the art of your words to stand for themselves.

And as the light now dawns on my notebook, the sense of that activity becomes lost. The free-flowing, now seen, forms into something that feels solid. And in the solidity, I see the rest of the scene. Our frazzled yellow and brown hair that needed brushing, how the markings looked less picturesque with your eyes opened. Eyelashes breaking into the day, into the reality that your markings were insensible scrawlings. Juice-stained shirts, the purple liquid running down white cotton like the marker jagged on the unamused paper. How the results of the activity were never as impressive as the activity itself. As in, it just looked like you didn't know how to write, how to form words correctly.

In this morning haze, the universe unblurs around me as I continue to write. The memories contained in my notebook, I lose sight of the mountains that surround me, de-concentrate on this world as I close my eyes and focus in on the words, and I write myself into existence.

WRITING BLIND

by Chelsey Clammer



"boo" by Eleanor Bennett

THE CUSP OF LEAVING

by Wendy Russ

She waited on the hot, broken pavement, arm outstretched, her thumb a ticket to a distant, refracted horizon. Waves of heat danced like undulating snakes under the spell of a charmer. She pictured herself passing through them, abandoning the green of home for the wide-open spaces where ground meets sky.

The pack on her back was heavy, but probably not heavy enough to last for long. Mini cans of pork and beans, fruit cocktail, bottles of water, toothbrush, hairbrush, her clothes.

She was untethered, except for the pack and the lingering sensation inside her—a tender, bruised feeling, a souvenir of rough love that she simultaneously craved and despised. He didn't know yet she was gone. He would hate her for leaving, deride her for her careless travel plans.

And yet...

And yet he would get that animal gleam in his eye and want to fuck her because she was willing to edge close to danger, to step out onto the ledge, to hold her breath, hoping it would all work out okay.

Down the road a farm truck rumbled. She stuck her thumb out, mustering a look of energetic hopefulness. The truck slowed and finally stopped. A dusty, sun-worn man leaned across the torn bench seat.

"Whar you headed?"

His lips and teeth were stained brown from years of chewing tobacco. The truck sputtered and belched blue exhaust.

The girl motioned west. "Thattaway. As far as I can git."

The man's eyes made a slow measure of her, taking in the long hair and pale skin, her slender body and small breasts, the jeans that hung low on her narrow hips.

She looked away, back the way she'd come, toward wild, green hills. A red-tailed hawk circled, looking for prey. The man spit out the window and nodded, as if finally making up his mind.

"C'mon then. Let's go." He leaned to push the truck door open, his other hand tapping a rhythm on the steering wheel, something familiar, something that stirred a memory in her.

This was the moment then. The circling hawk let out a scream as it swooped from the sky toward earth, talons spread wide.

Blue Jumpsuit

BY SHEILA MELTZER

Walking by, you couldn't help but admire the window, deep red paint on grey cedar shingle framing three rosy-faced lovebirds. You might smile at the slender figure in the blue cotton jumpsuit, the one you think of as the caretaker, the one who feeds the beauties, cleans their cage, and keeps track of the years. You'd vaguely recall that every time you've walked by this window there's always been an identical jumpsuit housing a very similar-looking man, though that one's hair wasn't quite so white, nor the suit quite so baggy.

Your breath might catch at sight of the smallest bird rocking her body front and back. In the space of that catch you might hear the silence of the fourth, her mate, martyred in yesterday's liberation trial, offering himself up as lunch for a lucky neighborhood crow. And if your sight would reach, through the waning eastern rays, beyond the birds and into the sparsely furnished room, there it would land on the washed-out fir floor, greyer almost than the shingles, at least around the edges of a richer red-stained rectangle, only recently exposed by the flight of a Turkish carpet. On the neat desk an envelope, no postage or addressee, contains a handwritten letter wondering who might be willing to adopt the birds, should the time ever come. Beside it, the savings bank passbook, its balance somewhat lower than the sum of next month's rent, despite the mariner's pension that was supposed to have sufficed for a man's natural lifetime.

Should you pass this way tomorrow, you would see only the cage with the empty perch and abandoned bits of cuttlebone, the permanent mottled grey and yellowed stain of the newsprint floor. You would hear, this time, the complete absence of bird song. Though your awareness might extend to the absence of the blue jumpsuit, you would not, as yet, smell the remains of the slender figure inside.

FATIGUE

by S. G. Lerner

I click.

Men tweet pictures of their unsuspecting one night stands. #bedofshame

I click.

A four-year-old wearing makeup and a bikini struts across a stage. "Did I do good, Mommy?" she asks anxiously later.

I click.

Husbands are selling their wives' bodies to grow babies for rich white people. The women cry, the babies cry.

I click.

A handcuffed woman sitting on the ground is kicked in the head by a man wearing boots and a uniform.

I click.

An Amazonian tribe mourns as their home is doomed by progress. The forest is torn apart, while people fight for survival.

I click.

A woman is shot in the back by a man wearing white. God wanted him to do it.

The rabbit hole is endless. I could click until I died from the horror. Distance yawns between me and the rest of humanity. How am I related to them? I burn: rage and grief and despair competing for centre stage. I want to destroy them, I want to unleash my fury upon the killers and the CEOs and the people who seem to care for nothing and no one but themselves. I stare at the screen. I am impotent.

I click.

A kitten ninja-kicks the air, and the caption makes me smile. I click 'like', stand up, and put some washing on.



"Domestic Ballet" by Joe Dolce

A.J. Huffman

DREAMS OF A PERFECT TORTURE

Even the purple mists
of Hell
part
before her feet.
Ever afraid
of the eyes.
Still searching
for a newer shade
of death
to line her lips.

A RHINESTONE BUTTERFLY

She stepped out
of the framing circle
of night.
Right into the center stage
of his eyes.
And he smiled.
And she danced.
Slowly.
She couldn't afford to lose the steps.
They were all that kept her.
From burning alive.

PURE MORNING

by David Bottoms

Who would begrudge Wendy Hirsch a cigarette, especially now, as she sat on her patio and waited for the news to do its worst?

Her roomie Sheri appeared at the patio door, fingers scrabbling madly with the knob before managing to tug it open, her face wide-eyed in shock.

“It’s started!” she gasped. Wendy’s eyes moistened in dread. Her mind backed away from what was finally happening.

“When?” she mouthed to her friend.

“Only a few minutes ago—” she glanced back at the screen, where the fast-moving informational crawl framed scenes that beggared all description, jumping, cutting from one scene to the next, developing a ripple, again to the main story, the one truly unexpected—

“—there it is again,” yelped Sheri, “...confirmed, oh God, confirmed—” she shot a stare at Wendy, but registering no clear response, shut the door again and returned to hanging, hands limp and wraithlike, in front of the screen.

Wendy admired her friend for quitting, quitting after 15 years.

She’d only ever considered them an affair, an accessory—something to sit with at a table in a club, to occupy one’s hands with, enjoy the ritual of lighting, inhaling, wrist cocked just so, fingers splayed, fetchingly.

Wendy sought a pack upon rising, fears and obligations shunned to the side for a lungful of clarity.

She returned her eyes to the cigarette now before her. Her last sweet, calming drag had been three years ago. Long enough to be done in habit and with routine, yet no time at all, really.

She looked into the ash of a makeshift fire pit, then over scrubby grass toward the chain-link fence that enclosed her. She sat, perched stupidly in a suburban pen, one pale, plump woman clad in discount-store sleepwear and flip-flops with rhinestone-studded straps and felt absurdity and futility still her joints and slow her breathing. She glanced through the patio door at Sheri—now pacing, then still, and at the screen’s reporters as they stood,

shaken and disoriented amidst an earpiece-surf of competing updates.

What did it matter if she smoked? Especially now? The fire in the pit, burned, smoked, reduced itself to ash, all to the complete indifference of the world. Same with a cigarette—her cigarette. It truly did not matter.

The capstone was disaster, death—the thing that pried itself into acceptance and sat, triumphant, like resignation.

Very well.

She looked around for the lighter—maybe it had fallen onto the concrete, maybe she’d left it inside, but she was startled as Sheri flung the door open again, nose snotty from bawling.

“Wendy, damnit, get in here!” she cried, and Wendy, shocked into motion, rose and followed her back into the house. Sheri could only point at the screen and sob.

“I can’t get hold of Dad, can’t get my sister, nothing, no one,” she gritted her teeth at Wendy, who only had dumb comfort to offer.

“No, the lines,” she said. “The lines.”

“So what do we do?” her friend demanded. “My car’s on empty...why didn’t I fill up? I can’t even get over there...”

“We can use mine,” said Wendy through a fog of disorientation.

“Okay, okay. Let’s just wait a minute. See if they can get through to me. Them, or your mom, or someone. See if they’re even there.”

“Right.”

There were two 800 numbers on the screen, but for what? They’d surely be inundated.

Wendy opened the patio door again. It whined as it pulled open, then closed again, and she sat back in her chair. The cigarette lay where it had fallen, undisturbed by the slight breeze. Voices rose a couple of houses down, then again over the privacy fence behind her. Why weren’t there more voices? She picked up the cigarette, leaned forward and crumpled it into the pit, then drew another from the pack.

She held the new relief, freshly selected, flicked the lighter and prepared for her blissful reward.

~ continued next page ~

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PURE MORNING by David Bottoms

She paused with the filter an inch from her mouth, the scent of its finely packed gift rising now to her nostrils.

No.

Disaster or not, cosmic indifference or not, she could make one tiny decision, even if it meant nothing. She wouldn't light the cigarette. Three years was still three years. She lowered her hand.

Sheri was at the door again.

"It's Dad!" she exclaimed. "He's okay!"

Wendy looked at the cigarette. Lit it. And sucked in deeply, her gaze resting somewhere above the fenceline.

"spit2" by Eleanor Bennett



At the market, Hannah gathered tiny fruits—cherries, clementines and the smallest plums—and set them in her red plastic basket. She reached for nectarines—Sarah's favorites—and grapes so juicy they exploded in your mouth.

Hannah carried her produce home, holding the paper bag with both hands, careful not to bruise or pierce the fruit. But every time she got home it was ruined. Sometimes it was rotted, blue with mold and speckled with fruit flies. Sometimes, she would find sharp pineapples or apples that smelled of sorrow. This time, the bag was nearly empty. One seed, hard and brown, lay at the bottom.

Hannah put the seed in her mouth and pressed it against her teeth until it splintered into her tongue. She could taste the blood. It tasted like the barrel of a gun.

"Blur of Time" by Pete Madzellan

SHOPPING FOR FRUIT by Stephanie Thurrott

CONTROL FREAK

Standing in the downstairs bathroom in our new house in Michigan, I surrender to the sink. I wash my hands and reach for the faucet to stop the stream of water. Eager to get back outside and explore the backyard, I push the handle to the off position. As soon as the water stops, I pull it back on again. Off. On. Off. On. My sense of calm returns; I feel safe to walk out of the bathroom, and flip the light on my way. Off. On. Off. On. Off.

A few months later, Dad's job relocates us again. The plane touches down in Hong Kong and I add careful stepping to my repertoire, avoiding all cracks on the street, playground, or stairs. The cracks on the pavement transform from something once unnoticed to clear lines demarcating safety and danger. Maybe my mom won't break her back, but step on that one crack and Dad's plane will crash into the South China Sea.

I celebrate my ninth birthday in England, a new student with unforgiving hair. It is spring and my classmates know each other well. I am given a key for my school locker. I have never had a locker before. I slide the key and lock, unlock, lock, unlock, lock, unlock, grab my books, lunch, backpack, and lock, unlock, lock, unlock, lock, unlock. My belongings definitely secure, I sigh and step away.

At recess, I comb the pebbled playground, scooping up handfuls of rocks at random and stuffing them into the deep Velcro pockets of my magenta coat. Back in class, I am anxious for the school day to end. I fixate on the digital clock installed in each of my classrooms. School ends at 3:40. I wait. 3:15. 3:15, 3:51, 1:35, 1:53, 5:13, 5:31. I lose myself. I am comforted by the consistency I've created against unpredictability, much in the way I once made a house out of the box from our new refrigerator. Dad had used a sharp knife to cut a door that swung open and closed. I used to go in and out for no other reason than to use the door.

But, now I am constructing a fortress. A scrawny-armed bricklayer, I am too busy building to realize that I am cementing myself within its walls. Once the walls are erected I stand in their shadows and realize I have no way out.

PEDESTAL

I perch on the toilet lid in the basement of a Parisian café. My shoes, abandoned, leak on the floor and my mother squats in front of me, stripping my feet free of wet socks. Her fingers barely register on my toes. We are unprepared for this weather. My body refuses to warm and I tremble on the lid like a late autumn leaf clinging to an icy branch.

My mother cradles my right foot in her hands and brings it to her mouth. I feel embarrassed when she exhales long and hard over my blood-slowed veins. Resuscitating the nerves, she rubs her palms sharply over each breath, encouraging pink over pale. She looks at me, eyes wild, an animal guarding a carcass.

All morning I envied the impenetrable eyes of the gargoyles, immune to this record cold Parisian winter. Atop the porcelain, I blink as my eyes continue to sting and weep involuntarily. I want to go home.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity," Mom reminds me.

I am eleven years old and this is my third trip to Paris.

"You have to look at this place as though it's the last time you will ever see it. When you grow up, you will probably marry a man who works a regular nine to five job and can't afford to take you to places like this."

Bristling, I know what I want to say. "I don't need any help. I'll get back here all by myself."

But how can I say that to the woman who revives me when I can't manage to keep my feet dry?

"That's good, Mom. Thanks."

She gives one last breath and rubs again, determined to start a fire between my toes.

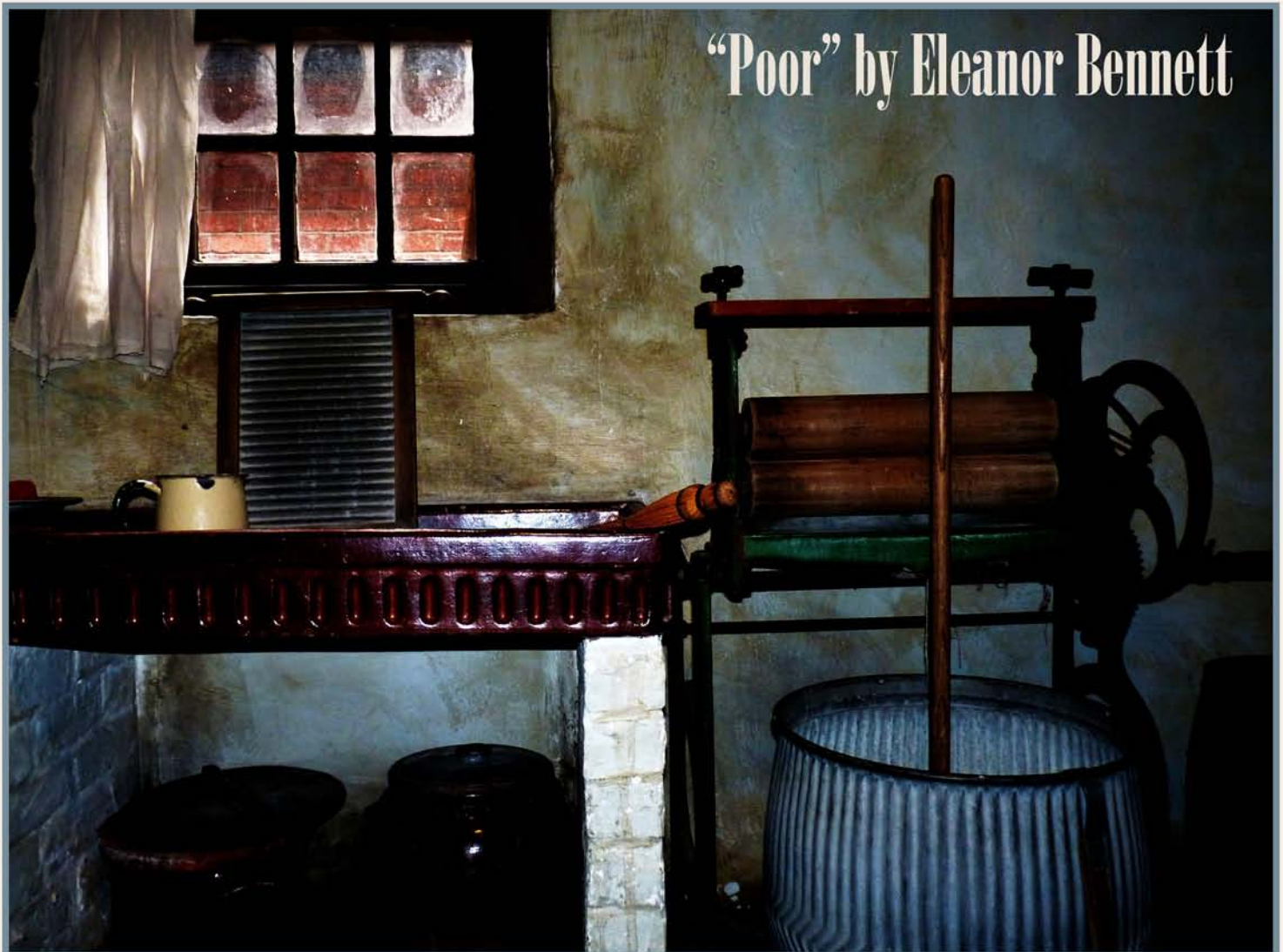
"There!" She slips my socks back on and ties my shoes even though I've been tying my own shoes for so long I can't remember ever learning how. I ease off the seat, fidgeting toward the future.

MEMORIES

by Rhonda Parrish

After his funeral it was my job to clean his apartment; a cramped and dreary place with fly-spotted windows, overflowing ashtrays, and outdated furniture. The air was stale and the rooms filled to bursting with memories. They danced through the sunbeams on the backs of dust motes, lurked in the corners like cob webs, and whispered with wire hanger voices from the closet. Weddings, graduations, and birthdays huddled together on the mantle, and candid moments lined up like soldiers in books, stood back to back in the shadows of an antique bookshelf.

Pressed like a leaf between pages, I opened the window, inhaled the autumn bite, watched the apartment breathe, expand. I dusted off the memories, each by each, packed them up, gagged with paper, cardboard, and tape. The boxes stacked into towers of sentiment labeled with their destinations. STORAGE. CHARITY. MOM.



I discovered it as I was leaving, tucked between the cushion and arm of his favourite recliner. Faded by time, with ragged edges and a faint stain in the top corner, I could clearly imagine it held between his yellow-stained fingers. I closed my eyes, and joined him in that nearly-forgotten time, re-living.

The air was sweet with rain, the plants were freshly green. I reached up to hold his hand, calloused and hard. It swallowed mine, warm and gentle. My boots were flashes of yellow as they danced through puddles, a cacophony of drips and drops erupting around them. They splattered against his trousers, grey with a permanent seam, leaving brown spots and trails he laughed off. The leaves on the overhanging trees laughed with him, drizzling us with the jeweled beads that clung to them.

I stood a while, torn, then I folded it up and slipped it into my wallet, between my daughter's grade one picture and a twenty dollar bill. I shut the window with a bang that scattered dust bunnies along the empty kitchen floor and left, closing the door behind me.

Why resist our relationship when this room calls to us? It wants for softly shaded sibyls from diverse locations, their draped dresses billowing on damp plaster; idealistic *ignudi* posing on pillars, their limbs curved and animated; finely drawn figures of a filial bond, their flawless attachment marred by an apple but marked magnificently by our marriage. Can't we work together, hog-bristle brush and hand, or will I forever be compared to your chisel, chipped by continuous use? If you are stuck in the midst of stucco, Michelangelo, bring me along to soothe you. Let the cloth underneath the platform catch our mistakes. This is not a chore, but a chance.

The flames of candles leap toward the formerly blue-starred barrel vault. Ghirlandaio's frescoes of the apostles sit drenched in bold shades of Florentine paint. Our papal friend hums from the altar to ready his lungs for Sunday's service. I have heard the clerics discussing your David, a marble boy outside the Palazzo della Signoria. You wasted strength to create him, working on a youth that cannot hug you comfortably with his hard haunches. Must I slay a giant to keep your attention? I make more muscles than he ever will.

Envelop me until my lines grow familiar. You have spent the day making *pozzolana* so that I am able to do my part. We'll move in stages: the stories culled from scripture so that we can weave the whole tapestry of salvation within triangular and crescent sections; the key players crafted on limestone to lengthen their longevity; the settings of airborne thrones and natural Eden restored with pigment to embellish less vibrant tints. No matter that I come from humble origins, bristles from a Swiss boar's hair, a cast off instrument that your assistant discovered near the vestibule. My handle is noble pine. I trek through the volcanic ash of *pozzolana* landscapes. Simply unite your fingertips to my flagged tips as we address the panels.

Think not of unfulfilled contracts, but of the ancestors of Christ, already holding their hallowed children in the lunettes. Your brushstrokes bring out the soulful interplay between shadow and light. Attentive women manipulate ivory combs, wickerwork cradles, and their swollen stomachs into relaxed positions. Ruth swaddles her newborn in a muted shawl. An incandescent infant Jesus reaches for a mirror to view his reflection. I observe the subtle smile etched across your face, the commencement of confidence. We massage creases into hundred-year old countenances; deck firm necks with modest jewelry; darken the tucks of vermilion and amber tunics. The scattering of characters stand and recline to your heart's content. It is taxing to have different personalities coexist harmoniously yet we've more than managed to do so.

You were foreseeing your downfall before we'd begun. If the first man can fail, you thought, why not a fresh example? But perfection lies in the details, and you have missed them, dear Michelangelo. It is no wonder you framed a remarkable touch in our masterpiece. You elongated the arm of God that stretched toward Adam to give his clay life. The divine spirit skillfully sculpted his skin, a trade you know all too well. Should a creator cease creating? If so, then why should either of us exist? You agree, adding an arch to Adam's willing reach.

Oh, we're far from done. A cathedral ceiling is too onerous, and I'm certain your rival Raphael is off somewhere drafting buildings. Still, tilt your head upwards without moving me. The scaffold is warmed by the sun creeping past glass, dawn casing our own angles, whether wood or membrane. We are members of an elite collection, two painters chosen to be covered in pockets of grace.

PRIVATE CORRESPONDENCE

by VR Barkowski *excerpt from her unpublished novel, A TWIST OF HATE*

He eased himself from the tangle of sheets and scanned the room for his clothes.

"Hey, where are you going? It's early." She climbed out of bed and sidled up behind him, pressing the length of her body to his, the curve of her cheek warm against the beads of his spine. "*The love that lasts the longest is the love that is never returned.*" Somerset Maugham wrote that."

Not a conversation he intended to have, not with her, not now. "I need to be downtown for a meeting at nine."

"You're sure? On a Saturday?" She reached around and gently cupped his balls.

He inhaled sharply. "Yeah, I'm sure. When can I get the letters?"

Suddenly rigid, she backed away, an arm covering one naked breast as she grabbed for her robe. "Right. I forgot this was a business deal, correspondence in exchange for services rendered."

"Come on, it wasn't like that." *Wasn't it? Would he be here otherwise?* He plucked his jeans from the floor, tugged a still-buttoned shirt over his head and sat on the edge of the mattress to pull on socks. "Last night was terrific—really." His voice rang hollow, and the air between them shifted and soured.

"That's me, one terrific fuck."

"Please don't do this."

"Do what? Call you on what an asshole you are? Someone should. You're a user, and the worst part is, you don't even realize it. You *think* you're a nice guy." The words hissed like water in hot fat. She folded her arms and squared her shoulders. "Never mind. What's the point? You're a man. You'll never understand."

There it was, the verbal equivalent of checkmate. The way every woman he'd ever known signaled the end of a discussion.

She wrapped the robe tighter, her small, white hands fumbling with the belt. "I told you, the letters are in my desk. You'll have to wait until Monday. I'm not going into work over the weekend *for you.*"

"I can swing by Monday and pick them up," he said, searching for his other shoe.

"No. Do you have a fax machine?"

"In my office." He met her storm-at-sea gaze. "I really appreciate this."

"Leave your fax number on the table in the entry when you leave. And the next time you want to drop by and *talk?* Call first. Better yet, don't call. Ever. We're done."

Tears glittered on her lashes and a wave of shame roiled up and broke across his heart. He took a step toward her, but she moved out of his reach. *Leave it alone* he told himself. Of course, he didn't listen. "Look, I know I'm a selfish prick. I'm sorry—"

"Save the apologies for your new girlfriend. You know the way out. Use it." With an impressive screw-you strut, she swept into the bathroom and slammed the door.

He brushed aside a kick of relief and finished dressing.

A layer of fog as thick and hoary as sheep's wool choked the morning. He flicked a business card onto the glass-topped table, and with the scald of dishonor burning his throat like bile, he stepped into the cold, grey arms of the waiting day.

Jetty

by Nicholas McCarthy

**I tossed the copper pebble up through the air
And saw it twist and turn, its flat face
flashing in and out.**

**As it landed in my outstretched palm,
I flipped my wrist and made it skip
One**

**Then two
Into the tender pool like a man's hands.**

**I grinned while I walked away,
Feeling better with the knowledge
That I'd contributed to an ocean.**

“Addiction 3” by Eyejacker



ADA

Ada was one of those old black ladies who wore big hats to Baptist church, the brim cocked sideways over her sweaty brow. She was a woman who never learned to walk delicately in heels, and so she teetered through the fellowship hall, her wide feet screaming for help.

At prayer meeting, Ada was the first on her feet, always wearing some loud-coloured dress and clapping off-rhythm, swaying side to side. She made those wrinkled-up orgasm faces when she prayed, mouth open. The walls could not seem to hold her roaring laughter. Guffaws bounced among the mountains, streamed through deep valleys, conquered sky, indifference, my heart.

James Kingfisher, known to me as Ghetti, the nickname I gave him when I was six, lived next door to my grandparents. He was seven years older than me, but once I graduated college those years didn't seem to matter much. One of my favorite memories of Ghetti is from the summer night we painted his bathroom.

He opened the tiny window so that the smell of paint wouldn't be so overpowering. Not long after we began, Ghetti put a chicken in his Crockpot. When we were almost finished painting, he added some carrots, seasonings, and potato chunks. The smell of the simmering bird mixed with the smell of paint and of pungent onion and herbs was so enticing that I started to salivate.

“You staying for dinner?” he asked.

“Sure.”

I felt his eyes on me as I finished the last brush strokes on the wall. I stood a little taller and tugged conscientiously at my t-shirt. His body language revealed a bashfulness I'd never seen from him before. I took a deep breath and closed the distance between us. My hand found his cheek. It was the first time I'd touched him in an intimate way. He froze for a moment, and I took it as a sign that he was uncomfortable.

“I'm sorry...”

“It's okay. I like that.”

It finally happened. He leaned over and kissed me—a light little peck on the lips, then he just hovered there with his face right in front of mine until I offered my lips to him. Ghetti tasted like tart lemon, with only the faintest hint of onion and parsley. I tasted the simmering, uneaten dinner along with the odor of paint. It was as if I drank in his taste along with the smell of his house. The fragrances were a part of him in that kiss, he transmitted himself to me in it, and I wanted to stay interminably with him in that house, to lie down with Ghetti and to wake up with him.

“Annie,” he began at the same time that I said, “Ghetti.”

“God, you smell good enough to eat,” Ghetti whispered against my collar bone.

His reply was to pull me tight against him, and we just stood that way for a long while, with his fingers pressing into my back and my head against his chest.

SATURDAY NIGHT FIRE

by Colleen M. Farrelly

My roommate and I gaze out the window,
clutching our empty boxes of pizza.
We are mesmerized by the snow pile below,
shoveled crudely against the concrete, a
tantalizing target for a well-placed throw.
She opens the window as I search for a
match. Carefully, we ignite our Frisbees,
aim, and fire. A direct hit! They burn and freeze.

FATHER'S DAY

by Kirby Wright

The side is falling off something next door.
You can hear the wife scream it. The hus-
band continues to barbecue. He thinks of
her as a pesty roommate, someone who's
mediocre at casseroles yet spreads her legs
after a bottle of wine. He wonders what
will happen after they polish off the syrah,
when it's just the two of them camped on
the deck overlooking the hill of weeds.
Now she's screaming about smoke in the
house. He flips the burgers, smiling.



Blood

by James W. Hritz

Thicker than compote or fresh caramel. Red but sometimes brown, like
viscous umami when I feed it to myself—completing the circuit. I need
the vitamins and iron to replace the green vegetables I can no longer eat.
Soon others will savor their own innards, now that the fear of God has
spread across the horizon. I am more myself than ever before. The only
thing that lives in me, is what lived in me. Nothing that once mutated will
pollute my vitals again. My Love will know as well, when we reconcile.

My handheld incandescence spots your name, even though I'd know
where to walk with my eyes closed. I swig from me finger and pull my
coat over my head. Black polymer roses in hand—to show I still care.
How much rain must fall to float your body from the earth? That
damned, corrupted Earth! It is time for your escape. I've made a 16-foot
rosary—double length for strength. Drops of sustenance are there to
renew her liveliness. Will you grab hold as I snake these blessed beads
into your rigor hand before the gravedigger's flashlight exposes me?

Will you pull yourself up to me?

A MAN AND A WOMAN

by Robert Gambogi

A draft of cold wind blew down from the mountain, pushing against the door leading from the ski lodge café out to the small patio fringed with ice. A waiter balancing a cup of coffee in each hand, pushed with his hip against the door, then gave up to wait for the wind to subside. Another waiter came out of the kitchen, looked at the cups of coffee in the first waiter's hands, then through the thick glass of the door to the man and woman sitting alone outside in the cold. "Cherchez la femme," he said, and the waiter holding the coffees shrugged and gave a small, patronizing smile.

The wind having let up, the waiter pushed again on the door and this time passed through. He deftly placed the coffees before the man and the woman—the man looking up and nodding—then hurried back to the warmth inside.

The man went back to looking at the woman across from him. The woman was staring off into the distance toward the mountain's white peaks and frosted tree line against the clear blue of the sky. The wind lifted her dark hair and she smoothed it back. The man said, "Would you rather be inside?"

Not turning to look at him, the woman shook her head slightly. "No, it's fine." Cars came slowly down the narrow, icy road running alongside the lodge, sliding to a stop, then gunning their motors to slither onto the highway, leaving little billows of smoke behind, like baby clouds fallen to earth.

He sipped his coffee, watching her, seeing the sadness back in her eyes. "I think that's interesting," he said, and took another sip of his coffee. "What you said last night. What you said that Freud had said."

"What did I say?" she said, still not looking at him, her words distant.

"About love and work: that a person needs a balance of love and work to be happy in life."

She finally turned to him. He saw that her eyes glistened. He thought he couldn't tell if she was transfixed by the beauty of the mountain or on the edge of crying. He was confused by her eyes, warm eyes, capable of transmitting so much. Finally, she said, "I don't think he really said it."

He laughed a little and drank more coffee.

When he set his cup down, it clinked heavily on the white china saucer.

He turned when he saw a bird land on the wooden railing—a tiny bird with legs and feet no thicker than pencil lines. The bird hopped closer to them, each little hop making a spidery crack in the delicate film of ice coating the wooden railing. Still watching the bird, the man said to the woman, "Why would you have told me something that you don't think he really said?"

She shrugged. Then she turned her eyes fully on him, locking his eyes to hers. He felt it. He realized what she was doing. She was opening herself to him, telling him he could enter her if he wanted to, if he thought he could stand it. And he knew he could; he was certain he could stand anything that was her. He craved what was her. He craved whatever was behind those eyes, be it violence or sorrow or hope or despair. It didn't matter as long as it was her. He reached out and gently brushed his fingers against the side of her face.

But he was afraid also, he thought, and he took his hand away.

He looked back at the woman across from him. Her eyes were soft and normal now. "We talk well together," he said.

She nodded.

"For two people who have only just met," he went on.

She nodded again.

Then she looked at him with her warm eyes. And he said, "I only talk so much because I can't make love with you here." And he surprised himself by what he had said. But he saw that her eyes were not surprised. So much could go wrong, he thought. A word—a single word—could be misunderstood. A look even. A quick, meaningless glance at a woman passing by could engender unwarranted jealousy. So much room for misunderstanding, for misinterpretation. It could all disappear in a single instant of misunderstanding. And then I'm afraid that if it happens too fast it won't last. That it won't last as long as I need it to: For all the time we both will ever have in this world.

Her eyes went back to watching the white mountain. He saw there was a tear crawling her cheek. He stared up at the cold mountain—wondering what she saw there.

“spit”



by Eleanor Bennett

JOSEPH

by Christina Tang-Bernas

I met a man named Joseph.

He asked me for thirty cents. I said, "Sorry, I've got no cash on me." I told him the truth. The truth was that I had no cash on me. But I also lied. If I had told him the real truth, it would sound more like, "Sorry, I've got no cash on me for you."

He stared at me, eyes creased and weathered, his lips twisted slightly crooked and said, "Don't be cheating me. I'm an old man."

I dug out thirty-seven cents. All the contents of my pocket handed over to a brown leathery hand with blunt-tipped fingers. He slipped the coins away, making them disappear in a magic act, a sleight of hand. He sighed, and said, "You're good people. I know you're good people because I've seen a lot of people. I'm old, you know?"

Together, we walked down two city blocks in the dimming twilight, my husband and I, two Asian kids barely adult, and one old Irish man who clasped my husband's hand in his, gripped it tight and warm and slightly desperate.

"I'm from New England," Joseph said, his shoulders turned slightly inward. "I've got friends there. I'm going home. I just don't like it here, so I'm heading home."

"How're you going to get there?" I asked, thinking of the thirty-seven cents he'd hidden away.

"I've got friends." He said it with such gravitas, such assured belief I almost believed his friends would materialize around us, ghosts slinging arms around his shoulders.

He looked at me, his eyes squinted up, "You look smart." He swung around to my husband, "You got a smart wife there." My husband laughingly agreed. Joseph nodded, "I should've married a smart woman. She would've kept me out of trouble."

"Who'd you marry then?" My husband, ever-curious.

Joseph grinned.

He said, "You two stick together. No matter what. All you gotta remember is that whatever the world throws at you, you can take it just as long as you stick together."

My husband and I looked at each other. "Yeah."

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Joseph sighed, "I'm an old man."

"What's your name?"

"Rick", my husband said, "my name is Rick."

"I knew a Jeff once," he told us, his eyes shadowed with memories. "I was in the war, you know. The one in Vietnam."

We trudged along the concrete, people headed the other way flowing around us without notice.

"All my brothers went to war. All my friends went to war. What was I supposed to do?"

My husband leaned closer. "I guess you've got no choice."

"No choice. No choice. War's a terrible thing, you know."

He said he had a hole in his neck, twisting his head to the side to show us. We looked and looked. We didn't see anything. He showed us the scar on his knee, thick and white right over the bony kneecap, his pants scrunched up on top.

"You were real lucky," my husband said, "Somebody's watching out for you."

"Lucky," he sighed, "Yeah, I guess I was."

"I like your shirt. It's got one of those alligators on them." Joseph's finger tapped the fabric of the striped polo over my husband's heart.

My husband laughed, "My mom bought it for me."

Joseph nodded, "A shirt from mother is the best. If my mother had given me a shirt, I'd wear it every day. My mother. My mother was the best person I've ever known."

"You were real lucky," my husband said, "Lots of kids can't say the same."

"Lucky," he sighed, "Yeah, I guess I was."

The silences grew longer and longer. Silences of reflection, of introspection, of breathing the same air and sharing the same moment. ~ continued next page ~

My mom is on one side, a cop on the other.
The cop asks me why a pretty girl like me wanted to kill herself.
I can't make words.

I am dirty,
and shedding like an animal.
Dislodged hairs have fallen all over my red sweater.

He drops me off at PICU.
They won't let my mom in.
Inside is bedlam.

Jenny greets me by throwing a flower pot
at my head.
She is restrained.
Two orderlies carry her to her room
where she gets a shot.

They notice me watching in the doorway
and tell me if I don't get out
that I'll be next.

In the dayroom there is Sudie.
She shuffles when she walks.
Sudie keeps saying, "Roy Rogers and Dale Evans
are coming to town"
and that we're having "Big Mac soup for lunch."

An elderly man
dozes in a chair.
When he wakes up
he is laughing.

Colleen
Wells

MY FAVORITE
BLUE JEANS

I am placed on the adolescent ward
where Alice won't eat,
and Rose had a miscarriage,
and Steve overturns chairs until he gets a shot in the ass.

My favorite blue jeans go missing.
I know it was Rose.
Dark eyes always staring,
hair shaved on top
with a long tail in back
giving her the overall appearance
of a newt.

I go into her room and get them back.
but I am the one in trouble
for going in her room.

They put me on level one where I must sit on a chair
and face the wall,
and think about why I'm here.

~ continued from previous page ~

Joseph by Christina Tang-Bernas

He thanked us. "God bless you both. I don't know
what else to say."

My husband shrugged, "That's all you need to say."
He turned to Joseph, "Where are you heading?"

"East." Short. Succinct.

My husband clapped him on the shoulder.

"I hope you get there." I meant that, sincerely.

Joseph hummed under his breath, "I will. The Lord
always takes care of his own." He stopped and flexed
an arm, "I'm an old man, but I'm still strong. I'm still
strong."

We walked together, our steps struggling to match:
his stumbling slightly to keep up, ours awkward
and dragging to slow down. The red hand flashed
at the crosswalk. We kept walking. It was only
when we reached the middle of the crosswalk that
we realized he'd never crossed with us.

We turned, halfway, saw him stopped at the corner
of the street. His figure, slightly hunched, looked
small and tired, but in the growing darkness, his
smile was bright. He gave us a thumbs-up.

I wish I'd given him more than thirty-seven cents.

FLYING

by Aaron Hughes

It's 2am, four days after the surgery.

I'm interconnected. A drainage bag. A drip. An IV line for antibiotics. Another IV for *Ketamine*. A line in my wrist to monitor my blood pressure. A catheter attached to my 'how's-your-uncle'. I look very attractive. Actually, at this point, I don't give a fuck how I look.

Ketamine is known on the street as 'Special K'. It's a powerful painkiller. It's also a potent party drug. Or so I'm told. I find it no fucking party at all. I'm a control freak: I like to be driving the car, not hanging from the roof rack. I'm also on *Oxynormacin* and *Oxycontin*. I will be for more than six months. Both of these are strong, morphine-based drugs. Every time I close my eyes, I see patterns and colours across the backs of my eyelids.

I'm flying. But I can't sleep. I'm still in pain, despite the pharmacy inside of me. I just can't get comfortable. There's a thirty-centimetre incision in my back. It makes it impossible to lie at any angle. And then there's the tube, running out of the wound, into a drainage bag.

To take my mind off the pain, I turn on the television. It takes me a long while to work out what I'm watching. Partly because I don't want to turn up the sound. I don't want to wake anyone up in my wing of the hospital. I have my own room. But sound travels in a hospital like you wouldn't fucking believe. Another reason why I can't sleep.

A late night re-run of 'Hannah Montana' is on. I've never actually seen the show. But suddenly I love it. I love that no one gets that she's the same girl, just with different wigs. Love it. I'm actually smiling, watching the show. And I love that her father – in real life and on the show – sang that so-bad-it's-good, 'Achy Breaky Heart'. It's taking my mind off the pain.

Then it gets even better: Dolly Parton guest stars as Hannah's aunt. Somehow, Dolly helps her with some lame adventure. And the pièce de résistance is that Dolly sings: she gets her guitar out and accompanies herself. I even turn the volume up – just a little – to hear the song. To this day, I have no idea what the song was.

How camp is that? Dolly Parton took my pain away, even for a moment.

I will always fucking love you.



"Pay Phone" by Leah Givens

MILNER ROAD

by Paul Francis

eventually you'll blow away
like the cherry tip on a cigarette
but right now you're in my bedroom
and the wind is blowing through the window
and you aren't going anywhere
you turn to me and say
'you're a lot nicer now,
than you were in school'
i don't say anything
'or maybe its just that i'm better looking now'
outside the neighbours cat is trying to get in
through the backdoor
i know how he feels
you put your leg over mine
and your head on my chest
and light another cigarette
and i don't mind
because you're a lot better looking now
than you were in school
and though i'd like to tie you down
with those ribbons on your thighs
i know you'll blow away like all the others

Where's My Fishing Boy, she asks (at two)

BY MICHELLE LEE

The fishing boy comes a few times a week
to cast his line in the pond behind our house.
He is older, probably nine, and has the belly
of too much spaghetti and not enough
growing. That will come in years
when his eye turns to other things,
like my daughter who stalks the window
in the afternoon waiting for his tromp
across the weeds to the spot where he plants
his feet and hopes to snag an open mouth.
The pond is stocked and soon slim silver
dangles from his hook. He flashes it
in the sun, holds the skinny catch
in his hands just for a second before release,
and my daughter presses her nose against
the glass, gleeful at the sport. *Where's my
fishing boy*, she asks when he doesn't come
for a few days, and I tell her he'll be
back, the fish call.

Dirge for T. by Nicolette Wong

If not for the Swastika in gold seams, the day's glowing trail, the arc of transit around his body, or the flame before my skin, the red silk would unravel and he would fall into the abyss. For now we throw coins, gold papers, pure corolla about the scene like children who scabble for safety. How to swirl, chant, knit potsherd to his end? The harbingers wave their wands—such magic for his passage, wider than fire, amid hundreds of paper lotuses floating down the stream. I call from the shore; he hears me but cannot turn to answer. For it is spelt that no one may know the darkness—there is only hope in punctures where incense sucks our memories. How to return to the cold bricks on our fingers. From that first dawn I was a child, smudging myself with his laughter. Around the hall we read yellow scripts for solace. The effigies will sing down the aisle till they become ash cakes. I stir the ashes with an iron rod and listen for his steps: weightless, loops stringing us to empty seats, model ships and his pipe. His house offers up its scent, a cradle of overtures. Whatever binds us, meddles with distance. Have a sip of that red bean soup. A dose of sweetness. At the farewell.