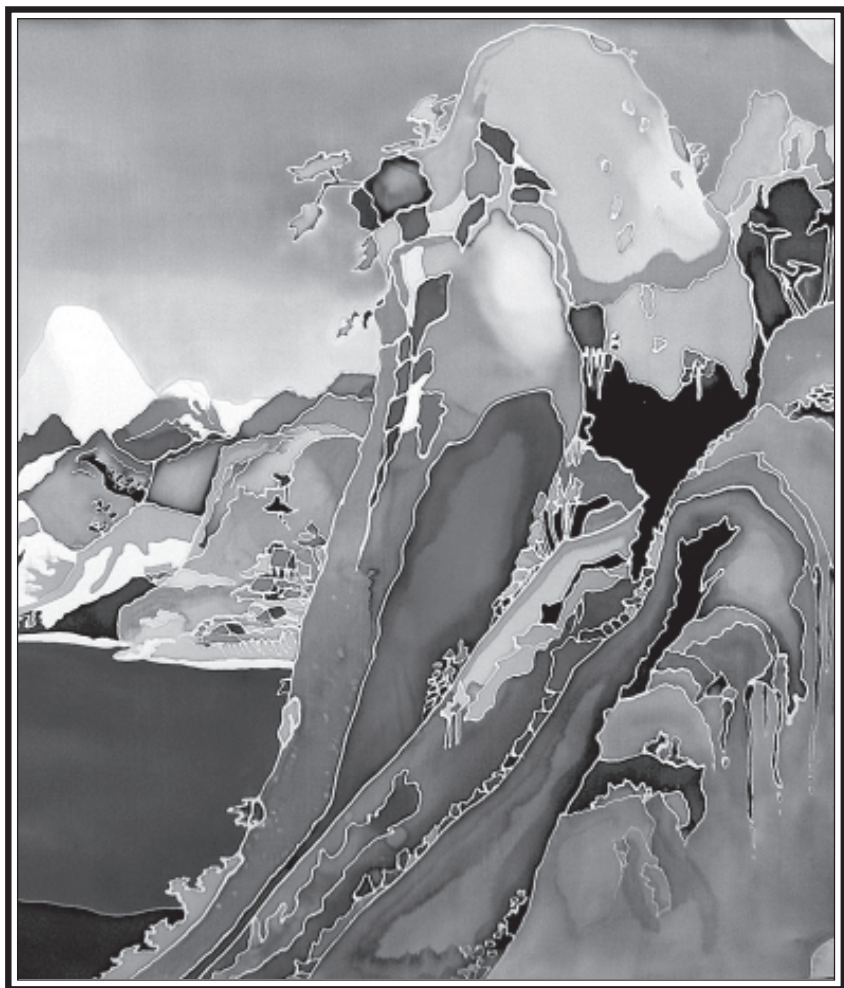


PORTALS



Spring 2007

PORTALS

Literary and Arts Magazine

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Professor of English
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Fourteen

Heather Coulter

Freak
they called me
bells around my waist, shadowed clothes
I kept my head down.
I could never be one of them.
I tried.
But we had no money
and no one could know
who I really was
when they weren't looking.

People
I didn't know,
tripping me in the hallways.
They saw I was different.
like wild animals
they smelled fear

no reason
for them to hate me
(I'm not so sure they did)
but they were bored and I
was easy

Easy
was the word in my eyes
hovering above my own reflection
just before the last day of school
as I watched my father
his fists
my neck, shoulders, arms all red
red ears, red face

like rose petals
the plums would form by morning
I'm still not sure he wanted to tear me apart
for all those years
but it
was easy
simple
like being fourteen.



Josh Everett

Everywhere

Shoshana Weinstock-Herman

Everywhere

I want to dip my toes
in every ocean

I want to see the stars
in every language

I want to watch the sun
rise
set
somewhere different every day

I want to walk through a vineyard in France – fingers
brushing the endless aisles of gentle leaves
I want to dance in a piazza in Italy – beside a trickling
fountain with cobbled stones beneath my feet

I want to touch the Western Wall – feeling the wrinkles
and cracks of the cool stone
and drink at a bar in Ireland – learning a song or two
from the locals
and climb a castle in Scotland – breathing in the ghosts
of its history

I want to learn to surf in Australia – battling my lack of
coordination with laughter
and walk the streets of Brazil – letting the colors and
smells blur around me
and explore the towns in England – hitting every
Beatles-related spot

I want to know every inch of America – make a friend
in every state

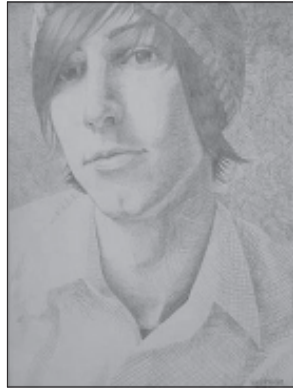
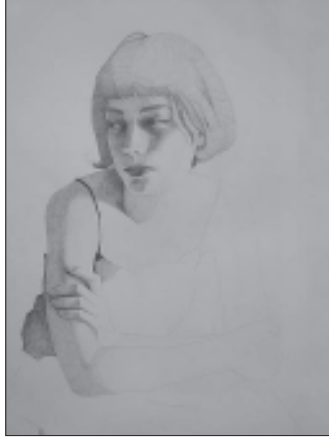
and scream into the Grand Canyon – until my voice
goes sore
and drive on Route 66 – from start to finish and every-
where between

I want to try
everything
see
everything
taste
feel
smell
hear
everything

And if I'm ever old and finished
I want to do it all again



Steven McNally



Alexandra Anderson

Our Eyes Turned

Grey Padgett

Wave the white-stained flag and surrender
to the cable spools and lemon pools
that overtake our paths. They stole
our steps and swept our feet, they wired
the grime with their tempers while
trees wave grim memos and weave
brown growls into melodies.

The confetti—our childhood—has
settled. The lake—our romance—has
sullied. And the swing swings empty where
our owl faces howled rash jazz, where
we hid our toes to remember what was sweet, and
our eyes, oh, our eyes turned: yellow violet green.

Life, and then the Rest

Krystal Hammond

You know, I've never been the brightest crayon in the box, I mused.

My welcome mat slapped the floor as it rolled back in place—right where my spare key had been. I chewed my lip and nudged the door open with one toe to survey the damage.

Debris was everywhere. Shards of my couch's sunflower upholstery sprawled in cheerful ribbons across my floor. What was left of the TV was in a similar state, only less cheerful and more pointy. Chairs lay in disintegrated little bits against the wall, and my coffee table was overturned. The remains of my dishes—which somebody had the bright idea to smash against the wall—reflected my feminine form oddly. I snorted.

Something snarled from down the hall.

A shudder tickled my spine as heat rose to my eyes. My hands turned to fists. I knew better. I really did. But I hate those creatures with an acid passion that eats away all rationale and common sense. That stupid monster was creeping around my apartment wrecking my things. The thought made my fluids boil.

And besides, if I did what I was supposed to do and call the police, they would almost certainly find the stuff I keep in my closet. I don't like people in my closet. I'd already had to move twice this year because of nosey neighbors or other break-ins. I wasn't about to do it again.

I nudged the door open farther with my toe and stepped inside. The only light came in through my windows from the street-lights, giving everything a synthetic yellow glow. I could hear the refrigerator humming in the kitchen alcove, as well as the snarling, choking sounds of the beast.

As I made my way into the little foyer area, the walls began glittering. Liquid, tinted with Radiant Peach Hy-dye, was spattered everywhere. A concentrated trail of the stuff streaked from the middle of my kitchen and down the hall beyond my sight. The undersides of my arms went cold. Jen was supposed to be at work. If she was here . . .

I stalked to the kitchen and reached under the bar for my machete. It was missing.

The thing snarled down the hall again. Then mushy, slopping sounds.

I snatched a knife from the cutting block. It wasn't as long or sharp as my machete, but it would do. I grabbed another, just in case, and followed the trail of Radiant Peach.

My apartment's small and has narrow hallways. There's no room to slink around and try to be all covert or anything. However, fortunately it's fairly new and the floorboards don't squeak. Silence was my most formidable ally.

I could see the creature now, at the end of the hall in my bedroom. Its vaguely human shape contorted and twisted with movement, ashen skin bright and glistening with sweat. A few spare shreds of clothing about its waist maintained a modicum of decency. It huddled over something wearing fluid-soaked jeans: Jen. I could hear her crying.

Fire streaked up my arms and shot down my back and over my scalp. Rage pulled at me, tightening my fingers around the knives, strengthening the muscles in my legs and arms. Ghouls. Disgusting, horrid, petty demons. I lifted my blade-barbed hands and dove for the animal.

I don't know how it saw me coming, but it did. The ghoule leapt away from Jen and flashed into a crouching, fight-ready position. I stumbled over Jen and managed to

recover my balance just before the thing launched a counterattack.

Ghouls are fast. It came at me like lightning, claws flashing, hissing and snarling furiously. I managed to score its arm, slashed an opening into its chest, and even halted an attempt for my neck by blocking it with a jab that went through its entire upper lip. But it didn't even flinch. It just kept going, pushing me back, carving a lattice of fine slits on my arms where it managed to dodge my knives.

I didn't have much time, and I knew it. As small as the cuts were, they added up quickly and the pain took its toll. Translucent liquid began streaking down my arms. Soon, the ghoul would drive me into the wall.

So, I drove me to the wall first. I jumped back and twisted, then leapt at the wall with all the strength I could muster.

I kicked off the wall so hard I felt the drywall give way. Momentarily airborne, I brandished my knives and prepared to feel the blades sinking into ghoul-flesh.

I missed.

Well, not really missed. I would have flown directly into the ghoul and torn into its insides, if the freaking thing hadn't moved.

I felt it grab my hips and thrust me harder and faster across the room.

Sliding luan doors crunched under my weight as I crashed into my closet. I felt things give and bend, then burst under the shock of impact. A sharp chemical scent filled the air.

I caromed off the doors and flopped to the floor. The knives were gone. I couldn't remember when I dropped them. For a beat, everything fell silent. The world spun.

The ghoul gripped me, lifted me with strength not

even the guys on the cover of Men's Health could duplicate, and pinned me against the wall. Its eyes—which were a lovely shade of green—flashed with amusement and anticipation. I was too stunned to try anything. For some reason, my limbs wouldn't obey my commands. My fingers twitched a little, though.

The ghoul reached behind its back and withdrew my machete. I guess it stowed it under its shirt after Jen tried to defend herself.

Crap.

I couldn't even gasp properly before the ghoul plunged the blade into my abdomen.

My legs gave out, and the corpse-eater let me fall. Flashes of white danced across my eyes as my body—such as it is—tried to deal with the pain. The ghoul stood over me, blood-red tongue snaking over its canines, waiting.

And then I realized the ghoul's mistake.

It wasn't eating me yet, which meant that it thought I was a Living-In.

Which meant it hadn't seen the fluids running down my arms.

Which meant it expected me to die.

Which meant it didn't expect what was coming next.

There was no time to stop and think about it. If the ghoul realized I wasn't a Living-In, the next time it flashed those nasty little incisors, they would be headed straight toward my flesh. I couldn't take that kind of risk.

I let out a little hiss and let myself sink closer to the floor. The ghoul leaned closer to watch.

Then, I wrapped my hands around the blade of the machete and tore it out. White flashed again, but I refused to let the pain stop me or slow down my momentum. I heaved the blade up in a single, vicious stroke.

The ghoul's head thumped and thrummed as it rolled

across the floor.

I dropped the machete and sat a moment, limbs shaking. The ghoul's body twitched oddly on the floor. Fluids seeped from my closet onto my hands. Pain throbbed, from my arms and head and torso. But I was functional, and the ghoul was dead.

Jen let out a low whimper.

I blinked, remembering my roommate, and forced myself to my feet. I stumbled to my nightstand and pulled out a roll of plastic wrap and duct tape, then forced myself to keep moving until I knelt beside her.

She was in bad shape. The ghoul had torn her left arm clean from the socket, and consumed part of her thigh. Her abdomen was a mess of shredded skin and exposed entrails. The ghoul had clawed a few chunks out of her shoulder and neck, too.

But more than that, she was losing fluids. Fast. I found the detached arm half-nibbled under my bed and started duct-taping it back into place.

Jen cringed. I could see her fighting not to wail in pain. "Bad?"

I snorted and wrapped a layer of plastic around the stub and re-attached limb. "The thing ripped your freak-ing arm off. It's bad. I've gotta get you to Nicholas."

She flinched. "I hate him."

"We don't have a choice."

Her eyes filled. "Wh-what if he sends me back?"

"I won't let him."

"You don't have any control over that."

I frowned. "If we don't get to Nicholas, you'll leak out. You want to stay here until you're drained?" I shook my head. "I'd rather be sent back than start decomposing."

Her lips twitched, eyes flashing back and forth between imaginary points. "Just . . . not yet. What about

the closet?”

I tossed a look back at my closet. The doors were cock-eyed and hanging half-way off. Inside, I could see my jugs of glutaraldehyde, busted and leaking. What’s more, the injection machine lay on its side, crushed to a pulp. There’s no way I’d done that when I crashed through the doors. The ghoul must have sabotaged it. Jerk.

I cursed, tore off a length of duct-tape, and secured it over the gash from my machete. The action nearly made me faint. “Nope,” I said. “Replenishing embalming fluids isn’t an option right now. We need to go to him.” I used the plastic wrap and more lengths of duct tape to patch myself up.

“Nicholas . . .” Jen murmured. She blinked up at me. “He told us he didn’t want us moving again. Someone had to have heard. What are we going to do, Marie?”

I thought on that as I bent down and hefted Jen into my arms. My embalming supplies were ruined, apartment wrecked, and there was a decapitated ghoul body on my bedroom floor. Jen was right—someone must have heard the racket. Considering our reputation, that alone could lead to us moving again. Add to that the fact that we both had suffered substantial damage and would need repairs . . . Nope. Nicholas would not be pleased.

I snorted. Being a zombie sucks in so many ways, it’s not even funny.

“I dunno,” I said, flashing Jen a ridiculous grin. “But we’ll live, won’t we?”

Jen’s chortle sounded more sickly than amused, but it was sincere. I took that as a good sign and angled out the doorway, then made my way through the debris and stowed my friend in my car. I drummed my fingers against the wheel as I pulled out, off to meet Nicholas the necromancer.



Steven McNally

Kitchen Drawer Memories

Emma Elias Michaels

I cleaned out my kitchen drawer today;
(the one that collects everything
that has no rightful place...)
and I started throwing out my memories.
I pulled the plastic rubbish basket near
so that the fragments of my life
need not travel too far, at least not yet.

A torn theater ticket to “A Chorus Line”;
I cooked dinner that night, we laughed,
we talked, and then I sent him away.
A cork from a bottle of Saint Emillion;
a dry wine and a drier evening.
Last Sunday’s church program,
written words of unity,
the gathering of friends.

A pale blue ribbon, once wrapped around
roses in bloom, is now twisted and mangled
under a shiny rock that I found while hiking
in Gay City State Park. A cancelled postage stamp,
Mexican red smudged with black ink – a reminder
of sun-baked days and a lost hope.

A newspaper clipping, advertising a special deal
on weight-loss sits next to a thirty-cents-off coupon
for Breyer’s ice cream; scattered, broken
pencils, an old pair of scissors, a dried-up
slightly green raisin, an empty film box that once
contained the beginnings of a new career.

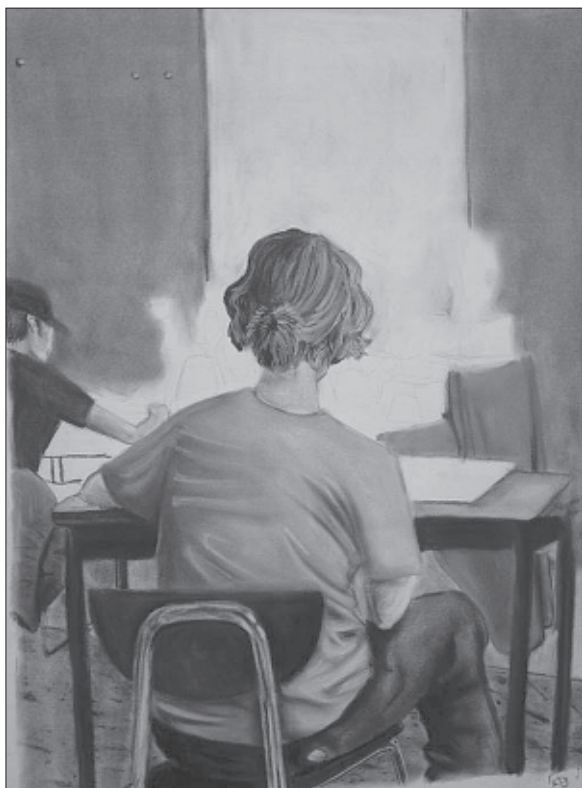
A crumbling sand-dollar, wedged in the corner,

brings me once again to Kelsey Point;
to cold winds and warm hands. Unopened
match boxes from The Blacksmith Tavern
speak of a private birthday celebration,
and a tender night of joining.

Slowly the drawer empties, as I toss
the remnants of my life into
the Rubbermaid coffin. A funeral procession
of memorabilia and thoughts bear away
my days of old. I come to realize that I
have cleared the way for my next drawer of memories.



Stephen Pendola



Keith Dilena



Jennifer Cessna



Shannon Johnson

We Were all Young Then

D.K. Bordeaux

The old man lay still in the bed, half covered by the sheet, his bare feet exposed. He stared at the ceiling not seeing the yellowed paint. He spoke of his pains. His feet hurt, he said. When he continued, he spoke not of the present but of a world unknown to his sons gathered about the bed: "See that scar on the bottom of my foot. That's where I got bit by a rat." His eyes never moved from the ceiling as he told the story. As a boy of eight or nine he had been given the assignment to kill the rats that infested the outbuildings on the farm. His father was already dead. The rats lived in colonies under the tamped clay floor of the smoke house and several other small sheds scattered about the periphery of the yard. When the rodents became too numerous his mother had assigned him to reduce their numbers.

The young boy hit upon the idea of mixing the residue of lye left over from making soap with water and pouring the caustic mixture down the rat hole. He would then stuff the hole full of whatever was at hand and wait to see where the rats next appeared. There were numerous holes to find, but he persisted. There was no television after all in those days. After a few days the constant inundation with lye started to take a toll. Rats started appearing, missing patches of hair, and quite a few were definitely wobbling as they escaped from their now caustic homes. Some made their escape while the slower ones fell victim to whatever improvised weapon was at hand, a board, a shovel, a brick, whatever.

One morning as the boy was patrolling the yard barefoot, as he always was except on Sunday, having recently added the daily ration of lye water to a newly discovered rat hole, the long-tailed, partially hairless oc-

cupant of said premises elected to make a run for freedom from the noxious fumes. The boy's sharp eyes quickly detected the movement and the chase was on. The yard itself was mostly bare. His mother regularly swept the yard beneath the pecan trees that surrounded the farm house with a yard broom made from broomstraw, a weed that grew in abundance around the edges of the fields. As a result, the exposed earth of the yard had developed a hard, almost polished surface.

The rat sped across the exposed ground making for the tree line just the other side of the freshly plowed field that bordered the yard. The garden had not yet been planted. The boy intercepted the rat about midway of the narrow strip of field, his speed having been slowed by the deeply plowed soft gray soil. Not having any sort of weapon, there was only one thing to do, he stomped on the rat with his bare foot. Now wood rats are not the most hospitable creatures, and this one, having been recently treated to a bath of concentrated lye water, was in no mood to give up without a fight. Hence the scar the boy carried on the bottom of his foot for the rest of his life. But it was not the fate of the rat that the old man spoke of next, but the fate of men.

He spoke of the fine gray powder soil again, but it was not the drought-dry soil of his boyhood. Instead, he spoke of the hot dry volcanic soil of an island in the Pacific. An island that the boy had never heard of growing up. He spoke of the way the dust covered everything and worked its way into his clothes. Everything was covered with the fine dust. He described how his boot-shod feet sank in it whenever he tried to run, slowing him down, but he kept moving from one shell hole to the next, taking advantage of the least natural depression. His platoon had been on the front line for some days. They were tired, those that remained. It was a welcome relief to hear that

they would be relieved. Perhaps it was someone's idea of a joke. They waited, strung out across the contours of a wide shallow valley, more the beginnings of a ravine, really.

A few hundred yards ahead the ground began to rise again to the next hill they or someone else would assault. The open field of volcanic soil was crisscrossed with shallow trenches no more than a foot or two deep dug down to the rock. The Marines knew that each trench intersection would be in someone's gun sights, probably more than one someone. The soil clung to their once green uniforms and they clung to the soil. Watching the front, listening for sounds of their relief. No one was in a hurry to cross the killing field in front. At last there was movement behind. The clink of equipment signaled time to slip back away.

The platoon was fresh off the boat. Their faces clean shaven. They moved up and through the line. Few words were exchanged. A squad spread out across the ravine taking defensive positions and preparing for the night. His outfit had looked like that a few days ago, or was it weeks or maybe only hours, but they had changed. They wasted no time slipping back behind the hill they had taken a few days earlier, at least the illusion of safety. Replacements would arrive, and they would go back in the line, but perhaps at least a day's rest. It was a short day.

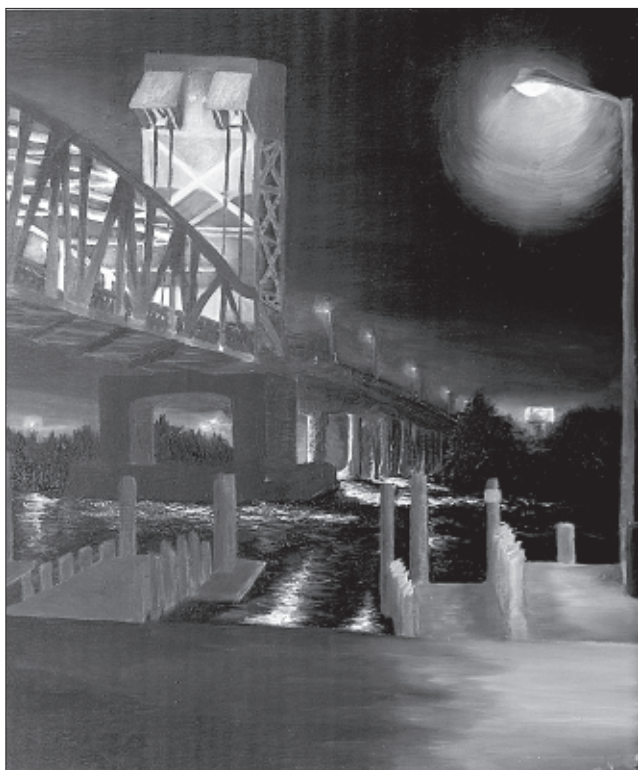
By noon, the word was passed to move back up to their old positions. At first numb they moved forward, back towards their objective of the day before. Back over the hill. Adrenaline rush. He moved again on the run. He had learned that at least. Move fast and find a hole. They reached their old positions, paused. The backs of the other Marines were visible out in front. They had advanced forward 25 yards in their less than a day on the line. Spreading across the valley their relief had built little half round

forts out of stone--the soil too thin here to scoop out a decent hole.

He ran forward again, without pausing. He looked at a dead Marine, a single bullet hole in the head. The face pale, thin gray layer of dust, the eyes unseeing, new day's stubble of beard on the once clean-shaven face. He ran on, veering to the base of a large boulder where he wedged himself in a volcanic crack, kicking rocks down to fill the abyss below his feet. He could see the line of Marines, all dead, all in a line. It was a perfect vantage point. His buddies strung out again, blending with the landscape, finding whatever cover they could. They waited for the sunset, then waited for dawn. Tomorrow they would move up the slope toward a hill topped by a demolished radar screen, but no one was in a rush to go.

He might have slept, but he became aware of a noise beneath his feet as the gray dawn emerged. Quiet work. He felt the movement in the rock as much as heard it. He looked down. He could see a rock move and dimly between the stones a human form was revealed by a faint light from below. Movement. A hand reached out and delicately moved a rock. He could see, but had not been seen. He moved slowly, quietly, sliding out, signaling with his hands. A Marine answered his unspoken request and tossed him a grenade.

The old man went silent, remembering but not wishing to speak. Then his mind returning to the dead Marines he spoke again, "Their faces were covered with a thin layer of dust, gray dust, one day's growth of beard," then paused before finishing his thought, "Their faces were all so young. I guess we were all young then."



Lesley Moore

Mother's Arms

Lois Basiliere

Why is it that what we dislike most about our mothers is what we inherit? Why couldn't I have acquired her calm temperament, soft voice, positive attitude, non-complaining disposition, relaxed style and grace? Unfortunately, the attributes I have my mom to thank for are not as flattering. Among those things is making some of the statements she did, such as, "If I knew then what I know now." Others like repeating myself, talking to myself, and talking to the television are a few of the more memorable characteristics I seem to have acquired.

A physical attribute that is genetic and most unattractive is the way in which the top of my arms flap in the wind when a car window is rolled down and one of my arms is hanging outside that window on a glorious spring day. Oh, how my younger brother and I used to laugh when we observed our mother in that pose.

After the snow has started to thaw, and the sun is bursting through the clouds like a ray of hope that spring is soon to come again, and there is a slight breeze in the air, the first thing I want to do is turn on the radio as loud as I can, roll down the windows, and hang my arm on the outside of one of the car doors. While she used to get angry when we teased her about how her arm flapped and jiggled in the breeze, I have tried to avoid thinking about the pain that I know our laughing must have caused her. If only I knew then what I know now.

The stories that began as, "If I knew then what I know now . . ." often were related to not being married and/or not having children. I know she did not realize that my feelings were hurt when she suggested a different lifestyle might have been easier ; however, I now understand what she meant. She certainly loved us all

and never played favorites. Very few women of her generation worked outside the home. And, apparently, some of them (mother included) did not know a whole lot about birth control, or, if they did, they certainly didn't practice it in an effective way.

She was more than likely a woman before her time, since she did believe there were options for women. Bringing up four boys was not a picnic in the park. I think I can say with certainty and a bit of authority that it was much easier bringing up her only daughter than bringing up those four boys of hers!

Mother was a very intelligent woman, and perhaps she would have pursued a career as a librarian if she had her life to live over. Her love of books was incomparable, and she left that as an inheritance to me. Without a doubt, she would still marry and have children. She was the epitome of motherhood. However, she put herself last, and if I could talk to her today, I would tell her how important it would be for her to think of herself first. More than likely, I would have to repeat that more than once since she always thought her children came first.

Repeating myself, talking to myself and, alas, talking to the television have developed over time. During those times, I utter the most brilliant and profound words that have ever come across my tongue and through my lips. I am not the quickest one in the room to speak. But, when I am by myself and talking to myself, I am the most eloquent person I know. Occasionally, I snicker at what I have to say, since I can be quite amusing at times and a comic as well. Some of the eloquence comes from my love of reading.

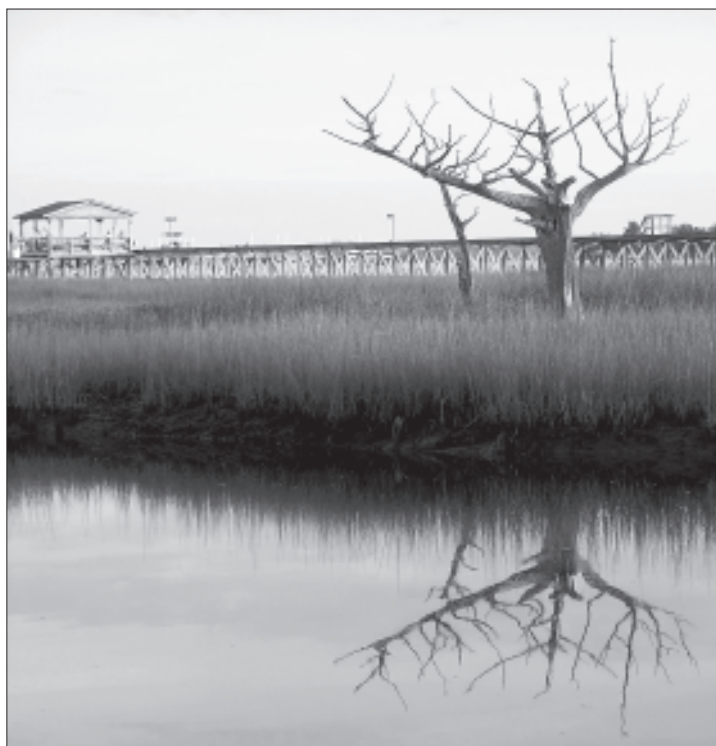
There are, after all, positive things I have obtained from my mother. And, mother's love of reading instilled the same addiction in me. Reading is my drug of

choice. Whether I feel depressed, angry, sad, content or deliriously happy, thrusting my nose in a book helps me to maintain a more relaxed style and a level mind.

But, my mind keeps reverting back to those flabby arms of mine. When and how did they become that way? Recently, I have been exercising only to find that they are becoming larger. Now, instead of small and flabby, they are big and flabby! Mother, do I hear you laughing in the netherworld?

If I was asked which person, living or dead, I would most like to have a conversation with, it would not be Jesus, George Washington, Martin Luther King, Ghandi or any other significant historical being. I would not hesitate in saying, "I want to talk to mother one more time."

First, I will thank her for instilling in me a love of reading. It is what has made it possible for me to do a multitude of other things in my life, not the least of which is writing with a fair bit of intelligence. Before either one of us breathed another word, we would take one another in each other's arms and perhaps laugh at the flabbiness of those arms with a joy that cannot be described. I can hear mother say, "I told you, God will get you for laughing at me!"



Payton Andrews

Coffee or Tea?

John Siebel

The sun crescents the skyline
and the moon takes his bow.

Today's coffee is disturbed
once more by Narcissistic
neighbors that are so out
of love I find comfort in
documenting their debates.

The woman's voice
slows the stir of my
cream as she prepares
her words for tyranny.
(I do not hear any
conversation about
breakfast in bed
or warm words
concerning ruffled
pillow cases.)

So I attempt to scoop
the sugar when I am
interrupted by words
even I, the ears
in the wall,
see as weak.

"You can't keep doing this, Chris."

It is like an antonym for anomaly.
Every day for me she speaks
through tightened sobs,

tempting my taste buds
for something sweet.

I tap the spoon
on the rim
of my cup
and wonder...
if maybe,
I should have
brewed tea?



Amber Brown



Shannon Johnson



September Krueger

Elements

John Williford

1.

I could write you along pages and walk
water street into my veins and watch

wrens take refuge against the brick
wall near the sidewalk

where the wind pushed them against their will
glided helpless like streamers

found a pocket of peace where the currents
couldn't reach the one boulder standing

high from the water the most sunlit
and warm shed mites and ruffled

their petite bodies as they hung
sideways as I passed the mulberries

from which they swept from where I heard
you laughing among the branches.

2.

There was a thick fog hanging onto
every limb and brick and sky

smelling of oysters and seaweed
heavy with salt; every street light was

illuminated, and the raven
lofted from somewhere amid

the milky stick like when lips
form: the corners pucker inward

drawing a circle when we blow-out candles
using only what energy is needed to transform

the waning light: and out she came
from the lip-like opening, spat into existence.

3.

There was a whisper in the air
when I was returning home — passing

the pines and maples, the big plastic rock
in my neighbor's yard — and among the trimmed

hedges, dead maple leaves brushed into the street
scattering in spiral wafts, landing near the manhole

and the fat tabby crouched in the dogwood's shade
in the pine brush, then there as I passed

the ginkgo must have heard what I heard
for its leaves, all of them and only them, were

glowing and they lapped the air like a dog's
(a god's) tongue, lapping and panting in the day-glow.

4.

I know why the sky is blue
yet when I sit on my porch

in the mornings, my hands gripping
the warmth of my coffee cup,

my mind gapes at the horizon
where loose spools of pink and orange

thread the sprouts of clouds into existence
as if owls had stitched them

when I wasn't looking. And they sprawl atop
the oaks above the snow's residence

and maple leaves bruised with dark red
like rashes on fair skin, drip like the red

of my eyes, and I know that all of us —
none of us could fathom the

delicate layers
of yarn that would (seem) to blow away,
if someone sneezed.



Gregory Hanrahan



September Krueger

An Ode to the Music

Angela Chambers

To the music that I hear
Between the spaces in my head.
I have heard it
Come and go.
Although it stays a while
To let me know
It still haunts me.
Rhythm
Beats
Against
My
Brain
An ode
To the
Music
That makes me
Sane!

Waiting

Amanda Gilliland

If everything
and anything
and nothing
were the same,

If hearts were meant
to live and die
and know not
whence they came

If lovers feet
from weary dust
had not
a resting place

If ever I
had never known
that look
upon your face

What lies this world
had told me
long before
you told me truths

What mysteries
I purchased
through the seasons
of my youth

What careless words
I swallowed

seeking not
for avid proof

But love,
as you will have me now
has lifted veil
from chin to brow

Displaying all
I'd never see,
if your whole heart
had not
found me.



September Krueger

Inspired to be Inspired

Shoshana Weinstock-Herman

Stepped outside today, to clean my shoes.
Banged and scraped the dirt and mud.
Something struck me and I took pause,
there I was – cleaning the mud.

For so long I've wanted to be free of the mud,
so long it's held me tight, pulled me in.

Muddy thoughts of who I want to be.
Muddy concerns that I'll never be sure.
Muddy regrets of what I've done
 what I haven't done
 who I haven't been
 who I'll never be

Muddy wishes that everything was different
Muddy lies I tell myself everyday
 things I shouldn't believe
 about myself and
 the people in my life and
 the people no longer here

But these past few days there was no mud.
It was there, but I stepped in it, through it.
It didn't hold on.

And as I clean my shoes, I think of
mud, both real and not.
How I want it to be nothing more than
something I walk through and past,
that will go away when I scrape it.

Too long I let it take hold, take control,

I condemned it, but did nothing to rid it.

Well, now I know how it feels, without the mud.

I want to hold that feeling forever,
to be that person forever.
That person that I was - without the mud.
I liked her. I admired her.
She laughed, she smiled,
and it was real.
She helped people, she befriended people,
she was people.
With a hammer, a nail, and gloves,
she built a new image of who
she could be, should be, wants to be.

So I drop my shoes, and leave some mud.
Cause it will always be there,
reappear.
And maybe seeing it there will remind me,
that I don't want it.
That it can't hold me down.
It's only mud. I'm me.
It's starting to be clear.
Mud or no – I'll always be me.
And for once, maybe I don't mind.

AmericA

Emily Reid

WE ARE thriving on a healthcare system built for profit
WE ARE not properly caring for our elders
WE ARE unappreciative of our schoolteachers
WE ARE willing to spend more money on a war then to properly educate our children.

WE ARE against immigration
WE ARE scared of the law enforcers intended to keep us safe
WE ARE giving firearms to felons
WE ARE able to get out of trouble with the right cash flow.

WE ARE going to build over every inch of green grass
WE ARE destroying our environment
WE ARE wasting all of our precious resources
WE ARE a nation that practices hedonism.

WE ARE breeding grounds for insanity
WE ARE obsessed with self-image
WE ARE scared of any person who is not like ourselves
WE ARE instilled with hate for difference.

WE ARE unwilling to assist the mentally ill
WE ARE abusive husbands and boyfriends
WE ARE teaching adolescent girls to throw up their food
WE ARE at a fifty percent divorce rate.

WE ARE dominated by the dollar
WE ARE obsessed with pride

WE ARE ruled by a president who does not understand
we cannot win a war that is being fought over an idea
WE ARE god damned americans.



Jacob Mertens

Ancient One

John Stevens

You see me in the moon bright
Saddled to a shooting star
The original galactic cowboy
Playing creation's guitar

Yippee kiyo kiyea
I toss my hat at a passing moon
As I fly across your sleepless thoughts
Singing my cosmic tune

I tighten my chaps with Orions Belt
And bless myself with the Southern Cross
My spurs urge the silver footed steed
As your sleep is dream swept tossed

On I ride far into the night
Each league brings me closer to you
Sparks fly from my charges hooves
As we emerge from night's cobalt blue

Your sleep is very restless now
You sense that I am near
Your breath is growing shallow now
Your ears strain to hear

Let lightening flash and thunder roll
I deliver the script long rehearsed
Your breathing gives me life
My life gave you birth

Blind Milton Dictating to his Daughters

—after a painting by Henry Fuseli

D.M. Stream

In a hardwood throne
You sit like a statue
Legs crossed and aching
Hands folded for prayer
While useless iron eyes
Occasionally shift from ceiling
To floor
Envisioning the Pandemonium or Zion
That flows from your dry lips.

And below on your right
One daughter
Plump and patient
Imitates the spider's craft
While the other
Gracefully standing slender
Makes immortal,
Your every word.

Looking for Emma

Emma Elias Michaels

Emma used to come often but never
stayed for very long, sensing danger,
sensing parched lips and a dry throat.
Long enough though.

On those days when the sky cracked open
my head and thoughts gushed out
like coffee beans from a torn sack,
she'd run in and scoop up handfuls
and offer them back like a magic potion.

Sometimes I'd see her as I lay buried
beneath layers of cotton print sheets
and half-polyester blankets.
She'd try to tease a smile from doubtful
eyes by puppeteering a carnival
of pleasing memories.

Quite often though, I'd find her standing
at the foot of my bed, waiting
for an answer as to why I churned the air
in search of a feeling within, and then,
before I could explain, a tear would form
in the corner of her far-away eyes and
the room would be empty again.

Emma liked the morning. She'd watch me write
and then stop me in mid-sentence to stroke
my hair and gentle my confusion, just before
pleading with me to write
past the anger and into my strength.

Somehow when the air got heavy and I couldn't
breathe, save for gasping, she would open
the window so I could listen to the coo
of the gray doves
and know that there was air enough to sing.

Last time I saw Emma, she was pale. I think
she was tired; she kept walking towards me
but we never did get close enough
to touch. She was trying to tell me
something, but a flow of silent words
kept drowning her out. I saw
a trail of coffee beans and it was then
that I realized she was gone.



Courtney Ryan

Mantlepiece

Robert W. Knebel

The first strokes of morning were being applied,
broad as the horizon,
gentle as spring love.
A melody wafted lazily on the waves of the breeze.
Tranquility ignored my personal space.

I smiled.
until

Twigs barked their last breath,
sadly splitting then suddenly silent.
Dread darkened the young sky.
My heart be-beat, be-beat behind eardrums.
Muscles tensed, ready to race.

A stranger pierced my peace,
cleverly draped in the skin of a friend.
He smelled of cool water and arrogance.
The song sunk. A lead balloon.
Tranquility fled as he invaded my space.

I aided in the ambush, indirectly.
Security bred laziness.
Rarely-used defenses had taken their leave.
Be-beat, be-beat, be-beat.
Time itself intent on torture.

A multi-level evacuation was staged.
Courage slipped into shadow,
sinking away in search of some armor,
leaving me to soil the earth as
the scent of fear stained the air.

Fight or flight conflicted within,
instinct battled curiosity.
No weapons were drawn, no threat made known.
A tender hand caressed my cheek.
Knees shook while feet took root.

The clouds were cloaked in midnight.
The whites of my eyes shone bright.
He tempted me with sugar.
Oh, he tempted me with sugar,
and I invited the rope.

Were it you could hear me now,
were it that were so.
My warnings forever unheeded,
advice forever untold.
You comfort in my surroundings,
this fire down below.
Were it you could hear me now.
Were it that were so.

Nightmare
Shannon Johnson

I wake to the chill of the night.
The darkness covering me,
suffocating me.
The dream from moments before
resonating throughout my body.
Breathe...,
Breathe...,
I can still hear the steady drum
of the once comforting sound
of my heart.
As the room and my life
come back to focus,
a solitary tear wisps its
way across my cheek.
Down...,
Down...,
it falls, embedding itself,
as tears from the past
so often do.
The memories begin to fade,
locking themselves
once again
in the deep crevices of my soul.
I am left now
with the so familiar numbness
that keeps me alive.
I close my eyes and drift away.
Pushing through
the doors of slumber,
I await that one moment,
when the feeling of sweet dreams
shadows the pain.



Marine Gillette

Our Own Worst Critics

Jonathan Padgett

The voice is silent now
Always lurking, waiting
To find a flaw and
Bury its teeth in detail.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.
So it can scream
Bringing down the euphoria of creation
Into a self-destructive dance

That inner voice, hissing critiques
How wrong this voice, so harsh, unkind
Shattering and fighting
The words I wield

A painful jeer.
The voice finds a victim,
Tearing it apart
Viciously unraveling this tapestry of words

Of blood and of tears,
Of art and pride.

Mother

Shannon Johnson

A hero is she who fights
for her young.
Her shield strengthened
by her everlasting love.
It is a power she cannot deny,
for she is our mother.

In times of sorrow
she showed us happiness.
In times of oppression
she fought for our freedom.
She has truly been our rock,
for she is our mother.

She storms the battle
of life,
Powered by the strength
of her soul.
The love in her heart is
undeniable,
for she is our mother.

In times of weakness
we rally to her side.
Our constant reminder
that we will help her get through.
In the end
we will help her stand,
for we are her children.

Reconciliation

John Siebel

The curtains are closed.

The door is locked.

I feel secure with
the arrangement
we have made;

You and I.

The avid reader/
aspiring Poet;
once separated,
but now together
re-newing our minds
in order to preserve
our soul.

So we embrace
our insomnia
and pretend to
enjoy the isolation;
the two of us
engaged in our
own allegorys
of life.

It is well into
the night and
you continue
to read while
I count syllables
in place of sheep.
The two of us

laughing when
the other mis-
pronounces
a vowel.

Finally together,
we master/mind
a crescendo and
press our flesh
against paper,
crumble up the
pages,
and remanisce...

about our past.



Christine Pfohl

Squiggle

Grey Padgett

There's

a

squiggle of a drop

on my table

a gift from grey skies

a gift for grey eyes

Through its lens

gloss and grains are

Magnified

Color beneath its skin

is richly real

And the drop is woman;

the water is world

It reflects my perverted face

and in its dome, centuries

of cycle pullulate.

Startled by the mean dark

circles under my eyes

I slowly bring the tip of

my man-fire

my cancer-cock

my cigarette

to the edge of her horizon.

I crush her skies...and she

creeps

into me

seeps

into Sun

makes
him sag

like a bloody sponge
till all the heat is gone.

But for his fire
he is given the world.
She lives inside him
soaking his core.



Courtney Ryan

Passing Through

Grey Padgett

“‘Martin’s General Store.’ Well, this is quaint,” said Jess.

“Quaint is code for middle-of-nowhere,” said Thomas, his hand squeezing the gas nozzle.

Jess zipped up her jacket. “I mean it. You don’t see these mom-and-pop’s much anymore.” She put her hands against Thomas’ red Camaro and flexed her calves. “Look at that man in the rocker! Have you ever seen anything so cute?”

Thomas turned around to look at the house next door to the gas station. A man with a brown beard smoked a cigar as he rocked slowly on the front porch. He and Thomas made eye contact briefly. The man gave Thomas a polite nod as he scratched at a mole on his face. Thomas nodded back and turned to face Jess again.

“I can think of something cuter. . . you and me rocking on a front porch covered with grandkids.” Thomas wrapped his arms around Jess and leaned her against the car.

“I bet you say that to all girls you take home to meet your mother,” she said.

“Every last one. I said it to you, and to you, and to you. And, oh yeah, there was also you.”

“I’m nervous, Thomas. I feel like this is some huge test.”

“Don’t worry about a thing. She’s gonna love you, Jess. Just keep your sleeves over that tattoo!”

“It’s just a butterfly. Surely your mother will let you marry a girl who likes butterflies?”

“Let’s not risk it,” he said, winking. He looked down at his watch. “We better get moving. Christmas turkey wouldn’t be the same cold.”

“Most people like Christmas vacation because there’s

no homework, but you only like it because of the food!” said Jess, slapping Thomas’ back.

“You got that right. I’m starving!”

“How much further?”

“Still a good three hours.”

“I can’t wait to get there.”

“Me, too. But this should be the last stop we have to make.”

“I love you, Thomas.”

“I love you, too, babe.”

* * *

“I thought we were in a hurry. I told you I’d only be a minute.” Jess took off her tee shirt as she walked out of the gas station, revealing a tank top underneath.

“Since we had to make a pit stop, I figured we should go ahead and fill up again.”

“But we filled up only an hour ago.”

“Yes, I remember, Jess, but if we fill up now, maybe we won’t have to stop yet again before we get there.”

Jess rolled her eyes and sat on the hood of the Camaro. Her eyes wandered to the house beside the gas station. Television lights flickered through the windows and an empty rocking chair on the porch moved slowly in the wind.

“What’s your problem, Jess? You’ve had an attitude since the minute we got in the car.”

“Well, excuse me, Thomas. But forgive me if I’m not exactly thrilled about a weekend with your mother.”

“Sorry if it’s too much to ask my wife to join me for my mother’s fortieth birthday.”

“That’s just it, Thomas. She’s forty years old and we’re only twenty-three. What sane forty year old woman is anxious to become a grandmother? My life didn’t end when I married you. She acts like I’m a Jezebel because I won’t quit school.”

The gas nozzle announced that the tank was full with

a “click.”

“You could cut her some slack, Jess. You know how lonely she’s been since I moved out.”

“Sure, Thomas. I’ll cut her some slack. And what will she do? What do you do? Blame me for everything. We’re late for your mother and it’s all my fault because I had to stop and go to the bathroom! She’s not a grandmother because I’m not a proper wife!”

“Calm down, Jess. Can you please pay so I can wash the windshield? We’ve got to go. You know she hates it when we’re late.”

“Yes, I know. I hate it, too. It’s just one more thing for her to complain about.”

“And what do you call this? You egg her on with your attitude.”

“Once again, Thomas, it’s all my fault.”

“Jess, please pay. We’ve got to go.”

* * *

“Aaron, please just try.”

“But I don’t have to, Mommy.”

“Just try. You know Daddy doesn’t like to stop, and it’s three more hours before we get to Grandma’s.”

“I did try. I don’t have to go.”

“Come on, then. Daddy’s waiting.”

Jess took Aaron’s hand as they walked through the gas station. A large woman puffed on a cigarette behind the counter.

“Ain’t you cute?”

“I start kin-da-garden next week.”

“Well ain’t you a big fella?”

“Mommy, can I have a candy bar?”

“Not now, Aaron. We’re having a big meal at Grandma’s.”

Jess smiled at the cashier as they passed through the door. She and Aaron walked up to the green minivan

parked outside. The back door was slid open and Thomas was standing beside it, leaning inside.

“Any luck, Thomas?”

“Well, it’s clean enough, I guess, but it’s gonna stain.”

Jess looked over at a black mutt tied to a pole. “I told you we shouldn’t have brought Molly. She gets sick so easily in the car.”

Thomas stood upright with a wad of paper towels in his hand. “Mom loves that dog. Besides, who would have taken care of her over the weekend?”

“Well, I can tell you that this is the last time we’ll bring Molly to see your mother.”

“Grandma loves Molly,” sang Aaron.

“Did you go, Aaron?” asked Thomas as he threw the paper towels into the trash can.

“I tried!” Aaron said triumphantly.

“All right. You know we’re not stopping again until we get to Grandma’s? Okay, buddy. Hop in.”

Jess buckled Aaron in while Thomas untied Molly from the pole and led her to the van. As Jess and Thomas climbed into their seats and shut the doors a man with a salt-and-peppered beard pulled into the driveway next door. Aaron waved through the window. The man smiled, then got out of his truck and walked up to the house.

“Okay,” said Thomas. “Everybody all set?”

“Mommy, I think I can go now.”

“Aaron, why didn’t you go when we were in the store?”

“I didn’t have to then.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

Thomas rubbed his temples. “I’d better use the payphone and let Mom know we’re running late so she won’t worry.”

“Mommy, if I go to the bathroom, then can I have a

candy bar?”

* * *

“I’m pretty sure there’s a gas station up here soon.” Jess looked nervously to the left and right sides of the road.

“Mom, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“Aaron, there’s more to driving a car than using the pedals and steering the wheel. You’ve got to keep an eye on the gauges. You should have told me we were low on gas sooner.”

“I told you when we were at a quarter of a tank.”

“I know, but on these back roads you never know when the next gas station will be.”

“We still have plenty of gas, and besides...”

“Thank goodness! There it is. I knew there was one close. Now, Aaron, please be very careful when you pull in.”

“I know how to drive, Mom.”

“No, you’re learning how to drive. That’s why it’s called a learner’s permit. Aaron, slow down, please!”

Aaron’s face flushed red and his palms sweated. As he pulled up next to the pumps, his hands slipped on the wheel. The car turned wide and the corner of the bumper nudged the trash can that sat there.

“Are you crazy? Do you know what happens if you hit those pumps? Put it in park and get out! I’m driving!”

Aaron stood to the side and watched his mother put the car in reverse, correct the angle, and pull up next to the pumps.

“Great!” shouted Jess. “I only have ten dollars in cash and this is one of those ancient gas stations that doesn’t even have a credit card machine. Now we’ll have to stop again before we get to your Grandmother’s house.”

Aaron pumped the gas while his mother went inside. Still shaking with anger, he slumped against the blue Corolla and noticed a man leaning over the railing of his front porch, tugging on his beard.

“Don’t feel too bad,” the man shouted. “A boy who’s learning to drive should have his daddy in the passenger seat.”

Aaron looked down at his feet and didn’t see the man wink.

“Ya’ll ain’t from around here, are you?”

Aaron felt his eyes stinging. Without looking up he answered, “No. We’re just passing through.”

He finished pumping and sat on the passenger side. Jess came out of the gas station and took her place in the driver’s seat.

“I’m sorry for screaming, Aaron, but I’m just looking out for you.”

“I wish Dad were here.”

“I know, sweetie. Me, too. But he is with us, in a way. You know you look just like him. You could pass for his...”

“I could pass for his twin. I know. You’ve told me a hundred times.”

“I know I can nag about a lot of things...”

“Like my grades.”

“Yes. Like your grades. But do you know how important it is for you to go to college? I’ve struggled so much because I never finished.”

“I know.”

“And I know that you miss your father. But I’m here for you, and I love you, and all I want is for you to be happy. Okay?”

Aaron stared down at his lap.

“Aaron?”

“I know. I love you, too.”

* * *

"Too bad Mom couldn't come with us."

"Yeah, too bad I didn't have to spend nine hours in a car with your mother."

"Give her a break, Cheryl. I'm all she has left since Dad died."

"I know, Aaron. She just gives me a hard time because she loves you so much, and I put up with it because I love you so much." Cheryl squeezed Aaron's leg.

He laughed. "I'm worried about her. It's been a long time since she's seen Grandma, but I guess they never really got along."

"She didn't get along with her mother-in-law? You're kidding me!"

"Seriously...it's weird how they never talk or visit each other."

"Well I just hope your grandmother likes me better than your mother does!"

"Grandma is gonna love you! That's for sure. I've already told her all about you and she's dying to meet the famous Cheryl."

"How long till we get there?"

"It's probably about another three hours. You know, once the interstate opens, it'll shave close to an hour off of this trip."

"Good," said Cheryl. "I love driving through the country, but it's so isolated. What if the car broke down? Who knows how far we'd have to go before we could find any help?"

"I think there's a gas station somewhere around here," Aaron said. "Do you need to make a stop soon?"

"Yeah. Pretty soon. How are we on gas?"

"Good."

Cheryl looked out the window and watched the blur

of trees go by. The woods suddenly opened up as they passed a house beside a vacant lot.

An old man with a white beard was sitting on the front porch in a rocking chair. He and Cheryl made eye contact briefly, and the old man nodded at Cheryl as he scratched at a mole on his wrinkled face.

A second later, trees were all that Cheryl could see again.

“People in the county are so nice. They always nod hello...even if you’re just passing through.”

They drove on several minutes more.

“Sorry, Cheryl. I’ll stop as soon as we find a place. I know there’s a store soon.”

“I know, sweetie. It’s not urgent yet.” Cheryl squeezed Aaron’s leg again.

“I love you, Cheryl.”

“I love you, too.”

Aaron rubbed his stomach with his hand. “Man I can’t wait for Christmas dinner!”

Mr. Martin put out his cigar and continued to rock in his chair. He had no reason to go back inside just yet. The weather wasn’t too cold. He looked over at the vacant lot beside his house. Not many cars came down this road anymore. It had been years since the gas station had been bulldozed. All the debris had finally been cleared away.

Mr. Martin felt an itch on his mole. As he raised his hand to scratch it, a yellow Volkswagen went by. A man was driving and a young girl was looking out the window, smiling. He gave her a quick nod, and a second later they were gone. It was the only car he saw that day.

She Always Loved October
Shoshana Weinstock-Herman

she always loved October
with its chilled leafy air

crisp silk nights
and burrowing in bed for warmth

but now October is more
now it is colder

October was the last could have been
if only she'd realized then

there was too much denial
too much fear

too many times saying she imagined it all
saying he never felt the same

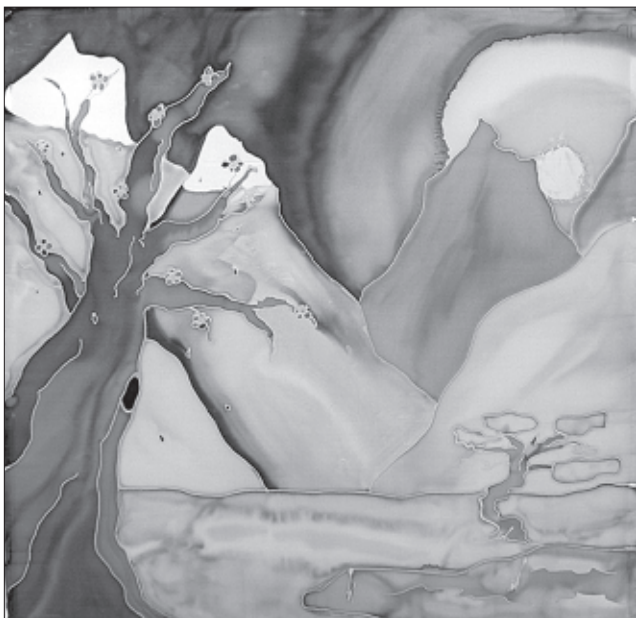
and it wouldn't be worth it
and it would ruin everything

so she let nothing happen – again -
and ruined it anyway

because it was the last time
the last time there was a maybe

so now this is October
the could have should have blues

and now she's ready to get past it
she's ready to love October again



Eric Riffle



Christine Pfohl

The Trench

Lisa Roell Turano

I can do this, I said to myself encouragingly. I can pee in a trench in front of a bunch of strangers. I'll just go and get it over with – how bad can it be?

I was sitting – legs crossed – in the bus terminal in downtown San Pedro Sula, Honduras. I had just spent several hours on a bus with no bathroom, and was seriously regretting the three cups of coffee I'd had that morning. My boyfriend Scott had just returned from the bathroom, and the news wasn't good. It's just a trench behind that wall, he informed me cheerily, I guess you'll just have to squat. It's not too private, but hey, if you gotta go.....

Oh well, I thought. One more cultural experience to add to the adventure. The bus trip itself had been an exciting experience for me – it was my first trip to Central America, and everything was new and exciting. Scott had suggested that we take a local bus from Copán into San Pedro, instead of the air-conditioned tourist van. It'll be more fun, he said. Cheaper, too.

So we climbed aboard a rickety old U.S. school bus that had definitely seen better days. The seat cushioning was long gone, which meant that every pothole we encountered (and there seemed to be a lot of potholes!) became a bone-jarring experience. The road was hilly and full of curves as it wound its way down out of the mountainous region of Copán. This didn't seem to faze the driver, who barely slowed as he hurtled around corners and dodged cattle in the roadway.

We stopped often to pick up passengers along the roadside, gears grinding each time we slowed to a stop. I was fascinated by the local people and I studied them out of the corner of my eye as they boarded the bus. The

men wore cowboy hats and carried machetes, the latter of which got deposited into a five gallon bucket as they boarded - I wondered how they kept it straight whose was whose. The women were quiet and reserved. They sat calmly with parcels and bags of fresh produce bundled around their feet, and they mostly ignored us. But the black-haired children on their laps giggled and peeked at us through their fingers. We smiled back, and felt completely out of place - we were the only gringos on the bus and we stuck out like sore thumbs.

At every crossroads bus stop we would pull in and wait for new passengers, and the bus would immediately swarm with vendors. Men, women, and children would board the bus and walk the aisle selling food, shampoo, socks, and various other necessities. A boy selling meat pies whipped a bottle of hot sauce from his back pocket each time he made a sale – giving his customers a complimentary sprinkle of fiery habañero. The open windows were filled with hands offering up plastic baggies of Coca Cola with straws (the recyclable bottles were too precious to sell “to go”).

After the vendors came the beggars. Blind, deaf, handicapped – they each displayed a permit from the government giving them permission to solicit. Those who could not see or speak were escorted by children who begged on their behalf. The dusty air vibrated with noise, the pulsing beat of loud Latin music mingling with shouts in Spanish and the squawking brakes and roaring engines of arriving and departing buses.

I sat wide-eyed as I took in all of this activity. It was like nothing I’d ever experienced before! I was brave enough to purchase a package of cookies amongst the chaos – it made me feel like I was actually participating in the scene unfolding around me. As I handed over my lempiras to a young cookie salesman, he rewarded me

with a dazzling smile. He couldn't have been more than ten years old, and it suddenly occurred to me that he (and all of these other young salesmen) should be in school. The sadness of that realization stayed with me for some time – long after the cookies were gone.

But by the time the bus pulled into the dusty station at San Pedro Sula, I wasn't able to think about much of anything other than my full bladder. It was time to summon my courage and head for "The Trench", no matter how disgusting it might be. (I had visions of a muddy, foul-smelling hole, flies buzzing around through the stench, landing on me as I squatted to do my business. But maybe that was just my overactive imagination, and it wouldn't be that bad.....)

I stood up and slowly walked toward the wall Scott had indicated, weaving my way through even more vendors (underwear, anyone?). I rounded the corner cautiously and headed toward a trough-like area in the corner. I felt my bravery draining away as I neared it, but I kept on moving – I really had to go.

But before I could get close enough to see just how awful it might be, I noticed a heavy-set older man standing against another wall, leaning against a battered wooden door with his arms crossed. Oh, no, I thought, is he going to just stand there and watch me?? He beckoned to me, waving me over to him. I hesitated – maybe he was just another beggar, staking out the pee trench??

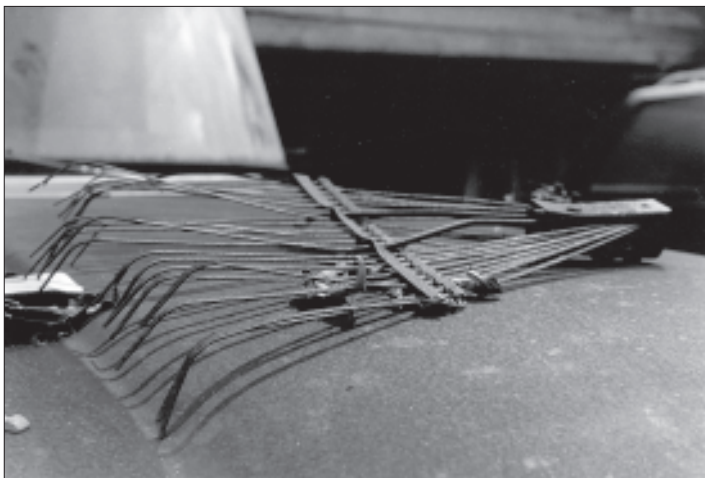
I approached him cautiously, mostly out of curiosity. One, he said in English, holding out his hand. After a brief moment of utter confusion, I suddenly understood. I dug into the pocket of my shorts, pulled out a crumpled red one-lempira note, and handed it to him. He reached down into a cardboard box at his feet and pulled out a roll of bright blue toilet paper. He spun off a small section, handing it to me as he smiled and opened the wooden

door with a flourish.

Inside was the finest sight I could imagine at that moment – a bright white ceramic toilet, with all the privacy of my bathroom at home. I smiled back gratefully as I quickly stepped inside.

As the door locked reassuringly behind me, I thought to myself, Well, that trench adventure will just have to wait for another day.

I smiled in relief as I unbuckled my belt.



Elena Watson



Chason Huggins



Lynn Graham

An Unexpected Haven

Jonathan Padgett

Nestled in the depths of downtown Wilmington, a haven exists, out of sight from most of the world. Driving down to the end of 15th Street, one would expect more historic houses to continue to exert their dominating presence; yet, suddenly, they end. The world seems to reel at the sudden lack of imposing architecture. Straight ahead is an extremely large wrought iron gate, and although open, it is obvious that it would easily bar access to what lies beyond were it to close. The iron gives the impression of antiquity, seemingly older than the houses just up the street, the cold, lifeless metal setting the theme for what is to follow.

Just beyond the reaches of the gate, the road becomes gravel, worn down into sand and dirt by countless generations of feet and tires. Signs beckon visitors to the right, and soon it becomes obvious as to what this enigma of a place is. Countless tombstones dot the landscape, an occasional mausoleum rising from their midst. Oakdale Cemetery sweeps forth over dozens of acres, the final resting place for thousands of individuals, rich and poor, famous and common, all held within its hallowed ground.

One would expect a cemetery, as most are in present times, to be a broad, flat allotment of land; however, this is not the case with Oakdale. Not only is it the oldest municipal cemetery in Wilmington at nearly one hundred-fifty years old, but also the land seems to rise and fall, like waves competing with each other to reach the shore. The plots are thusly sculpted into the sides of each hill, with a select few on top, to best maximize the otherwise limited space available. The road, now just wide enough to allow a single car squeeze by, winds around these hills, at times branching off to the right or left to better access

a remote area of burials.

The outer bounds of the cemetery seem to be a solid wall of trees, blocking the outside world from sight. Perhaps this was what influenced the cemetery to be named 'Oakdale.' The presence of the trees does not stop there, as all about the cemetery there are gigantic shade trees. As rays of sunlight struggle in an unearthly dance to light the ground, the trees screen most of them out, casting the majority of the cemetery into preternatural twilight a sizeable portion of the day. Interestingly enough, flowering magnolias, azaleas, and even oleanders dot the landscape and provide some relief from the otherwise bleak, but peaceful world of stone and shade.

The land of Oakdale seems to be pimpled with goose bumps; thousands of stones sticking out from the sweet earth. These grave markers come in all shapes and sizes, from the tiny weather-worn stone looking as if nature itself placed it there, to the solemn stone statues of seraphim that stand as silent sentinels keeping close watch over the occupants of the cemetery. In a few places, trees that occupy the plots have overturned tombstones, leaving shattered chunks of sculpted rock to grace the ground as if somehow mocking the permanence that they were once supposed to represent.

Not only is this a simple necropolis, quite literally a city of the dead, but instead it is one with history. The lore that surrounds the area makes for rich stories, which have been passed down from generation to generation. Take for instance, Rose Greenhow, whose story dates back to the Civil War. When running the blockade near Fort Fisher, she drowned, legend says, weighted down by the large sum of gold sewn into her skirts. The only female to die in actual service to either the Union or the Confederacy, her remains was given a hero's burial in Oakdale. The famous burials do not end there; how-

ever, the first governor of North Carolina elected by popular vote, an architect of a monument in Washington, DC, and even Nance Martin, who died at sea and was sealed in a cask of rum, possibly preserved perfectly to this day.

As one wanders about the cemetery, never knowing what lies just out of their short range of sight, they might notice on one particularly steep hill the complete lack of nearly anything. Upon further inspection, a large, circular area remains clear in this otherwise haphazardly crowded cemetery. There are no trees, no tombstones, just bare dirt and a sprinkling of grass. An almost eerie feeling presides, prickling skin into gooseflesh as human curiosity takes over. A short distance away, a sign reveals what this anomaly is: a mass grave. In 1862 when the a disease known as yellow fever swept through Wilmington, it took the lives of so many, so quickly, that single burials were made impossible, resulting in approximately four hundred people buried in one small spot.

People also dot the landscape, putting flowers on graves, jogging, pushing baby carriages, the casual observer, and even a few having picnics between the tombstones. Despite its grim nature, Oakdale has quite a bit in common with a park. The mystery of the place lies not in the dead, but the living, who use it as their own secret haven to get away from the world. The light breeze, the cheerful chirp of birds, the smell of flowers, all contribute to this, making Oakdale Cemetery a most beautifully unusual place.



September Krueger



Amanda Utsman



Payton Andrews

untitled
Amanda Gilliland

It wasn't that she was addicted to pills. In fact, she had never in her life been addicted to anything, except perhaps her own ideas. It was curiosity that prompted her hand to tease the child-safety cap at night. She was indeed no longer a child, but rather a finely established woman. Pieced together with old money, fashionable ties, and big city billboards. She had made a name for herself and it was this name that she was drowning in.

Nancy Allender. A lonely spotlight. Just distant enough to be no one, yet near enough to taste the grit of it all. Reality came in 6 Naproxen twice a day; a pink and chalky assurance. Or 5 Orphenadrine crushed into a glass of red wine. Nancy Allender. Experimental doctor. The yellow warning labels were plastered across her bathroom mirror along with her own personal notes scribbled in. Life may cause drowsiness. Alcohol may intensify effect and lead to a bar fight. Do not crush or chew your enemies, swallow whole. Take with food. Take with water. Take with endless amounts of time.

It wasn't a desire for death that kept her palms brimming with pills. It was their tiny and insignificant beauty, never fading, never fighting back. She decided that this must be what love felt like as she lay clumsily in bed, her throat scratchy and swollen. Completely incomprehensible, dizzying and sluggish, utterly used from continuous motion.

She recalled friends who had buried themselves in their lovers. Worshipping the battering of flesh upon flesh. Night after night, the frantic scramble for one's clothes in a dark and musty room that smelled of previous pleasures which had only just faded, a desperate plea for a certainty that did not exist. A hint of fear that they have

nothing left to give.

Nancy Allender. A secret affairee. She did have a lover, however. She saw him in her wildest fits of eccentricity. Gazing up with bits of cool drizzle edging from her mouth, he would stand there, just fitting into her field of view. They had never spoken, yet words seemed a trivial pursuit.

Nancy Allender. A growing shadow. With each night, each pill; she had grown so translucent that it was her own silhouette against a pale bedroom wall that would arouse her excitement. Those walls, tearing clothes from a frail and bruised body, forming a pile of little more than neglected perfume. She dissolved upon a creaking mattress, pulled the covers past her chest, and waited.

She could only envision him in pieces, never all at once. She could see the creases of his eyes, and how they remained unchanging for far too long. She could see his shadow in her dreams, chasing her through a dense and muggy forest, the branches gnashing her naked body, staining her with her own blood. She marveled at his speed, yet wondered what would become of them if he caught her. This uncertainty kept her just out of his reach, for fear of a fatal embrace. She could see his rough, cracking hands. Whose hands were they? Those of a hunter? A carpenter? A madman? Those calluses and scars were deep and winding, catching and tearing at her weary skin.

In reality, he only sat and watched as she slept. He had long since memorized the placid smile on her mouth and the curve at the edge of her jaw. He had counted her hairs as they draped down her face and even measured the pauses between her breathing.

By morning, the curtains would sway from an open window and not a scent was left to linger. In fact, he left nothing for her but an intense feeling of worth. This feeling, however, was quickly replaced with several smooth

and colorful capsules of temporary contentment, yet she had the fading sensation that there was more to be left unsaid. There was something more to be free of knowing. Nancy Allender. A secret life worth sharing.



Ed Knapp

Guidelines for Submissions

Writer's Guidelines

1. All writing entries must be submitted in both hard copy and on disk. Entries should be typed, with name, address, and telephone or e-mail address on the first page (or each poem for poetry submissions).
2. The files that can be accepted include .doc, .rtf, and/or .txt files.
3. Fiction should not exceed 3000 words. Poetry should not exceed 50 lines. Non-Fiction should not exceed 1500 lines.
4. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable if noted in a cover letter.
5. *Portals* acquires First North American Serial Rights. All other rights revert to the author upon publication. Previously unpublished submissions only.
6. Manuscripts will not be returned.

Artist's and Photographer's Guidelines

1. All art entries must be submitted in both hard copy and digitally as a JPEG, GIF, or TIFF file (with a target dpi of 300).
2. All art entries should include the artist's name, address, and telephone or e-mail address.
3. An appropriate title and the medium used in preparation should be included. Also label the category of each of your entries.
4. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable if noted in a cover letter.
5. Art entries will not be returned.

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English Department
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Wilmington, NC 28401-3993