

ChannelMarker • Volume 8

ChannelMarker



TIDEWATER COMMUNITY COLLEGE



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From here, go anywhere.™

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Volume 8



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Volume 8 • April 2009



TIDEWATER COMMUNITY COLLEGE

From here, go anywhere.™

Submissions to ChannelMarker may be mailed to:
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ChannelMarker volumes 1 – 8*

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Preface

An idea was reintroduced that has long been pondered by philosophers, theologians, and simple wonderers: Does a soul exist? Can it be quantified? Is it a provable entity? There are those who would say yes and, of course, those who would argue its existence—thereby denouncing the thought as only imaginative fluff. Fine, let the debate rage. However, the point remains that after our many, many millenniums of thought, after our superior technological advances, after our non-mystifying all the mysteries in the world, we still ponder. We still question. We still need.

ChannelMarker was conceived for those students who felt the need to commit more to life than just its requirements and for those students who felt a need to communicate more than the necessary words the days prescribed and for all of us who in reading their words could understand a “soulful” response. And it is to them that *ChannelMarker* is dedicated.

ChannelMarker is the product of this collegiate administration which embraces a total student mentality. This collection of students’ creative musings represents our college’s commitment to excellence in all its vast and varied manifestations. Dr. DiCroce, Tidewater Community College, our instructors and staff, all visualize the concept of the total student—the student who is diverse in thinking, needs a creative outlet, and who is compelled to put into words ideas that must find voice.

Our journey for our literary anthology of student works, we now call *ChannelMarker*, began in 1998 in direct response to this need for expression. As all growing, living things do, it began small. Today, it has grown into this fine annual publication you are reading now. Please join us. To paraphrase an old saying, “It will do your soul good.”

If you would like to express your soul’s desire and become part of this extraordinary project in the future, visit us at www.tcc.edu/channelmarker. We’ll be waiting for you.

Phyllis Gowdy
Member, Literary Festival Committee

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Only amateurs say that they write for their own amusement. Writing is not an amusing occupation. It is a combination of ditch-digging, mountain-climbing, treadmill and childbirth. Writing may be interesting, absorbing, exhilarating, racking, relieving. But amusing? Never!

Edna Ferber



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Let's take a walk . . .

Samantha Bartz

Stepping forward & upward
while looking behind her
she tripped on a stone
she tripped on a stone
Just a tumble
down a flight
she got back up
brushed herself off
no tears or whining
She found herself
in a pool of watercolor
turning her life tie-dye
Drenched
from head to toe
she started walking
to Arizona
Showering charcoal
she drew her life mural
on the highway
Leaving a trail
broken zippers & dirty laundry
she found herself at the edge
She'd gone too far
Still feeling it was not far enough
she walked across the water
to the end of HER journey
where she curled up
inside of her luggage
for someone else
to carry her away
She slept.



Cory Bland. *Bono*, 2008, Scratch Board. 8"x10".



The Consolation Prize

Amy Blondell

Hours ago the wind rattled the windows; now the quiet woke her. An artificial light ebbed through the curtains. Wriggling herself from her lover's grasp, she pulled on the robe he brought when he arrived last night. It was lavender—not her favorite color—and lightweight, reaching just above her knees. Subtle silver stitching ran through the garment, and Phillip had had it personalized with "Cara" sewn over the left breast in Old World style calligraphy.

She peeked out the window and gasped. Snow sprinkled from the clouds building on the roofs of cars and houses. A set of tiny paw prints dotted the sidewalk. Between the street lamps and the rising sun, it looked as if someone plugged in a nightlight, setting a hazy glow over the scene. She turned and gazed at Phillip. He lay on his back with his legs slightly bent and his left hand raised over his head. He snored faintly through his open mouth, his thick eyebrows creased as if his dreams confused him.

Cara had not been this content in many months. The last time he promised to stay the night he had spent two hours on the phone with Valerie before apologizing and then rushing out. Cara had swallowed her disappointment. She knew the rules. Phillip had, after all, explained them—explicitly—three years ago. She crawled back into bed, moved close to him and reached for his hand. He had only been sleeping a few hours, but she longed to hear his voice, feel his touch. He stirred, releasing a long, low purr. She tickled his chin. His eyes flittered open. He twisted his body and wrapped his arms around her. She whispered, "Hey, baby."

"Hmm?"

"It's snowing. You should see."

"Snow on Christmas is lucky," he said. "Do you feel lucky?"

She did. Phillip had always sent lovely, expensive gifts but he had never spent Christmas with her. She refused numerous invitations, hoping he'd find a way to come. Just a week ago she turned down a coworker whose advances she had been deflecting for nearly a year. She had been tempted this last time though, wearily acknowledging to herself that under other circumstances she could find Jackson appealing. He wasn't as tall as Phillip, wasn't as handsome—he looked rather academic with his round glasses

and patterned bow ties. He spoke in vehement expressions and reminded Cara of a Southern clergyman. He intimidated her; she really preferred Phillip's quiet intensity. Still, when the man you love is so far away for so long, occasionally one's mind might well...wander. Cara never let herself think about Jackson much. But sometimes...at night, when Phillip had been unable to keep a promise, or return her phone calls, or fly out to see her, Jackson would float through her thoughts.

Jackson always made her laugh, even when work was at its most wretched. And he did like to tease her, once accusing her of sending flowers to herself to convince him there was a man in her life. She had responded, she thought thinking back, perhaps a little too defensively, that she indeed she was seeing someone. And now, letting out a sigh of deep contentment, she grinned. He was with *her* this year, not Valerie. This year Cara had won the grand prize. The thought made her so wickedly happy she nearly laughed out loud. And it aroused in her such gratitude she got out of bed planning to prepare Phillip a breakfast to make him remember he really loathed Valerie. Valerie and the twenty pounds she had been promising to lose for the last three years, her minivan with the sticky juice box stains, her chipped manicures and tattered fleece sweat suits and the constant calling for his advice on which plumber to hire how much to tip the lawn boy even though she knew he needed to focus at work. Cara always knew exactly what he needed and right now he needed breakfast.

In the kitchen, she beat eggs, chopped green peppers and shredded potatoes. The shower started, and she felt renewed happiness anticipating the tender kisses he would drop on her forehead and cheeks. She laughed aloud thinking about it, and distracted, nicked her finger. She raised it to her lips when Phillip made his way over to her and slipped his arms around her waist. He took her hand, kissed the finger and asked, "What's all this?" pointing to the debris on the counter. "You don't cook."

She turned to face him. "Oh, but this is a special occasion. Just consider it a Christmas present."

"Ah, yes. What a subtle hint. I bet you'd like to see what I have for you."

She feigned surprise, "You mean you bought me something else?"

"Yup. And you can bat those beautiful lashes all you want. You'll have to wait to see what it is."

They sat down and ate scrambled eggs and greasy potatoes. Between bites he kissed her wrists and nibbled her fingers, careful to avoid the one she injured. It was exhilarating, all the attention. He had even offered to do the dishes, but she sent him back to the bedroom with a promise that she would join him soon.

Perhaps she took too long. She entered the bedroom buoyant with excitement as Phillip walked out of her bathroom fully dressed. She inhaled sharply and willed herself to remain calm. Phillip liked her calm. "Are we going out?" she asked.

"Uh, no baby. It's just that. I can't stay."

"What do you mean you can't stay?" she asked, hoping she masked the panic in her voice.

Phillip walked to the closet and pulled out his suitcase. He did not look at her. "I've got to meet Valerie and the kids."

"What do you mean meet Valerie? I thought she was spending Christmas in St. Louis with her parents." She was sure he heard the panic.

"Well she is, but she's coming home today and I promised to be there. You understand, don't you?"

Cara did not answer. Phillip walked over to her. He lifted her chin and kissed her softly on the lips. "Don't you understand?"

She swatted his hand away. "Of course I understand, Phil. It's just I was really looking forward to spending this time with you."

He pulled her close. "I know." He kissed her forehead, turned and picked up his coat from the bed. "I'll get back as soon as I can, but I don't have any business trips scheduled for the next four weeks." He walked past her toward the bedroom door then turned quickly. "Oh, almost forgot your present," he said, holding out a tiny white box with a white satin ribbon.

Cara took it, pulled the ribbon and removed the top to find a delicate gold chain and a pendant in a design she had never seen. She looked up at him, puzzled.

"It's a love knot. The Celtic symbol of eternal love."

"Thank you Phillip. It is beautiful." She walked over and hugged him.

"I'd better go." He kissed her cheek and the hand that held her necklace. "I'll call you." He grabbed his things and left the bedroom. She remained fixed in place listening to her front door open and close, and as she succumbed to her tears she realized that Valerie had won after all. She held up her necklace, her consolation prize, looking at it from different angles. It really was quite beautiful.

The phone rang; she couldn't bear talking to him. She sat on the bed waiting for the message. "Hi Cara. It's Jackson. Merry Christmas. Listen, I know you said you had plans, but I'm having some people over tonight..."

Cara picked up the phone and wiped her face. She clutched the necklace to her chest. "Hi, Jackson," she sighed, "My plans were canceled. I'd love to come over. What time?"



Imp

James Barton

A one act play

Prologue: *Charlie and Tim are college students in the process of renting adjoining rooms connected by a bathroom in an ancient house. The bathroom has a chain flush toilet and a claw footed bath tub. Center stage (CS) is the bath tub facing down stage (DS). Left of the tub is the toilet. There is a vanity sink down stage right (DSR). Up stage left (USL) and up stage right (USR) facing DS are doors leading from their individual rooms. Enter stage right (SR) door, the manager, a "Hag." Behind enter Charlie and Tim.*

Hag: This is the bathroom that joins the rooms and mind you the tub, in it lives an Imp who on occasion will bedevil you. You can tell by the claws that seem to be gripping the floor. Them's Imp claws for sure. *(Tim and Charlie silently laugh and wink at each other behind the Hag's back. She turns on them).* Mind me now t'is not a laughing matter. *(Lights dim).*

(Lights up, Charlie is in the tub. A football jersey is hanging DSR with a pile of football clothes, a helmet on the floor. Charlie looks DS as he soaks in the tub).

Charlie: *(Talking to himself).* A tall iced bourbon would be nice right now! *(Three quick knocks on door SL. Tim enters holding a bottle of bourbon with two tall ice filled glasses).* Are you psychic dude? I never expected an angel of mercy to be my old buddy.

Tim: *(Looking at the bottle then to Charlie).* Hell! I found this on my dresser. I thought you were inviting me to a night out with the team. *(Tim sits on the toilet pouring each a drink).*

Charlie: *(Laughingly).* I have about as much energy left as a beached whale.

Tim: So how went the game?

Charlie: There I was going to pull down this great pass when this cheerleader turns like a running back bends over and presents herself; I never saw the ball and the pass was incomplete. I'm about as popular as dried mud. How did your short story pan out?

Tim: *(Taking a deep draught of his drink, Tim shakes his head in dejection).* The prig turned it down. If I was on the football team I bet he'd a kissed my butt!

Charlie: No thanks, I'm not into that kind of stuff. *(Lights dim).*

(Lights up, Charlie is in the tub. There is banging from Tim's room SL. The voice of the Hag is heard).

Hag: You two are behind in your rent. If that is not bad enough, the noise with late hours coming home is enough for me to move you both out. Do you mind me now? *(Sound of door slamming. A few seconds later there is a knock on door SL as Tim enters).*

Tim: The super nasty Hag is on our back about the rent. You have any money?

Charlie: I couldn't help but hear. I'm broke. I wish my father would send me a few extra bucks.

Tim: I guess I could go to the financial aid office as ask for an advance on my scholarship money. *(Tim exits SL).*

Charlie: *(Speaking into the tub).* Yeah, sure. Come on, dad, I need some extra green.

Tim: *(Returns with a telegram in his hand).* Hey, man, you got a telegram. I didn't know Western Union was still in business. *(He hands the gram to Charlie).*

Charlie: Something bad is about to crash on my head. *(He opens the gram. Reading he sinks his head under the water then pulls himself up by his elbows blowing out water).* My father just sent me five grand!!! He says he ran into a windfall. I love that man! He says he was thinking of me and his first year of college being always broke. Signed, "Enjoy, good buddy." Tim, the rent is paid! Now all I need is a beautiful woman with a joint.

Tim: Cool man, that's really sweet. *(Tim exits SL. There is a sudden lightning flash above USR (for distraction). At that moment appears a beautiful lady, a joint in her hand, a glass of bourbon in the other hand).*

Girl: *(She walks toward Charlie, somewhat spaced out).* You wanted me? I came as quick as I came, I came, as I am, in like I'm here. *(Giggles are heard as the lights dim).*

(Lights up, Tim in tub is, talking to tub water). Professor Prig should be declared insane, flat out crazy; it's the third paper he's turned down. *(He sinks into tub. There's a knock from door SR. Charlie enters).*

Charlie: News is out! That English professor you have just went berserk, like totally out of it. The radio says they're taking him to the loony bin. *(Tim looks DS with a pensive face. Lights dim).*

(Lights up, Charlie is in the tub while Tim is shaving at vanity). Charlie: Man if my father died I'd have more money than God.

Tim: Be careful what you wish for. I'm becoming a little paranoid about that tub and the old Hag's Imp *(Imitating the hag).* A devilish Imp lives in that tub clawing, ready to do evil bidding. *(There's banging coming from Charlie's room. Tim goes to find out what's up. Tim returns with a telegram for Charlie. Charlie opens the gram and reads).*

Charlie: No! *(Pause)* No! My father just died of a stroke!

Tim: *(Backing away from Charlie).* Get out of that tub now!! Don't think or say a word. Get out. Now! The imp in the tub is granting wishes. The Hag told us the Imp was a devilish sort.

Charlie: *(Is now out of the tub with a robe or towel on)*. You really think there is some kind of nut wacko genie in the tub granting wishes? I'll rub it and ask to have my dad back.

Tim: Stop! No! Remember the Monkey's Paw? Don't wish for anything. That tub needs to be out of this house. For heavens sake, Charlie, it's emanating evil by granting wishes.

Charlie: What the hell are you talking about? You get too close to that crazy professor?

Tim: The Hag told me this house was built on a graveyard for derelicts and supposed witches that channel through the tub. An Imp is the devil's trickster child. The tub goes with the building. We need to get that tub out of here, as far away as we can.

Charlie: Damn! You're out of it. This tub probably weighs two hundred pounds.

Tim: So what! All of a sudden you're a weakling? It's our call. Think how many students must have gone balloowy because of it *(pointing at tub)*. That tub's got to go. *(Charlie throws up his hands and exits SR. Lights dim)*.

Scene II

(Charlie and Tim are in a street setting the tub down. Both are obviously exhausted and out of breath).

Charlie: For god's sake what are we doing? We're ten streets over.

Tim: *(Sits on the rim of the tub with his feet inside, looking in to the tub)*. This evil tub must be removed from its sphere of influence.

Charlie: How far do we have to go?

Tim: I don't know. I wish I had a drink. *(Tim looks horrified, his hand held out as if he had a glass in it, having realized he just made a wish. After ten seconds he looks at his hand and breathes a sigh of relief)*. *(Elated)*. The wish didn't come true!

Charlie: I guess we sent the Imp back to the devil.

(Police lights flashing from off stage. Enter police officer). Officer: What in the name-of-heaven are you two up to? I wish you boys would be off home and not be bothering me! *(Another flash of lightning above USR for distraction. Charlie and Tim vanish. The police officer lingers as if enjoying the night sky. Lights dim)*.



William Douglas III. *Untitled*, 2008, Photo/digital. 8"x10".



Dancing for Gnomes

Eva Luton

At the age of four, my parents carted me off to a house that belonged to an elderly woman named Mrs. Caprice. They dropped me off every day while they went to work, leaving me to spend countless hours being gated inside a dimly lit and cricket infested garage, the holding area for me and the rest of the children who stayed there. A yellow rug carpeted the floor of the garage, giving the room the illusion of being furnished. The only entertainment in the space was a television that only showed *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* and a dollhouse, for which there were no inhabitants, only the occasional cricket that would crawl out from under the plastic abode. Cut off from the outside world, I longed for freedom in a world where time stood still.

With her plump figure and her frizzy black hair, Mrs. Caprice could be considered eccentric. Everything she did, she did with her pet parrot on her shoulder that she liked to call "Pretty Bird." It often upset me that Pretty Bird was able to roam about the house as he pleased, chirping in his annoying tones, while I was forced to listen all day to an old man in a red sweater jabber on about sharing.

Sometime in the late afternoon, judging by the moving light cast in by a high up window, Mrs. Caprice would open the gate that was the barrier between the prison in which I was held captive and the free world. One at a time, she escorted each child to his or her "nap room." My room was located at the end of a dark corridor on the second floor of the house. Overpowered by sunlight let in by a large sliding door that led out to a rusty balcony, it was impossible to even think about sleeping in the library where I was stationed during nap time. In the middle of the room, a black leather recliner sat dormant, basking in a sun beam that seemed to center only on it. An oak desk took up the majority of the space in the room. Piles of papers cascaded over the sides of the structure, resembling an avalanche. The only thing visible through the window was a train track and a golden field.

Since the room was secluded from the rest of the house, I felt secure enough to act like I was asleep until Mrs. Caprice left, then get up and walk around the room. Each of the four walls was lined with cedar bookcases, housing hundreds of volumes of law books. Though all of the space seemed to be filled with some form of literature, a small area on the top shelf housed

some strange beings. Five figurines, all gardening gnomes, made their home in that nook. With their earth green coats and their pointed red hats, the little gnomes were a welcoming touch to an otherwise bland room. I thought of the gnomes as my friends during nap time. With nothing else to do but to wait for the train to pass (a sign that nap time was nearly over), I whittled away the hours by clearing a space on the floor and spinning in circles, pretending to be a fairy princess. I also sang nonsensical tunes of nature and love. Though the shadows of the room took some time to pass, I would entertain myself, and the gnomes, for hours on end. The library was my sanctuary from the bitter life of the garage.

One humid and overcast afternoon, Mrs. Caprice asked us if she could have a volunteer to help her bake homemade chocolate chip cookies. Elated, I immediately seized the chance to leave the sweltering dungeon and refresh myself in the air conditioning for an hour or two. She handed me an oversized cooking apron, and we were off. We followed the standard cookie making procedure: made the dough, added the chips, rolled them into tiny spears (occasionally sneaking pieces of raw dough), and placed them on the baking sheet. After placing the lumpy cookies into the oven, Mrs. Caprice told me to go freshen up, as I had flour lightly coated on my arms and face. As I left the kitchen, a warm feeling swelled up inside of me, and for the first time in this penitentiary, I felt like somebody cared about me. Giddy with loving emotion, this felt like the perfect day at my babysitter's house.

Flour free and happy, I returned to the kitchen to see if there was any extra cookie dough lying around. Mrs. Caprice's absence was apparent, as it would have been hard to miss her in such a cramped space. A faint but varying ringing noise emitted from the next room over.

Mrs. Caprice called out, "Stay in the kitchen and watch the cookies dear. When they get brown, call me...I'm watching TV."

The task was simple enough. I plopped myself down on the floor in front of the range and gazed blankly into the black screen that insulated the contents of the oven. After about two minutes, my attention began to wander. I didn't want to sit here and watch the cookies; I wanted to watch TV with Mrs. Caprice. To ease the pain of having to sit there, I sprawled my body across the floor and stared at the outdated pattern on the ceiling. I lay in a silent boredom for several moments when out of nowhere, a crackling laughter pierced through the air. I jerked in an awkward motion and bolted upright, looking over my shoulder as if confirming that the noise came from the next room. Motionless, but nevertheless curious, I waited for the screeching laughter to pass through again. And it did. Nobody laughed quite like Mrs. Caprice.

I stood up and ventured to the doorway to see what was so amusing. That ringing sound began to turn into an audible voice on the television, a singing voice. Intrigued, I popped my head through the entryway just as Mrs. Caprice doubled up with a mixture of snorting and giggles.

What I witnessed next was terrifying.

Time seemed to stop as I froze with terror at the sight. My eyes widened and my jaw dropped. On the screen in front of me, a child, oblivious to the camera filming her, was spinning around in dizzying circles, screeching with joy for her freedom and privacy. I watched as I, the girl on the television, discarded all traces of dignity as she spun around and around, dancing for the gnomes. I felt like a two-ton weight had been dropped on me; the world was falling in around me. The one place that I could feel safe had been tainted.

My eyes as large as Bambi's, turned to Mrs. Caprice, who still was still cracking up, and I asked, "Why?"

"Sweetheart, I have cameras in all of the kid's rooms. I have to see what's going on during nap time. If not, I wouldn't be keeping a very good eye on you, now would I?"

You sick woman. The only place in that house that I could ever feel like I was happy had always been in that room, singing and dancing in front of the little gnomes. I felt alone.

The next day at nap time, I reluctantly dragged my feet to the library. Throwing myself into that leather recliner, I pretended to fall asleep. I now knew the feeling of being watched. I made up my mind; I wasn't going to leave that recliner until nap time was over. The train passed by and I knew that I would never dance for the gnomes again.



A Path Forgotten

Sartaj Bains

The path home is simple as this day
Cars are queued at the light
Anxious to hastily arrive nowhere
Another faceless passes by
Traversing the reflection of a gibbous bridge
Water snakes through its throat
Its dismissed existence justified
The footway past the center followed defiantly
Here the world contradicts aptly
A sycamore wallows in the breeze
Dancing with its shadow where a hill apexes
Emanating prime necessities for untamed thoughts
Owed by muses when exhausted
The moon trying to kill the sun
Standing under an orange sky
Close by resides a familiar place
Want of a new start begins choking the heart
Too suddenly this path consummates
Where sugar-coated welcomes await
Pillows sluggish in conforming to a dream
Dissolution awaits a record
Of this simple day



A Pretty Girl Made Me Blush

Nate Boudreau

"Are you twelve years old," says Jim, his cigarette hanging limply from his lower lip, a quarter full Miller Lite idling in his hand.

"No way, dude, all I said was 'A pretty girl made me blush yesterday and since then I've had this aura, a feeling, whimsical.'"

Sean throws back the last finger of his double Jack on the rocks, stares down the length of the bar to catch the eye of the overly-endowed but extremely flighty bartender while the closing lyrics of "Thunder Road" wane on the jukebox.

"Another double Jack on the rocks and, Jim..."

"Yeah."

"And a Miller Lite."

Jim stubs out his cigarette, fishes a new one from the pack nestled in his cargo pocket. "So whimsical?" he asks, while lighting his fourteenth cigarette of the night.

"Uh huh," answers Sean.

The drinks appear before them, cash changes hands, the change finding its way into the tip jar.

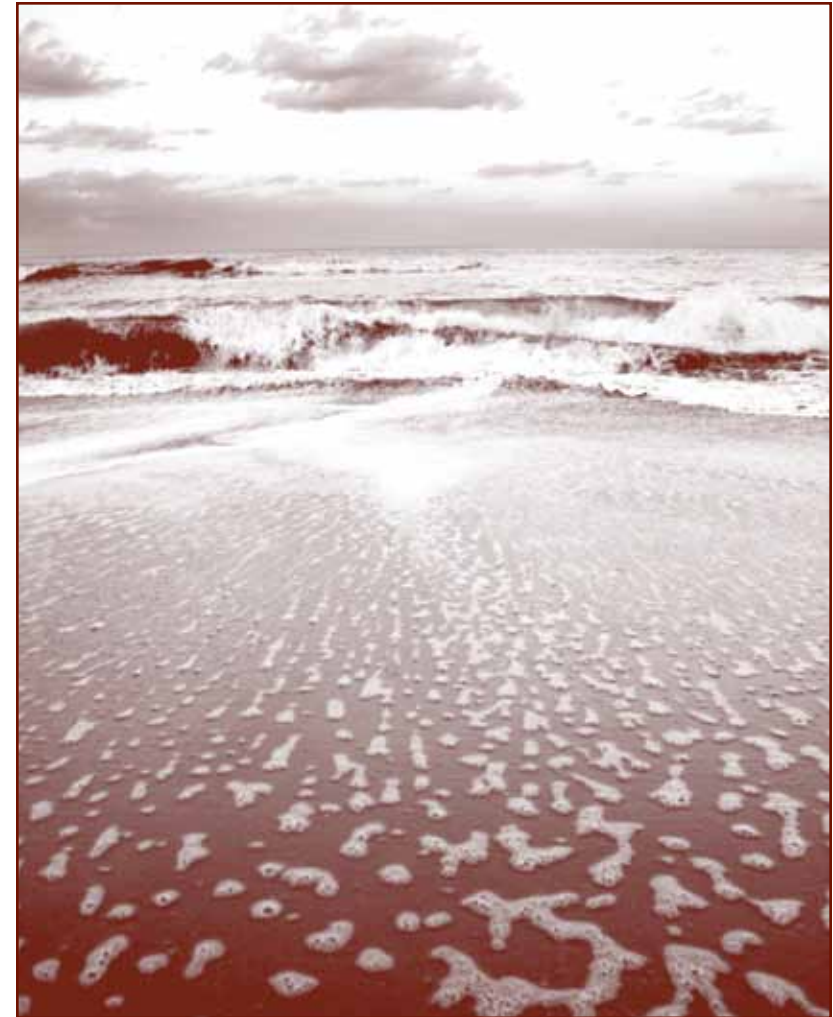
"Thunder Road" fades into the crazy finger picking opening riff of "Crazy on You".

"Ok, listen to this," begins Sean, "so you know that crazy revenge thing I'm writing?"

"Your epic tale of revenge fueled with a high octane mix of bullets, balls, and broads."

"That's the one, anyways, I have this notion, well more of a, ok."

"It's got this dame, a real classic double crossing femme fatale. Low cut dresses, deep throaty sultry bedroom voice, every vice in the book and not a conscience to boot. Pure sex. I want to do this whole classic bluesy night club thing to introduce her. Soft blue light, smoke oozing in the air, and a burning hot white spotlight illuminating this dame; she's on stage, her dress clingy in all the right places, glistening in sweet sweat leaning on a piano. She starts into this number, and originally I thought it would



William Douglas III. *Untitled*, 2008, Photo/digital. 8"x10".

be like “Goodnight Moon”, but yesterday I’m in my car rocking out to some Journey and BAM, this, (he points in the air as if the music was visible) comes off my iPod. Wait for it, Ba bah da da da da – daaa, Ba Bah da da da da – daaa, Ba Bah da da da da – daaa, da da da da da – daaa, da da da da da – daaaaa. I love that fuckin riff, except I want to do it slow, like real real slow, hip grinding, gyrating, pulsingly slow. The whole number is her seducing everyone. She’s makin’ constant eye contact, her sultry bedroom voice purrs. She’s fucking every guy in the joint with her voice.”

Jim half listening, leans over the bar, “Can I get some change?”

The bartender points across the bar to pool tables mouthing the words, ‘change machine.’ Jim nods, taps Sean on the shoulder, “Pool?”

Sean shrugs back, following Jim to the tables.

“Ok, so this girl makes you blush and so what do you do?”

“I’ll get some change.”

Sean lets the change machine convert his worn dollar bills into quarters. He places three on the table, drops three in the slot, ramming them in. The balls spill out, clunking as Heart is replaced by Boston’s “Something About You.” Jim inspects the sorry lot of cues that inhabit every dive bar he’s ever been to, picking out the least crappy one he can find. Sean racks ‘em, changes places with Jim only to find the same disappointment in the selection of cues.

“So?” Asks Jim, again.

“Ok, so this is what happened. I’m talking about something, don’t remember what, and I mention the fact that I don’t have quite the same physique that I had in my younger days, and she says something. I don’t really know what she says, it’s something nice, needless say; and then she goes on to repeat it and I start blushing.”

Jim breaks, “Ok, and you did?”

Sean lines up behind the cue ball, driving it hard with back spin into the four ball far corner pocket, the cue ball slams into the four ball and stops, rolling back a fraction of an inch. The four ball drops into the pocket.

“I’m solids,” announces Sean. “Ok, so then she says to me, ‘You’re blushing’ and I’m laughing and obviously blushing and I say ‘Yeah I am,’ or something equally as lame.”

Sean drives the cue ball into the six, scratching as the cue follows the six into the corner pocket. Boston fades into Bad Company’s eponymous “Bad Company”.

“You could’ve done far worse for yourself.”

“I suppose, but that’s not really the point I was trying to make.”

Jim lines up his first shot, lightly striking the cue ball. Rolling softly, edging the three which drops into the side pocket. “I’m getting divorced.”

“Wait, what the fuck over. Really?”

“Yeah, I thought we’d been doing better, but this time I think it’s really over.”

“Shit.”

“Remember Eric?”

“Yeah, New Year’s. Kind of a douche bag?”

“That’s the guy. I found some emails he sent her when he was deployed; he talked about things he wanted to do to her. You know, sexually.”

“That fuck!”

The cue ball ricochets off the side railing into the five. “So she’s looking for a new place.”

Sean clinks the ice in his empty glass. “I’ll get this round,” says Jim.

Jim takes the empty glass and bottle with him over to the bar. Sean’s watch reads 12:30, and he’s amazed at the lack of people. Jim stands in front of Sean, holding two drinks, amazed when Sean’s head snaps back from staring off into the cold bleakness of space. Sean gestures to the table ready for his next ass kicking

Bad Company’s “Bad Company” fades out. The opening riff from the Red Hot Chili Pepper’s, “Snow (Hey Oh)” follows.

Jim hands Sean another double. He examines the table to select his next shot.

“So this song reminds me of this dream I never had,” Jim looks up from the table, but says nothing. “So it starts with me in this gray place, like I’m in the clouds or something and I don’t really know if I’m ascending to Heaven or falling into Hell. Then this starts to play and Alec Baldwin starts narrating my life. All around me on these clouds are images from my life. They’re rotating around me and Alec is not only doing the play by play, he’s also providing color commentary. But that’s not worst of it; I’m floating in purgatory with Alec fuckin Baldwin narrating my life. My life is boring. I drift off to sleep. That’s where I wake up, if it was really a dream.”

Jim drops the one, seven, and nine. “You say a lot of weird things; that may have been the weirdest.”

“So what about the house?”

“She keeps her equity. I mean we...we’re trying to do this without a lawyer. Divide everything up fairly, then get the lawyer to finalize it. We don’t hate each other, I just think she, ahhh. She wants someone to be a stay at home dad and I really don’t want to do that, ever. I might want kids someday, maybe, but I don’t want to be a homemaker.”

“I don’t know, you might look pretty sexy in an apron. She could come home from a hard days flyin, then slap you around for not having dinner

on the table. You lock yourself in the bathroom, cryin, the kids are screaming and fighting, picture of complete domestic bliss. I don't know what your problem is."

"I like my motorcycle too much."

Jim lines up and drains the eight ball, Sean replaces the quarters on the table, drops three into the slot releasing the balls.

"I hate breaking."

"So you gonna see this girl again?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"And what?"

Sean awkwardly thrusts the cue stick into the cue ball, propelling it weakly for the break. "I hate fuckin breaking. I haven't got it down yet."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I don't think I'm gonna do anything. I don't think that's there is anything to do, and I'm mostly pretty sure she has a boyfriend."

Jim wastes a shot breaking up the clutter of balls on the table. "From what you've told me, that hasn't stopped you before."

"It didn't, but it never ends well."

"How was the middle?"

"I'm too old for that. Am I too old for that?"

"I don't think so; I don't think anyone ever gets to old for that."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I'm going to Daytona for Bike Week."

Sean surveys the table, rocking his head in time with the Stones' "Can't You Here Me Knocking." He lines up the one ball in the far corner. The eight, nine, and two block his path. He grins, his half mouth Han Solo wannabe grin, jumps the cue ball which lands with a smack and rolls into the one, sinking it. The cue ball sits on the edge of the corner pocket.

"Did you fuckin see that?"

"What, I got more change."

"I get one shot like that a decade and now I have no witnesses. No one will ever believe I made a shot like that because you had to get change at that exact moment. I think God has it out for me."

"You might be right on that account. Did you at least get one in?"

"Honestly, you think I'd be this excited about a shot that I missed."

"Well you are strange. You've been known to ramble on about Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots."

"That's because if some scientist ever built giant-sized Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots, and their programming went bad, they'd take over the world. I don't want to live in a world ruled by giant Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots. Do you?"

"Of course not, but somehow I think you have a better chance with this girl than we do of giant Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots taking over the world."

Sean scratches, trying to go two railings on the nine ball. The Stones are replaced by Free's, "All Right Now." Sean looks around, not many left. He knocks down the double, snatches Jim's. Sports Center pulses rapidly on the television behind the bar. He doesn't give it a second glance, pitchers and catchers report next week. He repeats the cycle with the bartender. A pretty girl had made him blush.



William Douglas III. *Untitled*, 2008, Photo/digital. 8"x10".



The Piece of Rope

Bryan Mark Christian

No customers for a while. The old man behind the counter sighed with boredom. The store was freshly cleaned and pampered but there was nobody to enjoy it. "Damn 7-Eleven," he muttered bitterly. It was true. Ever since the chain opened a new location, sales at Johnson's Food Stop plummeted to a new low. The man angrily bit his lip as he stared at the brightly lit store across the street with its brightly lit sign to go with the brightly lit fake smiles of the clerks who stole his profits. He knew they were fake because as soon as the fools walked out the door, the smiles turned into sneers and he could only imagine what they would laugh and gossip about in their band of thieves. He thought of how it was before the grand opening across the street. Plenty of customers came in every day and brought their families and friends. He knew all the regulars by name, and they would talk to him like he was a bartender and spill all their problems over the counter. He would gather all of his wisdom to help them. He liked to be old fashioned that way. He thought that it was a shame that nobody can feel like they can open up to anybody nowadays. He hated most modern stuff. His cash register was the same one that he used twenty years ago when he first opened the store. The only thing he had in there that came close to something that was halfway modern was a black and white television that stayed close with him behind the counter. He always watched the news and nothing else. Right now, however, the news wasn't going to come on for another fifteen minutes so he just sat there and glared at the traitors across the street.

There was a shelf on the adjacent wall close to the counter that held four gold trophies lined in a neat little row. Each one had a little cowboy riding a horse on top and a gold plaque on the front that told people that they were first place prizes from the state rodeo and the year. The years were 1966, 1967, 1968, and 1969. They were from when he was a champion back in the day. He was the best at lassoing steers to the delight of young and old alike and, as a finale, he would rear back on his horse and raise his hat in the air like the cowboys in those old westerns. When he won first place, he would throw his lasso to some lucky child in the crowd. How they loved that.

For a few minutes, he was in a trance, daydreaming about the days of his youth. The problems from across the street were temporarily forgotten. It was then that the door bell chimed and his mind snapped out of his nostalgic trip to the past. He turned his attention to the entrance, delighted to finally have a customer. A man walked in. He looked like someone who would have his family following close behind with the wife tugging the crying kids along and telling the man that he needs to take them while she grabs what they need. But the man was alone. Looking at him, the old man realized that he had seen him before somewhere though he could not place it at the moment. It was definitely recent. He watched and wondered as the man casually strolled throughout the aisles for a couple minutes before grabbing what he wanted and taking the items to the counter. The old man smiled and started to ring up the order.

"How's your night going?"

"Fine."

The old man stared at his face for another second.

"Excuse me for asking, but do I know you from someplace?"

"No. I don't see how you would."

"You sure? I swear that I have met you before..."

"No, old man, I can guarantee that you do not know me, or have seen me, or met me, or anything."

"Oh..." He did not want to piss off what might very well be his only customer of the day.

"Well, I apologize then...just thought your face was familiar."

The man was quite obviously annoyed and stayed that way until he noticed the trophies on the adjacent wall. He eyes squinted and he seemed to be reading the plaques on the front of them. His face lit up when he got to the 1969 championship trophy, the old man's last win, and he asked him if they were his. He replied that they were indeed and at that point the man rushed out the door, announcing to the old man that he would be right back. He stood there, dumbfounded, until, sure enough, the man came back holding a piece of rope.

"You recognize this?" the man asked him. The old man looked at it for a second and then realized that it looked like it could be part of an old lasso. He gasped silently.

"Is that...?"

"You better believe it. You see, back in that 1969 championship, I was in attendance. Other kids were into football, baseball, soccer, or what have you, but I loved the rodeo. Anyway, you threw this into my direction after they announced that you won. I tried to reach for it but some man grabbed it just out of my reach and I was about ready to burst into tears. Fortunately,

he took pity and gave it to me. I always was grateful for that as it was one of the very few happy times from my childhood. So, anyway, as a way of saying sorry for my annoyance, I want to give this back to you. I also apologize that only half of it is left, but my step dad had cut it to use for some project that he was doing a few weeks after I brought it home."

"So here." He handed him the rope. The old man was touched and surprised, and he could only take it and utter the most feeble "Thank you." The man smiled, paid for his items, grabbed his bags, bid him goodnight, and walked out the door with a chime. After he left, the old man walked over to his trophies with a contented smile on his face and hung the rope over them so that each end of it draped down evenly on both sides of the shelf.

The news was now just coming on as the old man flipped on the set and sat down to watch. He was drinking a cup of coffee a little while later when they started reviewing a segment that was a few days old. The cup started to shake violently in his hand when he saw a photo pop up of the man with the rope. The newswoman told the story... "Police are still searching for this man suspected of strangling his wife last week at their upscale home on Turner Street. It is now believed that the murder weapon used was some kind of rope, but none has been found at the home. Anyone with information is asked to please call the number on the screen."



William Douglas III. *Untitled*, 2008, Photo/digital. 8"x10".



Big Daddy, Daddy, Daddy

Nigel Dishman

I've chewed on this fat for months--fiddling the great debate between My
fingers like an assassin's coin.
I entertain he who could build mountains of his own portrait.
Heavy with children, this hill crumbles beneath him-- squirming, white
Militia men that make him strong.



And my body could not follow . . .

Brooke Friestad

I rode the thunder bolt,
And my body could not follow.
I rode the light wave,
And my body could not follow.
I came to the abyss,
And my body could not follow.
There I tasted star dust,
Watched the birth of a nebula,
And heard the voice of a dying star,
And still my body could not follow.
In the shoals of stars,
In the tails of comets,
In the solar winds I came back.
Back from the star strewn abyss,
Back from the remnants of a dying star,
Back to my body.
Back to this world of solids.
In hope that my body
May be able to follow me.
Some day.
And to know this, is the truest form of being.



Roses & Stone

Alyssa Hollingsworth

In a garden of color
Like a Monet masterpiece
I held your shaking hand
As I would hold a rose

One by one
Your petals have fallen
Like a flower-girl
Scattering beauty

You are a pressed flower
Wedged between my favorite passages
And I long to feel you
Only once more

It would be an honor
To grasp your gentle hands
Wrinkled and soft
Like the petals of an old rose

A fading bloom
More precious as it goes
I wish that I could save you
Evergreen in a crystal vase

But I have seen the color
Slowly grow pale
A rose cannot stay long
Like you, it becomes fragile

I dread the day
When my pink rose
Will lie beside the stone
That marks my metaphor



Holy Flying Snarfballs

Jana Cross

"You want me to do what?"

"Bathtub," Diego said. He looked at me and smiled. He was practically dripping in mischief. Oh boy.

"A bathtub." Diego really wasn't joking. He wanted to steal Falcon's bathtub. I could feel the eye twitch coming. He gave me wink as we pulled up at the stoplight.

"Okay, I'll bite. Why?" His truck bobbed along the road and I thanked God for seat belts. How he remained perfectly still in his bouncy truck was beyond me.

"Because it's my bathtub, Jack!" He pouted. Diego gripped the steering wheel tighter and continued, "Falcon saw me eyeing that tub."

"Can't you just buy another tub, Hun?" I suppressed a giggle, picked at the hem of my skirt, and tried my damndest not to laugh.

"Because now he has it!" Diego slapped the wheel and I jumped. I bit my lip but felt the laugh coming up. I stopped breathing for a second and choked on my chuckles. Diego glared at me and I cracked. "It's not funny."

"Right. 'Course not." I crossed my legs and the skirt slid up. This skirt was my favorite, mid-thigh length, black, silky, and had a mind of its own. My hair wasn't cooperating though; Diego's truck and the wind pulled it out of the bun that was perfect. A little hay here and there, and I'd look like I came from the barnyard. I almost had the snickers under control. At the next stoplight he put his hand on my knee and noticed its nakedness. His hand rested there a minute; here comes the lecture.

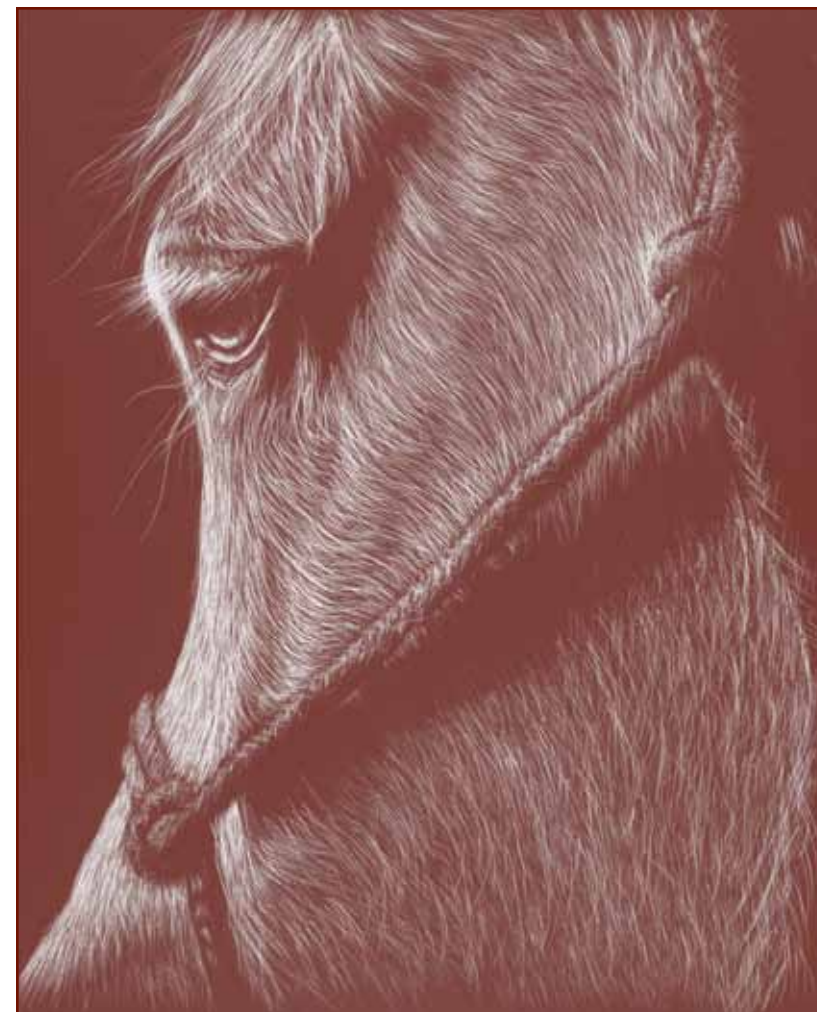
"Where were you going dressed like that?" He tugged the skirt down but it slid back up anyway. I swatted his hand off me and straightened it as best I could before the truck started moving again.

"I was going to meet with the gallery director. He wants to buy a painting. But I came running because you said it was an emergency."

"This is an emergency, Babe. I know he's not gonna be home until late tonight."

"Why didn't you call your goonies?"

"They laughed at me." Diego refocused on the road. Of course he pulls out the guilt. He looked back at me with his big puppy eyes and I melted. How could I say no? I mean, it would be kind of fun to steal a bathtub. Why not?



Emily Grissom. *The Dreamer*, Scratch Board, 8"x10".

Seriously, how many people can honestly say they've stolen a bathtub?

"Okay."

"And he should know better and--what? You said yes?"

"I said yes." His whole face lit up like a five-year-old with a cookie.

And he was just as cute, too. I rolled my eyes.

As we pulled up to Falcon's house, Diego backed his truck up the driveway. I was sliding down on the seat; Falcon's driveway was practically at a ninety degree angle and the seat belt could only do so much. I pressed my feet to the floorboard to keep myself up. He was right; Falcon wasn't home and all the lights were out. I stepped out of the truck and we walked up to the front door.

"You're wearing heels."

"Very good, Diego. Can you tell me what color they are too?" He smiled and slung an arm around my waist. The added weight made walking difficult. I shifted until he loosened his grip, mouthing a "Sorry, Babe." After digging through the thousands of keys on his key ring, he found Falcon's house key. The door creaked. It gave me the chills. I bet the neighborhood could hear that door. From what I could see, it reminded me of Diego's apartment. Similar furniture, similar colors, similar men. And both were a pain in my ass.

"Babe, the tub is gonna be heavy." I stopped in front of Falcon's couch and faced Diego. He stood in the entryway, closing the door behind him. I played with the fabric of the couch while Diego closed the space between us. Oh boy, here it comes.

"So?"

"So, how are you going to lift it in heels?"

"Me? You never said I was doing any lifting."

"Babe, I can't carry a three hundred pound tub down the stairs by myself." He folded his arms over his chest and spoke to me very slowly.

"Diego, what makes you think I'll be any help? I'm just the lookout on your crazy ass missions. Or the bait. Or the distraction. Or something else that usually gets me shot at, but I never do the grunt work. What happened to 'You-can't-carry-that-Jack-because-you're-just-a-woman?' Huh?" The mischief drippy smile came back. He walked over to me and ran his hands through my hair. He always makes my heart race, and I cuddled into his hands. I bit the inside of my cheek, and he ran his fingers down my neck and tilted my face up. I opened my eyes, not even realizing they were closed, and saw his face. His smile was so...fake. He's just trying to shut me up. Not gonna work this time, bucko.

"Diego..." I whispered and nuzzled his face. Two can play this game.

"Hmm?" He nuzzled back.

"Try again." I grabbed his chin and squeezed. His cheeks were smushed together and he looked like a fish. "Sweet talk and smooches aren't gonna cut it this time. Why didn't you call one of your goonies?"

"Because I'm stealing a bathtub." I released his face and started climbing the stairs. Diego followed suit and grabbed my hand for a little squeeze. Jerk. I smiled despite myself and let him lead us to the throne room.

When he turned on the lights, I saw the tub in all its tub-like glory. My breath caught. It was stunning. The feet were a soft golden color and the inside a creamy ivory. The sides had been painted a soft blue and green, with a marble look. Diego pulled out his tool kit and started working to ready the tub for liberation.

"Wow." I ran my fingers over the side and it felt silky. This was the wonder tub. Diego loosened the screws on the feet and started working on disconnecting the pipes. I sat on the throne and watched. "So, when are you going to tell me why you really want this tub?" Diego turned, frowned, and started working on the pipes again. He's moodier than me, I swear.

"Okay, we can move it now. Come on Babe."

"You're going backwards." I got on the opposite side of the tub and tried to get a grip. Diego lifted it a good two feet off the ground, while I managed about three inches. My toes were killing me. Peep-toe pumps aren't the best shoes for heavy lifting. The bathroom wasn't too far from the stairs, thankfully. Diego took full steps backwards while I waddled, trying to keep up in my heels.

"Holy flying snarfballs man, this damn tub weights a ton. I've got to take my shoes off." Diego stood on the top step and slowly put the tub down. I rested my hand on the side of the tub and pulled a foot up to remove the shoe when I heard the front door open. Falcon's home. Oh. Crap.

"Hurry up, Babe!" he whisper-screamed at me.

"I think the jig is up, Diego." I was still trying to pull my shoe off when my ankle buckled. I stumbled into the tub, and fell. The tub started moving, and Diego couldn't steady it. I pulled myself up a little and accidentally set the tub in motion.

"What the hell are you guys doing with my tub?" Falcon shouted. The tub was going now. Diego held onto it for all he was worth, but it was no use; the tub ran into him, causing him to fall in and continued down the stairs with us both in it. I heard a crack and the tub lost a couple feet. I think I heard Diego scream, but that could have of me. Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud. I felt like I was up front on a roller coaster. That tub must have been going at the speed of light. It zoomed down the stairs, bouncing even more than Diego's damn truck, and Falcon dove out of the way. Crack. There went the other two feet and it still kept going. My face planted itself into

the side with my feet up the air, one shoe on and the other hanging around my ankle. Slam! The tub stopped, but not before it took out Falcon's glass coffee table and ran into the couch.

My head spun. I felt a pair of hands under my arms, lifting me out of the tub. Falcon. He looked me over, making sure I was still alive and probably deciding the best way to kill me, then plopped me on the couch. He left Diego for dead, though.

"D! What the hell were you thinking?" he asked. Falcon's house was a war zone. The stairs were massacred. They were chipped and broken, with tub parts and holes all over them. His perfect hardwood floors looked like they had been sanded. The couch sat at an odd angle, t-boning the arm chair. The table shattered. No survivors there. Diego stood leaning against the wall, steadying himself and holding his head. That's gonna be a shiner.

"I wanted my tub back!"

"Your tub?"

"You knew I wanted it!"

"You've got to be kidding. Jack could have been hurt, D. What were you thinking, dude? Look at her!" Falcon pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. I sat up and felt a wave of dizziness coming. I do not recommend tub surfing. I looked up at them screaming at each other and laid back down. They're beyond help. I waited for the shots to start firing. It's only a matter of time before they kill each other.

I sighed, "Here we go again."



John Roberts. *Peek-a-boo*, Photo/digital, 2008, 8"x 10".



Samson

Kristen Dozier

Walking up to the bus stop, my feet plod along heavily behind my cart as I sludge through the rising puddles. I eye the tough, world weary youth slouching against the plastic see-through wall. *I'm sure he's safe; he looks too much like my Samson to be a bad boy.* I decide to surprise him.

I see his eyes darting to and fro in the tiny space. I know he's wracking his brain trying to figure out why this old woman chose him to sit beside.

I take a good long look at him through the corner of my eyes.

Pointing to his left arm, cradled securely in the hospital issued sling, "I think you need this more than me." I wave the concealed booze towards him. He stares at me, glancing between my outstretched hand and my weathered face. He slowly grasps the proffered beverage – keeping me within his sight to the very last second. He takes a swig, then wipes his mouth with the cuff of his leather jacket. He hands it back.

"Thanks, Lady."

I smile; it's been a long time since anyone's called me that.

"You're welcome."

A small group of boys calls out to my new friend. He shifts, glancing unhappily at the downpour. He hunches his back and rounds his shoulders forward before braving the cruel weather. *I can't let him leave like that!* I rummage frantically through my cart, pushing things out of my way, searching...*ah ha, there it is!*

"Here," I call out over the roar of the rain, "take it. You'll get sick without it."

He stares at my gift, noticing how it was once bright red and now faded to a rusty yellow. The seam has split, and there is now a large hole on the side. He smiles, just a little turning of his lips, a softening to his beaten face. My young friend gently takes it from my warm hand and places it upon his brow. I almost weep at the sight before me:

My dear son is reborn before my eyes.

"Don't stay out all night, Sammie. Your father and I worry when you don't come home."

Before the rain completely soaks my borrowed clothes, I wrap my bony arms 'round my boy and place a loving kiss upon his cheek. I hobble swiftly

back to the safety of the covered booth and watch as my friend slowly turns and hurries towards his friends.

"What's with the hat?" one asks.

"Is she your new girlfriend, Lee?" another jokes.

The offender staggers from the blow.

"The name's Samson." He steps ahead of the pack.



Resignation

Cory Bland

My choice is justified. The dissolution of my joy
more important than grand corporate schemes.
I exhaust myself. For what? For whom?
Sugar-coated doctrines and prime objectives.
A snake slowly choking me.
My throat crushed. My actions sluggish.
Rooted in place like a sycamore for fear of a tarnished resume.
I want to hide in my pillows. My uncertainty consumes.
The answer calls to me from the center of my being.
A jolt passes through me. I owe no one but I myself.
In conclusion,

I quit



Captain's Paradise

Sharon Mazhari

I remember visiting Captain's home in Treasure Island, a small neighborhood located in Slidell, Louisiana, only a few times when I was a little girl. My grandmother took care of this gentle and kind man, whom I only knew as Captain. His nickname derived from the captivating and illustrated stories, which he looked forward to sharing, of his times at sea when he was in the Navy. The anxious and excited feeling I would get just before arriving at Captain's home made me roll down the window of my parents' car, as if to bring myself closer sooner. I can still remember the teasing smell of the tide that would get stronger the closer we got to the humble white ranch style home that reminded me of a paradise getaway.

Along with Captain's quaint home, stood a rickety boathouse located across the street where the Saltwater Bayou Canal marks the way for fishing boats to come in and out of Lake Pontchartrain. The boathouse was home to an owl that we decided to name Earl, and the smell of gasoline that came from the boat resting on the murky, muddy water. I remember catching my first catfish off the deck by the boathouse. My brother had to help me reel in the three-foot stubborn fish, after he had just wrestled with a gar, which would eventually be everyone's dinner that night. I even had a battle wound to prove the fight occurred and remember being so proud of myself for not giving up and becoming the champion of the war between fish and man.

Captain's back yard faced Lake Pontchartrain, which gave us the perfect place to fish, have mouthwatering barbeques and truly relax with the view of precious sunsets across the breathtaking, clear water of Lake Pontchartrain. Just beyond Captain's backyard was the longest pier I had ever seen, with several crab cages attached. Its wooden planks held more memories than I have of Captain's home and, unfortunately, those memories are all I have now.

Hurricane Katrina destroyed Captain's cherished paradise with no hope for repair. No one is allowed to build again in the neighborhood of Treasure Island because of the danger and risk of reoccurring floods.

Homes and lives were changed forever due to the tragic and heart-wrenching wreckage left by the evil hurricane. The decayed, moldy, and splintered boards, which were once a part of the antique, southern-style homes, now lay abandoned in the once flooded and bacteria filled streets.

The people, whose lives were entwined in Treasure Island, have been abandoned as well. Their hope, their faith, and their ability to trust in their own safety have been washed away. Many lost loved ones, some lost their lives, and the few who survived the hurricane that made history—have only their memories to hold on to.



A Stew

James Barton

A farce in one act

Scene: A kitchen in Ireland. John is sitting at the table SC. Ellen is at the stove USR.

John. I'll have my stew now.

Ellen. It's too hot now.

John. Well cool it down a bit.

Ellen. And how do you suppose I do that, may I ask?

John. Put it on the window sill.

Ellen. Are you daft? It's mid summer and hot as the devil being at the door.

John. Well then I'll be off to the pub for my stew and a pint.

Ellen. You'll be leaving me to stew with a furor.

John. Stew as you may wife, I'll have my stew now or as soon as I can.

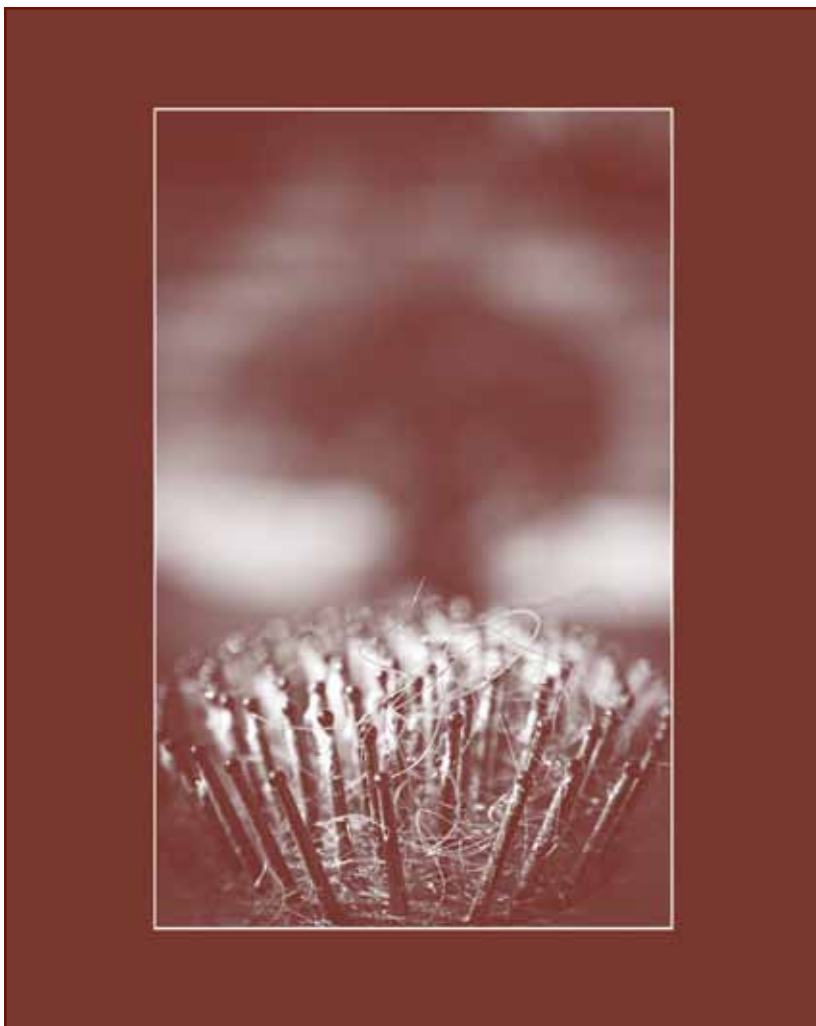
Ellen. And if'n you come home stewed in your pints I'll unleash my furor upon you.

(John starts for the door tensely as Ellen stirs the pot)

Ellen. The stew has cooled now. Sit yourself down.

John. (Relaxing) I've cooled myself a might.

Ellen. A cool stout for us both will bring the day right and let the stew stew on its own.



Joshua Fitzwater. "Informal scape", Photo/digital, 2008, 8"x10".



Rose Rocks

Nathan Moore

There's a place
Where even the rocks
Resemble Roses
Forged in the Dust Bowl
Planted
in the Garden
Pale skies above
Red dirt below
Endless Horizon
Coyotes
In the backyard
Tarantulas
crossing the road
Tornadoes
Blow through
Carrying
Rose rocks
Throwing them
past the state line
Raining
Earth Art
Reminding us
what can come
from only rock
and dirt
Just twisted Earth
twisted meanings

So we can find Hope
In Design

Make them appealing
to our eyes

If we can turn
Rocks into flowers

That bloom

Can we also cure man?

The Earth too?



Perfect Night

Samantha Bartz

Crimson lips kiss the emptiness
Leaves an autumn tint of gold in the darkness
that slowly fades to midnight

The moon scared away
Dragonflies glide about in shadows
Unnoticed
Silver clouds float around

shattering shimmering stars

Rain falls in sheets

existence only made real by sound

Rest in darkness

Only matched by the cold



Sunday Visit With Momma

Beverly Marie White

I drive down the shady, bumpy road leading to Momma's house. I pull into the gravel driveway, and stop for a moment, collecting my thoughts and gathering my courage. I step out of my car and stand there on the cracked sidewalk where I used to ride my bike and play hopscotch. I gaze up at the trees, which seemed so much larger when I was a child. I press on, and approach the door.

I had not called in advance to let Paula, my youngest sister, know that I was coming. But I knew she would be there. She is *always* there, strong and committed like a fierce warrior guarding a prized possession. A single mom of two teenagers, Paula is tough, vigilant, and undeterred. All of the things I wish I could be. She faces a monumental task, and I consider for a split second the amount of strength necessary for her constant, unwavering perseverance.

My very patient, but very tired sister, answers the door with a smile. "Come on in, Honey. She's awake," she says. I think to myself how difficult it must be, to live there in our childhood home every day. I cannot bear the thought of witnessing the gradual, but imminent decline.

Then, very slowly, my elderly but still beautiful mother comes into the room. She is clutching her aged and blind poodle, whom she lovingly calls Baby. He is always in her arms, a sense of security to cling to.

Thoughts are racing through my mind, quickly flashing, like a strobe light. Will she remember me today? Will she cry about losing Daddy again today? Will she remember my children's names today? Will she become angry about something that is stuck heavy in her mind, like an anchor that she cannot release? Will she be happy and cheerful, singing a haunting melody from her childhood that I have never heard?

Probably, all will occur during my short visit. Mom has Alzheimer's, the disease that slowly robs her of her entire being. It has taken everything, her sense of self, her dignity, her very soul. In her moments of clarity, while in the moderate stage of illness, she knew that she had it. She knew that she had just repeated a question or statement because of a vague sense of *déjà vu*. She knew because of the way people looked at her.

How utterly painful and fearful it must have been for her in the beginning, when she knew. How sad to lose her most precious, intimate thoughts and memories of a lifetime of loving and caring for a husband for forty-eight years—to no longer recognize that he was the love of her life, the only one. How tragic to raise six children, and now have fourteen grandchildren, whose names she cannot remember. Once upon a time, she was a strong, invincible, God-fearing woman. My cherished mother was an undeniable life force, the very essence of womanhood, to be loved and adored—always protected.

She *now* has become an empty shell of her former self, beautiful faces to her seem so familiar. Photographs invoke a sense of longing. All is unknown; all is lost.

How thankful I am *now*, that she no longer realizes what she has lost.



Lukewarm Love

Amy Blondell

Lukewarm Love
Stirs me in the morning
its Scent wafts through the door
greeting me with a misty hello
From the kitchen it beckons,
“rise, come and taste”
I hurry to obey;
the cold floor stings my feet
I reach for the warmth
cradling the cup in my hands
and sip my Father’s sweet gift



Numbers

Jana Cross

The noise was gone in her head. No slashing, clashing, crying, screaming.
Silence. Gloriously wretched silence.
She could do this, right? It’s only one life. One life versus a country,
that’s fair. Isn’t it?
But it’s *his* life.
Dangling.
She can’t hear him choking. Or herself breathing. When did she stop
hearing her heart beat?
This was her job. “*How much will I sacrifice?*” she asked herself.
She wished her sight was gone. Then she couldn’t see his wide eyes or
watch him claw at the hand holding him by his throat. That would make
things much easier. Maybe she could live with herself then. She fingered
the chain around her neck.
“Call your forces back,” the man holding his throat said. She planted her
feet and lifted her chin. “*How much?*” she thought.
“Last chance.” She felt her color drain and her lips parted.
One versus her country.
Just one.
One person.
One grave.
One loss.
That’s not asking too much. Just one little—
Her knees gave way and her hands hit the earth. Her hair fell into her
eyes and the chain swung back and forth.
“Release him. I . . . we surrender.”



Joshua Fitzwater. "Pulse", Photo/digital, 2008, 8"x10".



Black Cat in the Swamp of Morning

Nigel Dishman

Does this matter?
This horridly confident walk birthed from the wide open black mouth
And the bellies of frogs.
Look not on my fur, my sleek winding back-
My claws are sharp.
My, my, my, my am I not vile enough?
Wed to night and its surrendered kisses-
Black!
Black feline tarts, free yourself; dig your members deep into



A Church is Never a Good Place to Kill a Man

Kristen Dozier

I kneel upon the cool stone
whispering silently before Him.
my soul yearns
my tongue quivers
I can feel the laden footsteps.
I beg my God
to forgive this sin.

Three men step forth into the dimly lit chapel; the flickering candle light upon the altar reveals a kneeling man. The grotesque above them flashes, its gaping maw painted black behind the white fangs. The man in the red vest motions the other two to walk ahead of him. They move swiftly down the narrow nave and quietly encircle the praying man. Their leader stands behind his shaking bowed form.

The three men's eyes meet for a beat, the leader nods his head to the one on the right. He lifts his weighty bat and slams it into the man. The other one lays into him with his own bristled club. His mangled body flings to and fro before their leader presses his booted foot upon his back, lifts his sword and cuts his head off in three short strokes. It rolls before its journey is ended by the

a bloody foot print is left behind



Portrait of a Woman

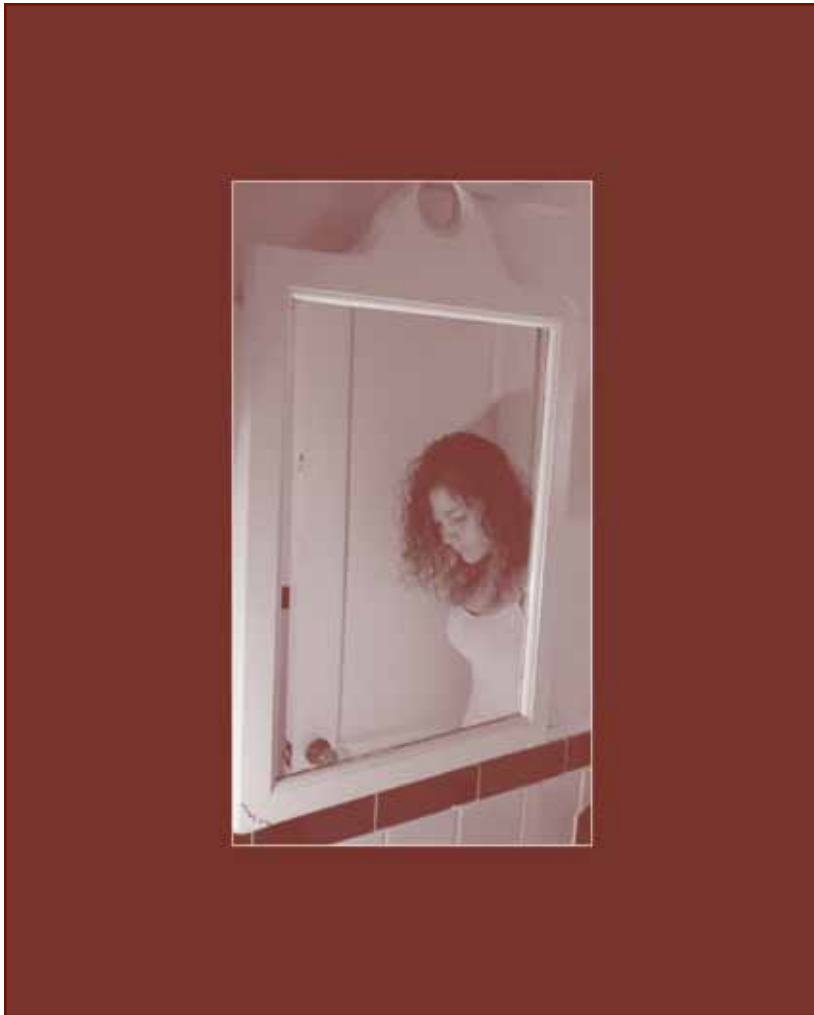
Kevin Tran

The early morning dew has just settled on the leaves. It is still dark outside and everyone is sound asleep, except for a few who need to make the long walk to the city for work, school, or business. In the distance, a few dim lights emitting from oil lamps are being carried by a group of women, as they slowly fade away from the small village. To make the long trip shorter, they talk and laugh often, dogs barking from far-off mix in, as well as the crowing of the roosters. Every now and then, they can hear a baby crying for milk or just from a bad dream. Occasionally, one woman will laugh so loud she makes the dogs bark hysterically. Steadily, with a stick on her shoulder and baskets dangling from each end, one woman starts her lengthy walk to the city fish market, as she does every morning. The light gets dimmer and dimmer, until it disappears into the darkness before the dawn.

Ever since the woman was young, she walked the streets all day long selling lottery tickets to help her family put food on the table. To make matters worse, her father passed away, leaving behind two younger siblings and an ill mother, too weak to work as a result of the Vietnam War.

When her siblings are all grown, she marries and raises a family of her own. Time has gone by so fast. She has five children with her husband, who is out on the front line fighting the invasion of the Communists from the North. She is now in her early thirties, skinny, with dark-skin tanned by the sun, and long hair. The struggle to support her family during the war has aged her beyond her years. Life becomes even harder after her husband is discharged from the military due to an explosion that cost him his left leg. Now she has to work even harder to support her family, and at the same time take care of her disabled husband.

Like clockwork, she gets up at four every morning. Before she goes to work, she cooks a pot of rice mixed with sweet potato for her children to eat during the day while she is out. After this, she is ready for her eleven-kilometer walk to the city market where she will buy fish from the fishermen to resell at the nearby villages for a meager profit. On the way back to the villages, she carries almost fifty pounds of fish on her shoulders. The baskets are so heavy that over the years they leave indentations in her



Kate de Lima. "Untitled", Photo/digital, 2008, 8"x10".

shoulders. After selling the fish, she goes to the nearby rice fields, selling her labor for a few pounds of rice or a small amount of heating oil. Bending over the whole time in the rice fields every day hurts her back badly, but she never gives up. She must endure these pains on a daily basis, rain or shine, for her family to survive.

Then her husband leaves Vietnam on a dangerous journey to find freedom in a different country. History shows that about 500,000 Vietnamese died out on the open waters searching for freedom. Some died from hunger; others died from ferocious storms; but most lost their lives from piracy or execution by the Vietnamese government when they were caught. She does not hear from her husband for two years.

The thought of him *not* making it to freedom always haunts her mind. Once again, she struggles even harder to support her family and now burdened with worries of her husband. She is truly exhausted; her children are all she has to live for.

Every night when they settle down to sleep, the children can tell that the pain has taken the better part of her. They can hear her groaning from a hard day's work. Sometimes the pain keeps her up all night. The kids don't know what to do to help ease her aching. All they can do is hold her tight and show that they feel her pain as well.

Their lives get even harder during the rainy season. She can't go to work every day then because of the yearly flooding in South Vietnam. She is very worried; she doesn't know what to feed her children if she can't go to work. Their food reserve can only sustain them for two days. So many nights they see her sitting in the kitchen, weeping and concerned for her children's livelihood. She worries that if the flood and the rain don't stop, they will have nothing to fill their stomachs. She cries because she is worried for their future. She has always dreamed they would have the opportunity to go to school, get an education, and have a better life. She does not want them to have to worry about whether there will be food the next day, like she does. Every time she cries, they cry with her; sometimes they don't even know why they cry or for what. They cry because they feel her pain, and most of all, because they love her.

At the beginning of the fall season while many kids are buying new clothes for their first day of school, her children can only dream about it. One of her sons comes up to her and asks why they can't go to school like their peers. She can't hold back her tears and cries in front of her naive child. She cries out of frustration because she has done all she can, but still can't afford to send them to school. One day while she is out working, her son dashes to the school, stands outside the classroom window looking in, trying to learn whatever he can. He then runs back to the house and to teach his siblings what he has learned.

This starts out with just a few times a week, but soon progresses to every day. Her son repeats this journey month after month. From self-learning to helping each other in this endeavor, they all learn how to read and write by the end of the school year. Again, their mother cries, but this time it's out of happiness.

After many years of living inside the United Nations' Higher Commission for the Refugees (UNHCR) immigrant camp in the Philippines, her husband finally makes his way to the United States. Their lives improve a little from the money he finally can send back to them. Once more, their mother finds a way, and on one fateful night, they escape Vietnam by boat, after spending four and a-half years living inside a refugee camp in Thailand, and reunite with their father.

Her dreams have come true. Even though not all of her children get to go to school here in the U.S., they all now have a much better life—the one she always wanted for them. Presently they are all grown and have their own families; they love her even more because she has sacrificed so much for them. No matter what life throws at her, she has never stopped caring for them, watching them grow and, most important of all, she never stopped loving them.

This woman is my mother.



Stars in Jars

Brianna "Anna" Vega

He plucks the star from the soft coal sky, cupping his hands to keep it safe. Warily he coaxes the glow from his hand into a glass jar, careful to drop the lid right behind it. As it joins its brothers and sisters, he counts his haul for the night, "Just one more."

The jar rests safely on the ground as the small figure searches for his next target. Light drops in the jar bunched close together, crowded in the tiny space, beckoning his return. He can feel their gaze, hear their whisper-buzz pleas for freedom, but he can't let them go. Stars that can be touched are rare, and he likes to hold a little light when he can.

And won't Mommy smile when he brings her stars that have wings?

Mommy's smile lights his mind as the next shimmer lights his eyes, barely a foot away. She always smiles for the stars, every single time, the same way she always used to smile for him. But now all she does is cry.

He catches her at it, when she doesn't expect him. When she's in the kitchen, making soup and Jell-O, or when she's getting Sissy's medicine ready. He's tried so hard to make her stop, but even when she hugs him thank you, she's still crying.

Another golden pearl tumbles into the jar. He can't make his Mommy smile, but she hasn't seen the night lately. Maybe her own special piece of sky will put some of the light back in her face.

And maybe, if he catches enough of them, he can bring Mommy a wishing star.

He counts his captive lights again, and decides to try for just one more. All of the glows look alike, and it's impossible to tell which one might hold a wish.

He knows what she'd use it for, if he caught a wish for her. Sissy would be able to play again, and Mommy would smile for them both.

A final drop of light drips into the pool. He'd like to search for more, but a weepy voice is calling him home.

Mommy is standing on the front porch, searching him out in the warm darkness. She doesn't look up, and the lights above her don't reach her eyes.

He scrambles up the porch stairs, his offering held hopefully before him. "Look Mommy! I brought you stars to wish Sissy better!"

He hears her take a quick breath, but before he can see if she's smiling, the top step has caught his foot, and the world is tilting and slamming and his glass jar is exploding right before his eyes.

His hard-won stars are fleeing, back into the night where they belong, bearing Mommy's wish on their tiny wings. Tears fill his eyes, and he wishes that he could fly away too, or at least glow in his own little jar.

Then warm arms lift him into Mommy's hug, and the stars fall from her eyes as she smiles.



A Little Yellow Bird

Nigel Dishman

Leaving a mess of cracked shells and birth trash you fell,

Beak aimed toward the earth, yet body reaching for endless sky.

Mother can't always be there to drop golden response down your throat,
so now, you must dig.

You must go and dig through the brown to find your own way.

A little yellow bird, a little destruction brought by rainbows.



Coke 101

Nigel Dishman

I

Golden guard row me ashore, limbs and regiments trail like the Bones of ambassadors.

II

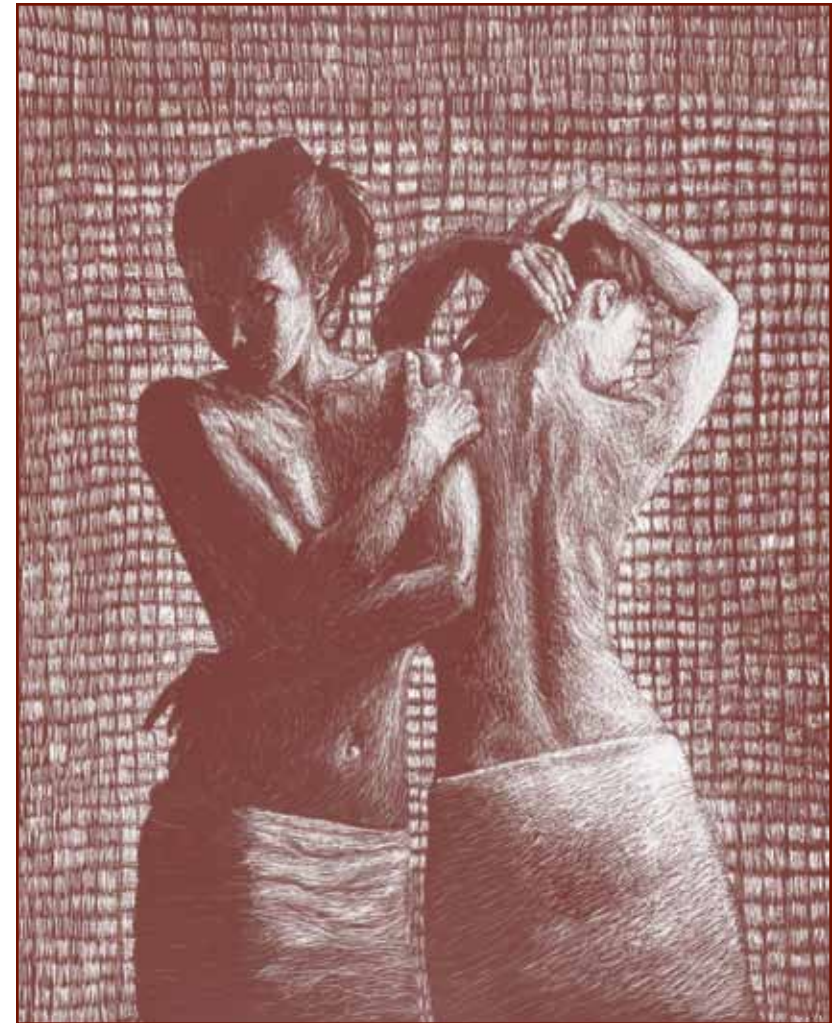
It begins with a man, man, manmade carousels for eight children to spin and ride giggling into the mouth of death; did this take us where we wanted to go? Are we to have arrived waist deep inside?

III

It feels as if something is lodged in my head, like broccoli in German bodybuilder's teeth, unable to be rocked way or soothed with any substance known on this wrecked planet.

IV

My jaw could be that of a horse, wide and hinged with steel reinforcements. Gallop, O' gallop into sunsets that fall into the crack of gods. Deep openings full with decline. This was supposed to make me happy.



Margaret Chappel. "Women in the spa", Scratch Board, 8"x10".



Against All Odds

Kevin Tran

In life, memories can either bring a person delight or sorrow. Sometimes, events can be so small they pass by in life unnoticed, like a cloud being whispered away by the wind—leaving behind little or no trace. But, sometimes a memory can be so disruptive, it makes a deep impression in our consciences, marking a major life changing event. This change is so significant that it can alter the course of life forever. This is the story of my life when a long time ago my mom took us on a daring voyage to look for freedom.

The sky is covered in darkness. It is one of those nights with no moon or stars, creating a perfect cover for us as we slowly approach the main vessel that will take us to freedom. Slowly and quietly we crawl onto the barely sea-worthy wooden fishing boat, tightly packed with its human cargo. Measuring at forty-feet by ten-feet, it was built to hold fifty people at the most; nevertheless, it is forced to hold more than twice its capacity. Like a can of sardines, we all have to fight for a space to sit once onboard. Bodies are entangled and overlapping—making it unbearable, but this is just a small price to pay in the pursuit of happiness. Steadily riding the waves, the boat heads toward international water, leaving behind our childhoods, friends and relatives, and our homeland that we may never see again. I can hear people crying around me: some cry out of fear, others weep because they have to leave their families behind, a few sob for unknown reasons. Like the wildebeests crossing the river into the waiting jaws of the alligators to find a new feeding ground, our voyage will take us across the ocean on a journey no less hazardous in our quest for basic human rights.

The next day as the sun reaches its highest point, we are out of Vietnamese water with the mariner's compass pointing toward Thailand. We have overcome our first obstacle, but many dangers lurk in the days ahead. Our greatest fear on this leg of the voyage is crossing into the Thai water and potentially running into their fishing boats. These are no ordinary fishing vessels: they are occupied by people whose brutal acts have earned them the title of pirates. Deliberately, they seek out Vietnamese boats, knowing that we are vulnerable and defenseless against their machine guns. Their main interest is our belongings, but that is not all they steal.

Many horrors have been documented by a very few survivors. Once a boat is captured by the pirates, they take anything valuable to them, from food to gasoline, and silver and gold, as well as women and young girls. All the women will suffer the same fate: they will be raped; some then kept as sex slaves, while others will be sold into prostitution. The young, the old, and the men will be left to die on the boat with no food or water. Sometimes, they intentionally sink the boat.

The journey has been a blessing so far, until the fourth night. A terrifying darkness comes down over us and thunder and lightning illuminates the furious sky. Winds blowing in all directions whirl together forming a formidable and frightening force. With strong wind and heavy rain beating down on us, we are unable to open our eyes at times. On numerous occasions, giant waves hurl over the sides and splash onto the deck. We are certain that the boat will capsize. A few times, an enormous wave hits head on the bow of the boat, lifting it up so high, then plunging it to a seemingly endless drop. We feel like dying every time it happens. Worried and frightened, people start to pray. In the darkness of the night, the beating of the waves the howling of the wind, and the downpour of the rain mix in with peoples' prayers and babies' cries, making it no less eerie and terrifying than *The Perfect Storm*.

The next morning we wake up to an unbearable odor—the smell of vomit and urine mingled with the smell of fear. At times, we were awakened to find someone else's vomit in our hair. This was something everyone expected, since most of us had never been on a boat before, let alone a long voyage. Into the fifth day, then the sixth day, everyone is exhausted from the beating of the waves. We are sitting in waist-high seawater inside the hold of the boat, but no one bothers to drain it. Because of the lack of space, movement is kept to a minimum, many people are too tired to budge. For a brief moment, some of us crawl onto the deck and look out, all that meets our gaze is an empty sea and a hollow sky. We are nothing but a minuscule speck of life wedged between two equally brutal and unforgiving forces. We are encircled by the sea that had promised us everything and yet nothing at the same time. It could give us freedom or it could take our lives instantaneously.

On the seventh day, we are well into Thai water. We come to acknowledge that many stories we heard could easily become reality. All of a sudden, the sight of a boat in the distance makes everyone choke with fear. The captain starts the spare motor to make the boat go faster, but to no avail. The Thai fishing boat gets closer and closer to our vessel by the second. We start to panic.

Screaming and voices gets louder and more desperate as time passes, mixed with the crying of the children, as well as some adults. Within striking distance, one man fires a few warning shots at us, signaling our captain to turn off the engine. Once our boat is tied to theirs, three gunmen climb on board. They gather all of us to the stern while they occupy the bow. After calling our captain to the front, they knock him unconscious with the butt of a rifle. With more than a hundred people on the vessel, death is now inevitable. The crying and screaming gets louder and more desperate as we face our certain demise. People are begging for mercy, praying to God, Buddha, ancestors, or whomever they can think of at the moment, hoping for divine intervention. Some make the sign of the cross as they recite a part of the Bible. Those with non-religious beliefs find God and ask Him to take them to His Kingdom. While the people are praying and babies cry, the three men search for valuables. We are convinced that we will be killed. After half an hour of terror that seems an eternity, they climb back on their boat and speed off with everything that we had, including all our food and water. Miraculously, none of us are killed.

Our boat drifts for two days. On day nine, we see a container ship go right by us. We start to scream for help with nothing but the little life still left in us. The captain ties a white shirt onto a stick with S.O.S. written on both sides, waving it back and forth, trying to get the attention of the people on the liner. Unlike Tom Hank's *Cast Away*, they never stop for us. People start to cry again out of desperation; we are fully exposed to nature, a battle we cannot win.

Early on the morning of tenth day, the sun beats down on us more intensely than usual. Suffering from hunger and thirst, our lips are so dry they start to crack and bleed. Our lifeless bodies lie on the boat with our extremities overlapping. With no hope to go on, we lie there waiting for death to come take us away from this miserable life. The sunlight intensifies as it gets higher overhead; we are lying there too weak and hopeless to open our eyes—then a miracle happens. Something wakes us. It is the cries of seagulls, a sound that normally irritates us, but now it sounds like music to our ears. Flying high in the shadow of the sun, they come to us like angels sent by God. In contrast to Noah and his ark, who was greeted by birds with an olive branch—we are welcomed with the gulls' droppings. Never before in our lives had the cry of the seagulls sounded so sweet. We instantly get up and glance around as joyful laughter spreads like wild fire.

We see land.



I found you that day in a field of wires

Nathan Moore

I look around and can't help but
hate
what we've done to the place

I'm walking beside this retired
warship
searching for shade

All I see is metal
and steel
some trees for
decoration

Jellyfish bob
up
and
down
in the water

Behind the buildings
there are
Chinese fish
you can feed bread
and quarters

Here are the kind
of people that
run
do laps around the pier

I've never known
one of these
sweet drenched
maniacs
running in rain
or snow
or heat

Today the weather
complements
the beautiful parts
the rest is out of place
Noise
cars

And the silent warship
with tourist aboard

I take another look
around
nothing good yet
nothing new

Just more construction
pushing us away
from
the cities

Trying to find
solace
in the remaining
parks
and
lakes

Now we're forced to
get away
take trips to
the real
places

The forest
the ocean

They charge admission
for shade these
days

Nothing to do except
return to my own car
my own city
Construction
Torn up roads

Leading to
nowhere

I've been driving for hours
now
trying to get reception
trying to connect with you
on this lonely
afternoon

I finally found
you
in a field

Under the satellites
and towers
bringing us together

In those moments
all the warships sink
in the harbor

On those days I look
around
and see you
in everything



Coma Cocoon

Nathan Moore

I awake
to a mid-summer's
Reality
the dream so
far removed
all I see are
the casualties

The Archer
practicing on
our playgrounds

The Arson Investigator
setting the
fires

Here we whisper
Over and
over again

Until our words
leave us

Our lips
sealed

Nothing left to say

The dream now
abandoned
like the old movie
no one
has ever
seen
or
heard of

No critics
to critique

The Reality
carries me from
Summer
to
Winter

The dream
lingers
though

Weak from
coma

The kids
drop Death

And then catch
themselves
in the
act

While we tell
the ones
underground
the war is
going well

They send us
Enforcers
we tame them
drop your
Death
in the basement

The War is over
but don't let
them know it

The Estates
need remodeling

The Enforcers
forming
opinions

Oppress them
Send them back

back down

Request
new ones
better ones

Obedient
Official

Do this
for your
Country
suffering
above

The dream
in the casket
purple flowers
so serene

A peace never
accomplished
in death
finally
achieved

The winter
takes Reality
and makes it
hazy

The fog
sets in

The fog
I found in a
future
book

A future
look
at us
the crooks

I awake
from the
seasonless
year

Reality
replaced
by a dream

No boundaries
no laws

A dream that
I think is
worse
than
the
Reality
ever
could be.



Eternal Villanelle

Brianna "Anna" Vega

We are the endless night.
 We drink the dying stars.
 We court your twilit flight.
 We wander in the dusk-drawn hour,
 for we smolder in the sun.
 We are the endless night.
 We whisper darkness in your failing ears.
 If we catch you, you'll be ours to keep.
 We court your twilit flight.
 Lips press to lips,
 breathe our echoes within you.
 We are the endless night.
 We are the final Thief
 to gaze upon your light.
 We court your twilit flight.
 The stars dip down to lend their light awhile,
 And we await the moment when it is ours to claim.
 We are the endless night.
 We court your twilit flight.



The Bus Stop

Rachel Steinman

Heart pounding, Marie hurried through the freezing rain, stopping from time to time to switch her suitcase from one hand to the other. Her water-logged shoes squished with every step, and in spite of the cold, she wished desperately she had worn flip-flops. When she finally came in sight of the bus stop, she saw Jack waiting under the awning of the abandoned hardware store just behind it.

"Jack!" Gripping her suitcase harder, she jogged towards him.

Jack's face broke into a smile as he came out into the rain to meet her. "I was beginning to think you weren't gonna come."

"Sorry," she said, fighting the chattering of her teeth. "I had to wait for my parents to go to bed."

"Well you're here now." Jack smiled again and pecked her with a kiss. "And you're freezing! Where's your coat?"

"I forgot it in my room. Didn't wanna take the chance of going back to get it."

"Here, take mine," he said, taking off his windbreaker. He wrapped it around Marie's shoulders and took the suitcase from her. "Come on. Let's get you out of the rain."

Clutching the jacket close, Marie followed Jack over to the hardware store. "I used to think this place was haunted," she remarked, staring at the broken windows and moss-grown siding.

Jack set her suitcase down beside his. "Yeah, it's pretty creepy, but at least it's dry."

Marie raised an eyebrow and held her hand under one of several leaks. "It is?"

"Well—" he chuckled—"drier."

"Will the bus be here soon?" Marie asked, slipping her hand through the crook of his arm.

Jack glanced at his watch. "Fifteen minutes."

"Do you think they've noticed I'm gone?"

"Nah, I don't think so," he shrugged. "You said you waited until they had gone to bed, right?"

"Yeah, but what if they woke up? What if they catch us?"

Jack's muscles tensed under her hand. Absently, he reached up and touched the patch over his eye. "We're in a public place this time. They can't do anything."

Stamping his feet, Jack reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette pack and a lighter. "Last one. Wanna share?"

Marie nodded.

He had to strike the lighter several times before he got a flame. "You got your money?" he asked, taking the first draw.

"Yeah," she replied, feeling in her back pocket to make sure it was still there.

"Here." Jack handed her the cigarette. "We're gonna be okay, ya know? We've got each other, and that's all we need."

Marie gave a bitter laugh. "That's all we want, but it sure as hell isn't all we need." She took a draw and coughed, still not quite used to the new habit. "A hundred bucks won't get us far."

"No, but it'll get us away."

Just then, a dark Civic turned slowly around the corner. They drew back further into the shadows of the store.

"Is that your dad's car?" Jack asked.

Marie shook her head. "I don't think so."

For a moment, the car slowed as if it would stop. Marie squeezed Jack's arm, her chest constricting in fear. The car continued to crawl down the street for a block before turning off again. Both of them sighed, but they didn't move from where they were.

Trying to steady her hands, Marie handed the cigarette back. "Do you—do you think we're doing the right thing?"

"What do you mean?" Jack's voice edged with concern. "Don't you wanna be together?"

"Of course, it's just that—wouldn't it be better to wait until my parents gave us permission?"

Jack tossed the cigarette into a puddle. "They practically locked you up to keep you away from me. Do you really think they're gonna suddenly change their minds?"

"I dunno." Marie shrugged, pulling at the edge of the jacket. "But they're my family." She blinked back tears. "This is gonna break their hearts."

"I thought you already broke their hearts." Jack walked over to a partially broken window and flicked the remained glass. "Didn't they tell you that a month ago—around the same time your dad gave me this?" He pointed to his patched eye. "I believe his exact words were, 'I'm sorry I raised a daughter like you.'"

"Jack—"

"Why can't you understand? They don't love you."

"They do—" Marie hesitated—"in a way."

"No, they love who they want you to be, not who you are."

Marie didn't respond. As much as she didn't want to believe it, she knew he was right.

"What if they catch us?" she asked finally.

"You're twenty. Even if they catch you, they can't make you go back."

"But what if you don't get a job? Or—"

Jack put his hand over her mouth. "For a little security you'd go back to all the lies and abuse?"

She pulled away from him. "They've never *hit* me."

"There is more than one kind of abuse, Marie." He raked his hand through his wet hair. "Even if they changed their minds about us eventually, I wouldn't want you to go back to that. Do *you*?"

"No!" Marie exclaimed. "But what if we can't make it on our own?"

"We will."

"How can you be sure?"

Down the street, they heard the rumble of the approaching bus.

Jack smiled and lightly caressed her cheek. "I can't. You'll just have to trust me."

The old Greyhound pulled up to the curb and came to a stop.

Jack looked at his watch. "Right on time." Picking up the suitcases, he held his arm out in an awkward, gallant motion. "So, you coming?"

Marie hesitated, looking around once more. "Oh, what the heck." She strode forward and took the offered arm. "But if we starve to death, I'm gonna kill you."

"Welcome, folks," the driver called, giving them a knowing smile. He took the tickets from Jack. "Nice night for a trip, huh? Just take a seat, and we'll be on our way."

The bus was all but empty. Marie followed Jack to the back and sat down beside a window. The bus lurched forward, slowly leaving the depot, the hardware store, and her home behind.



Departure

Ashley Atkinson

Tears *melt* along cheeks,
N e v e r e n d i n g h u g ,
Stomach hollow,
Fear crawls inside,
Memories flash with every blink,
Words of compassion,
Slow, painful release,
Heavy bags lifted,
Trunk slams shut,
Deep breath.
Followed by empty waves,
Goodbye.