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# Table of Contents

Lancaster County .................................................................................... 11  
God's Creation ........................................................................................ 12  
Father ..................................................................................................... 13  
Lost and Found in Morocco .................................................................... 15  
Angrytown .............................................................................................. 19  
Catch Phrase ........................................................................................... 21  
I Am Who I Am ...................................................................................... 22  
Me, Myself, and I .................................................................................... 24  
Still Running ........................................................................................... 25  
Paperclip Expectations .......................................................................... 26  
United in One ......................................................................................... 27  
Prisoner of Love ...................................................................................... 28  
Ghosts of Ireland’s Coast ......................................................................... 29  
One Fine Day .......................................................................................... 30  
Welcome Back ........................................................................................ 32  
The Return of the Veteran from War ....................................................... 34  
Sing to Me ............................................................................................... 35  
Today ...................................................................................................... 36  
The Movement ........................................................................................ 37  
The Hour ................................................................................................ 38  
The Miracle of Hands ............................................................................. 39  
Standing Proud ....................................................................................... 40  
Hole ........................................................................................................ 42  
The Renegade Cardinal .......................................................................... 44  
The Beacon ............................................................................................. 47  
When Shock and Disbelief Turn to Anger, Then What? ........................... 50  
The Taste of Flakes ................................................................................ 52  
A Lesson Learned But Not Forgotten ...................................................... 53  
Say A Little Prayer for Me ...................................................................... 56  
The Dancing Flies of the A Shau Valley ................................................... 58  
I Remember ............................................................................................ 59  
Take A Whiff of This .............................................................................. 61  
Mr. Slot Machine .................................................................................... 63  
Pain ........................................................................................................ 65  
The Show ............................................................................................... 66
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nameless Soldier</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Rick's Own Words</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthright</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mourning Flow</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puzzles in Time</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Gold/Black Death</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radioactive Man</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Sleep</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Am Deaf</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Real Battlefields</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something You're Not</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blossoms</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Am I Here?</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellipsoid</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Reading That Alan Died</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Right to Choose</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Glimpse</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquarium</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand Tall</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature’s Warm Embrace</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Jewel of Energy</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Dreams</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Doesn’t Have to Be Love</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Attic</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarrel</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Grandfather’s Place</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wisdom of The Ages Revealed</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sowing wild oats,
beardless young men
and bonnet-wearing young women
raise hell.

Retying the laces
to modern society,
rebels with a plan
to use electricity and running water
trade in their horse and buggy
for a laminated driver’s license.

The alluring voices
of sweet funnel cakes,
sultry candied apples
lure juveniles to visit
the Chocolate Park.

Many cycles later,
after the season of forbidden pleasures,
the bridge to modern society burned,
kerosene lanterns and candles
light the way to adulthood.

Beardless young men
and bonnet-wearing young women
gratefully grasp
suspenders and straight pins.
God’s Creation

Angela Moore

You are the greatest creation I have ever seen
Skin so white, like new-fallen snow
Eyes crystal blue that sparkle and gleam
Ten little fingers and ten little toes
Cheeks that cast a beautiful glow
Your voice is the sweetest that I’ve ever heard
As if listening to the bright early bird
Your hour-old skin so soft to the touch
Oh, little one, you’re going to be loved so much
I thank God for the joy he has given us with you
Skin so white and eyes so blue
Father

LaVerne Cross

Where are you now?
A man I never really knew,
But loved cause I was supposed to,
He loved all kinds of women
So why not love me too.
I wanted to share some of my hopes and dreams,
Plus a little of the love you give to them too.
But I wasn’t lucky enough to be chosen by you.

I waited time and time again on my front porch,
Wishing and hoping you would come,
But as the days passed and the nights came still no you.
The disappointments, broken promises, pain, and hurt,
Left me missing out on a part of you that I take.

Wanting to know you from head to toe,
Asking you questions about boys that I don’t know.
Maybe if you would have shared my life and showed me the way,
I could have used more of my talents from you that I take.

Maybe it was your love of women that kept you away.
‘Cause my love of men is sort of the same way.
I just don’t have 32 children to show
‘Cause of the men I have loved in my day.
Kids were not part of the game that girls and boys play.

You have two beautiful grandchildren you have never seen.
Maybe they have your smile, charm, or artistic ability.
Your grandson loves cars as you do but what does it matter, you’re never near.
Maybe it was just my imagination,
‘Cause I wanted to be close to you so damn bad.
But never getting my dream to come alive
For just donating your sperm inside of my mother’s womb.

Thanks, father, for not giving me your love,
‘Cause I am better off without you.
No disappointment, hurt, heartache, and pain
Which leads to tears all over again.
Lost and Found in Morocco

Laurie Weckstein

The day started in heady excitement. We bundled ourselves into our little rented Siat, the Spanish everyman’s car. It was early because we wanted to catch the first hydrofoil out of Gibraltar and fly over the water of the most famous straits in the world—to Morocco.

It would take an hour and half to get to the tiny port of Tarifa, where we would catch the boat. We shot through the south of Spain as the sun was coming up. It was the nondescript month of March. I was so excited about spending the day in Morocco—on the African continent—that, at the beginning of the adventure, I was willing to imbue the Spanish countryside, with all sorts of meaning. In truth, it was rather dull. We seemed to be up on a never-ending high plateau. Miles of dull, brown dirt from which sprouted miles of pale, dry grasses. Still, we were in Spain and soon we would be in Morocco!

At the coast, we wound our way off the plateau in a series of precarious switchbacks that would make you sick if you thought about it. The occasional car, driven by a genuine Spaniard, would crazily pass. We gave away our pretend-Spaniard status as we carefully maneuvered our way along. It was amazing to me that the road to such a significant place on the planet would feel so remote, so ancient, and only occasionally traveled. If the Straits of Gibraltar were in America, we would have been jam-packed in traffic on a brand-new, twelve-lane super highway—backed up for miles at this point. Instead, we traveled freely and mostly alone on a bleached, decrepit, and truly ancient country road.

At Tarifa, we bought our tickets in thousands of pesetas (only a few dollars). We boarded a normal-looking white boat, big enough for twenty-five to thirty passengers. The mooring lines were loosed in high arcs, landing on the deck of the hydrofoil as screeching gulls wheeled overhead. We started off and the hydrofoil raised up on its characteristically high perch atop the
water. As we literally flew over the water, my companion and I discussed our plans for the day in Morocco. Our hosts back in Spain had recommended that we put ourselves in the capable hands of an experienced tour guide when we arrived. I airily dismissed that suggestion then, just as I was doing to my companion now. “I want to see the real Morocco, not some fake, plastic, pretend Morocco!” I protested.

We reached Tangier, Morocco, in forty-five minutes. In the tiniest snatch of a moment, everything changed. At precisely the same instant that my heart thrilled as my feet first touched African soil, my olfactory senses were assaulted by the smell of a particularly repugnant incense. I hate incense. Without registering it consciously, I felt within a moment after landing that this place was already many things. What lay before us seemed like chaos. The colors, the activity, the noise, the smell . .

Within thirty seconds of landing in Tangier, my self-assessed worldliness vanished. I immediately realized that we should not be set loose in this place alone. We frantically made our way to the closest of a dozen tour stands just off the dock, the proprietors vying for our American dollars. We’d only just arrived! The most exciting day of my 24-year-old life had turned into the first day in my life that I actually feared for my safety. This was a most unexpected turn of events.

Five minutes later, ensconced in the safety-net of our newly acquired protectors (our tour guides) I took a real look around for the first time since our arrival, now just ten minutes ago. Besides the smell of the place and the realization of some survival instinct I seemed to possess, I had taken nothing else in. Now I took a good look around.

As in any city, there was a lot of vehicular horn-honking. Men and women were dressed in everything from traditional Moroccan long-gowned garb to casual Western dress in wildly colorful, crazily mismatched combinations. There was the occasional turban. Most women wore traditional saris. I stood out in my white pants but it was too late to do anything about that now. As I walked, my pants were like a blinking neon sign announcing that I didn’t have a clue about this place. My feel hurt already too. I’d worn the wrong shoes for walking around in this dirty, hard world.

Our main goal was to keep close to our tour guide (very close) as we began to walk through this old, old city. Our group was almost immediately set upon by a clutch of dark-skinned, shiny-haired, charming Moroccan children. They ran around and amongst us constantly directing “This way,
lady!” and warning “Lady, don’t fall!” at the holes and pitfalls in the ancient walkways. What seemed charming at first quickly gave way to annoying, as it became obvious that “This way, lady!” and “Lady don’t fall!” were the only Western expressions that these little urchins knew. The only variation being “mister” which was used if appropriate. These little self-appointed tour guides wanted coins and dollars for their services. Their modus operandi was to pester you until you gave in. I quickly learned to ignore them even though they didn’t go away.

“Why aren’t they in school anyway?” I asked our tour guide.

His all-knowing answer, “There is no public school in Morocco.”

“Oh,” I replied.

The remainder of our tour carried us well into the afternoon. We went to an open-air market where bloody sides of cows and pigs hung, attracting flies, and a thousand chickens hung by their feathered necks—no refrigeration anywhere in sight. On the way to lunch, I saw a goat’s head floating in a bucket of water outside the door of a private residence. At lunch, I ate rice. Later, we visited a cool, dark mosque where every interior surface was covered in glittering and dazzling tiles fashioned into shining, breathtaking mosaic scenes. At some point in the afternoon, I gratefully spied the red and white Coca-Cola sign (something familiar!) high up on a building, above a restaurant, only the words “Coca-Cola” were written in Egyptian-looking Moroccan letters. Finally, after the grand-finale camel-ride, we were on the hydrofoil again headed back to civilization.

We arrived at our host’s home in Spain after midnight—dirty, exhausted, and me limping because somewhere during the day on the other continent, the heel had come off one of my low-heeled flat shoes. Despite the low heels, it still caused a limp if one went missing.

I decided that my now-filthy, one-heel-missing shoes symbolized my day in Morocco and my choice in wearing them as symbolic of my unknowing arrogance. My excitement had been childlike and, as with a child, it almost immediately disappeared at the very first obstacle—or bad smell. I did not have a good time that day. I picked my way around Tangier trying not to step on anything gross. I tried to keep my pants clean. I complained about the smell of Arab cigarettes. I didn’t actually eat anything of consequence (I drank Coke all day) until we got back to Spain.
Truthfully, I realized I was ashamed of myself. The world was different over there. I knew it would be different. Spain was different. But this civilization... it was raw. It was rich. It was old. And it was hard.

My only saving grace would be to learn something from this day. My excuse was ignorance. But I am no longer ignorant after my day in Morocco.

I’d like to return, now fifteen years later and approaching forty years old. I’ve learned the lesson, I think. I may still feel uneasy in Africa but I won’t wear white pants; I’ll wear comfortable walking shoes. I won’t cringe at every strange new sensation; I’ll rejoice in my broadened understanding of our world and the souls that inhabit it. I won’t whine over something as trivial as incense; I’ll breathe deeply and know the smells for what they are—proof of a rough, honorable, hard-won life in a beautiful, ancient and unforgiving land.
Angrytown

Toby Tate

So you spoke with fists again
Because with words you never win, and then
You stand in slack repose, like a beatnik reading prose
A rebel with a cause, a loophole and a clause
It’s your way, not my way

You’d rather steal than borrow
You live for today not tomorrow
You’d rather take than give
It’s the reason you live and all around
In the wake you leave behind
The world is drowning, we’re goin’ down
Here in Angrytown

We lock our windows tight
Because we fear the night, oh no
The streets are paved with blood
From the unknown and misunderstood
And I keep looking to the sky for a reason
(If there’s a reason)

You’d rather steal than borrow
You live for today not tomorrow
You’d rather take than give
It’s the reason you live and all around
In the wake you leave behind
The world is drowning, we’re goin’ down
Here in Angrytown
And when you start to say, there’s no other way
I have to disagree
‘Cause in your poisoned mind
Your rage has made you blind
And hate is all you see

So you march again today
Got to blow someone away, to say
What you really mean
That the world is so unclean
And we will be the ones to bleed
To fill your need

You’d rather steal than borrow
You live for today not tomorrow
You’d rather take than give
It’s the reason you live and all around
In the wake you leave behind
The world is drowning, we’re goin’ down
Here in Angrytown

We’re drowning, we’re goin’ down
Here in Angrytown
Catch Phrase

Toby Tate

say what you mean
not what i want to hear
words growing from your tongue
in a garden of flowery phrases
just roll them up in a ball and throw it to me
to catch
if it's over my head
it will bounce off the wall and go splat on the floor
leaving a mess for someone to clean up
if i step in it, i may slip
and fall
and break my bones
or knock the wind out of myself
and lose my breath
so you pack the words tightly together
and toss it to me
spinning and flying as if in slow motion
i wait patiently for it to come
i raise up my mitt
and catch your drift
I Am Who I Am

Sandra J. Bradley

I look just like any woman
my short hair
and thick waist
tells nothing about me
for
I Am Who I Am.

Don’t judge me
without getting a glimpse
of who I am
who I would like to be
who I am going to be today
for
I Am Who I Am.

Why does it make a difference
to you
that I may wear a veil?
I worship
my god just a little differently
for
I Am Who I Am.

You don’t understand
nor can you comprehend
my life
my values
my special sisters and friends
Do you want to try
and expand your horizons?
Remember
You are You
and I Am Who I Am.
Me, Myself, and I

LaVerne Cross

A caramel complexion,
Pretty white teeth,
A killer smile that drives all men wild,
Intelligent, sexy, strong, assertive,
Loving, sensual, and a humorous style.

Loves the Lord with all her heart,
Pretty long legs,
Eyes that make a man beg,
The beauty inside and out,
Add extra spice to any man’s life.

A mother, wife, daughter, and friend,
Always hard at work until the very end,
On a journey of life reaching no end,
Just happy to wake up breathing over and over again.
Today is September 11, 2001. I am sitting at my desk on the 89th floor of the World Trade Center Two. I am drinking my English toffee cappuccino. I hear this odd sound, almost like the humming engine of a jet coming near the building. As I look out the window, I see a huge jet right next to my window. The jet is slamming into the building next to mine. I am thrown backwards to the floor from the powerful impact of the jet. As I stand up, I feel disoriented. There is glass and debris all around my office. I can smell fumes from the raging fire, which I can see as I peer from my shattered window. I hear crying, screaming, and the eerie sound of steel moaning as it is being incinerated by the intense heat of the ignited jet fuel.
I start to run for the steps. The intense heat and nauseating smell of flesh and hair being burned is too much to bear. People in my building are screaming and the piercing sounds of the emergency bells are causing my ears to ring. I say a silent prayer as I continue to run down the steps. I hear another humming sound and think “Oh, God!” I am probably now only on the 20th floor. Now I hear another horrendous sound and smoke is coming down the stairway. I feel sick to my stomach and I am having trouble breathing. My body wants me to stop but I keep running. Finally I am out of the building, running aimlessly. I just lost a shoe. I am safe now, but still running.
Paperclip Expectations

Charles H MacAllister Jr.

Paperclip, O’ Paperclip
Where does your start begin
Are you rolled from the inside-out
Or perhaps the outside-in

You have a way of holding things
Without the use of force
But can you hold together marriage
Or will it end in divorce

Can you hold back the rain, I think not
Or hold back a person’s tears
Or hold back the aging process
That robs of youthful years

Can you hold back traffic
To see that I safely pass
Or can you hold back the hands of time
To ensure that my dreams will last

Paperclip, O’ Paperclip
Where does your start begin
Or should I ask in contrast
Where does your ending end
In this time of war and pain and hate,
We all must stand for something.
Do we live for our freedom or die for our rights?
A place of sorrow filled with rage,
In a nation torn apart,
To fuel the spark and make a flame
We must tear down the wall of hate within ourselves,
We must unite for the fight for our freedom.
Is this what we all stand for?
Not to die for the freedom of country but for freedom of one’s self,
Or do we prefer to have pain and hate fuel our passions,
To fight our wars.
What do our rights stand for?
Are we truly equal, are we truly free?
We will never truly win the war if we cannot unite with each other, and ourselves
To win this war on freedom, we must all stand for something.
Prisoner of Love

Vaja Kittle

I’m trapped in a cell with padded walls
Constantly I hear her name being called
I’ve tried to get out and tried to escape
Yet the surroundings of this place are imprisoned by gates
Two o’clock in the morning, I’m still awake
Envisioning a picture of her beautiful face
Fields full of wild flowers, sweet dreams from above
She stays in my mind, I’m a prisoner of love

I can’t get through the day without her sweet voice
Who do I want to be with? She’s my first, second, third choice
I walk with my head high and a smile on my face
In class I daydream and start to feel dazed
I feel for her deeply and wouldn’t let anything harm her
I’d take on the world with love as my armor
I see her as perfect, pure and graceful like a dove
The judge has sentenced me to life as a prisoner of love

Each morning I awaken with a smile on my face
Thinking of seeing her gets me through each day
If I can’t see her, then to her I must talk
Because her sweetness is my strength and without it I can’t walk
I live for her happiness and thrive upon her joy
She puts a twinkle in my eye, like a child with a new toy
Feelings like this are from God up above
And so I don’t mind being a prisoner of love
Ghosts of Ireland's Coast

Jennifer W. Branton

Textured fabrics of velvet and silk flow behind the beauties of Ireland’s coast, still.
Walking one behind the other, back and forth, sunset to sunrise,
They sing of their broken hearts, lonely souls, and their cursed eyes.
The people of the inland claim them witches, with spells still left to give.
Wearing empty lockets and cloaks of the time when they used to live.
The people of the sea claim them sirens, singing songs that can fold a man’s knees.
Avoiding the songs, the sailors cover their ears, remembering the captain’s heed.
Only one man knows whom the maidens are, wandering along the coast.
Every night, sunset to sunrise, he sits in the moonlight to watch their fabrics flow.
The people of the inland claim him as the maidens’ lover,
Saying he once sailed to a land not yet discovered.
Without a return in three years time, the maidens were deeply saddened and soon became Blind, singing along the coast for their long, lost love.
Their ghosts remain along the shore, never to fall below and never to rise above.
The people of the sea claim him, too, as the lonely sirens’ heartache.
It is on the coasts of Ireland he is cursed to live,
Without comforting, his lovers wait.
Exercise Journal: June 8, 2000
Whew! What a run! I conquered three hills and a total of eight miles this morning. Next goal: ten miles and six hills. I’ll give myself three weeks. Well, off to clean up and out the door to work.

Exercise Journal: June 12, 2000
The other day in the shower I found a suspicious lump in my right breast. This afternoon I have an appointment with my doctor. I hope everything goes well. I don’t want to end up like my best friend, Sally Benson. She and I were the same age, that is, until she died of breast cancer last May. I miss her dearly. She’d be proud of the progress I’ve made. My run today though was less than four miles. I wasn’t mentally up to the challenge.

Exercise Journal: June 14, 2000
Dr. Higgins called and said the results of the mammogram showed a suspicious lump. She wants me to get a biopsy done. My appointment is this Friday. I don’t know how to handle this. Mark has been very supportive though; he says that no matter what, he’ll still love me. I went online and checked a website for women with breast cancer. I’m more scared now; I guess it’s fear of the unknown. Went to the gym today to pump iron. I looked around at the other women and thought to myself: “Can they tell what I’m feeling? Would it be noticeable if I got a mastectomy?” My workout was ineffective; I went home in tears.

Exercise Journal: June 21, 2000
Fear has been confirmed.

Exercise Journal: June 28, 2000
I had an appointment with the oncologist, Dr. Mason. Seems like prognosis is good: I can go with a partial or total mastectomy and chemotherapy, or just the mastectomy. Such appealing choices I have as a woman. I feel less
than whole already. My next appointment is a week from Friday. No workout today. I need to figure out the rest of my life.

Exercise Journal: August 3, 2000
Sorry for not writing. I've been recuperating from the surgery. I opted for the total. Better to get it all now than fear of its return later. It’s been almost four weeks, and I still feel a little sore. Dr. Mason also did an implant to help it look more natural. The scar is healing nicely. Too bad my self-esteem is not. Mark's been very attentive; however, I know he looks at me differently. Doctor said no running for another six to eight weeks. I'm doing a lot of reading.

Exercise Journal: October 2, 2000
I finally put on my running shoes today, just ventured around the block. I ran for only twenty minutes; I need to get back in the groove. It felt so good to get out again. The leaves are changing colors, and the air is crisp. Soon we will need to pull out winter blankets. Mark and I are going skiing in Colorado as a “good will” trip; to lift my spirits, he says. The only lift I'll get, I joke, is the ski lift.

Exercise Journal: November 23, 2000
It's Thanksgiving Day today. We're expecting over 40 guests throughout the day. I've been increasing my runs now to six miles three times a week. I'll tackle the hills eventually. The pain and soreness are gone. I am liking my new shape. Mark looks at me differently now, more with a lustful passion than disdain. It makes me feel sexy and sensual despite what I've been through. Life holds more promise for me now and I won't take anything for granted. I'm looking forward to Christmas, for many years to come.
The last time I was in a classroom, Gabe Kotter was still a Sweathog! At 46 years old, I could swear that I was entering a room full of child prodigies. There wasn’t a face in the college classroom that looked a day older than fifteen! I hesitated before entering, long enough for a student to appear behind me who looked as though he might have just graduated from high school.

Panic set in and in seconds I examined my motives for returning to school. Oh, my God! What have I gotten myself into? Whose idea was this, anyway? I had to do something, either move forward or make a cowardly retreat. I imagined making a mad dash for the car just as my legs involuntarily carried me forward into the room. I chose the desk nearest the doorway, just in case. The image of a hasty retreat was still enticing.

Before I had time to collect my thoughts, the instructor introduced herself. She commented on the exceptionally young age overall of the class. She told us also that she usually had more “older” students in her lectures. Is she looking at me? I squirmed a little in my seat, which seemed much smaller than I remembered desk seats to be.

After giving a brief overview of the course requirements, the instructor assured us that much of what we would cover tonight would be a review of high-school English. I started to relax. After all, I had scored well above the requirements on my placement test, and had carried a B-plus average in English. I directed my full attention to the lecture.

Before I knew it, the teacher was calling on students to read out loud! It all came back to me. Instinctively, I remembered rule number one in any classroom. If you don’t want to be called on, never make eye contact with the teacher. To my relief, at least this hadn’t changed.

The chapter review included terms which I had no idea how to apply to writing. Clustering? What is that? The child prodigies knew, and demon-
strated no hesitation in answering. Finally, my ears perked up. A term I thought I recognized: scratch outlining. That had to mean the same thing as it did back in my day. It did, and I finally found myself on the same page as the rest of the students.

By the end of the evening, my class had done so well that the instructor dismissed us fifteen minutes early. Gee, is it over so soon? Just as quickly as it had assembled, the class wasted no time in departing. I found myself alone with my instructor. I walked up to her and let her know that I had enjoyed myself in class much more than I had the last go-round, 25 years earlier. She graciously thanked me, and welcomed me back to school.

I left, the ‘70s sitcom theme song running in my head. Welcome back, it’s been a long, long time since you’ve been around . . .
The Return of the Veteran from War

David A. Etheridge

Look, Ma, no hands!
Sing to Me

Mary Sundberg

I love the sound of your voice when you sing to me
How long have we been singing to each other?
A very long time
But there is always one song I want you to sing to me
It's the one I love so much
Every time I tell you to sing to me, it's the same song, no questions asked
“I’ll Be” by Edward McCain
Would you consider that our song?
Maybe just a secret ballad
Thank you for singing to me
I can't wait for you to sing to me again
Sitting here I can almost hear you singing
Though you are so far away
Sing to me
Today

Laura MacIntyre

Today
I bought
Some
New jeans
With
Your money
And kept
All
The change.
Please
Forgive me,
Although
The jeans
Look
So nice on
Me
The Movement

Stephen Gillis

Not worried about what is said or done to me but
Determined to run
To run to their destiny
Bold in times of insecurity
Laughing at adversity
Nothing can hold me back
I’ve come up from the brink of self-destruction
And negative seduction
But watch out, I’m coming out
Look, another deadly threat
A black man with intelligence, rebelling against the Naysayers
The playa haters
Dealing with the negative later
Never settling for less
Always accepting and expecting more
Expecting the best
Pushing forward
Weeping endures for a night, but joy comes in the morning
12 noon

Workers scurry to be first
in line for the community microwave,
pulling out Ziploc baggies
and compressible adult lunch boxes.

Dreams of Captain D’s catfish
and Sbarro veggie pizza
yield reality
of homemade tuna sandwiches,
Nutri-grain bars and
leftover spaghetti from
last night’s dinner.

Vending machines holding tasteful
treasures nourishing workers
from starvation and
robbing the money from their pockets
leaving denim-colored lint.

Melodies of Rockports
and Easyspirit soles
enchant workers
like sugarplums do children
as the tick tick of the clock,
a worker’s matchless friend and
relentless enemy,
steadily holds the beat.

1 p.m.
Hands. How wonderful they are. How much we can do with them, learn from them. They can take us places or hold us back. How fortunate we are to be so endowed. Hands can lead us away from ignorance when they turn the pages of a book, or they can bring us to the brink of despair and destruction when they lead us into trespass.

Hands are the product of the fingers and the palms, but so much more than the sum of the parts. Hands can beckon others to come close or point the direction away for others who try to come too close. Hands can be gentle or soothing or can be fists when angry. Why is a single finger so expressive when held alone, away from the others? It can be rude or brave; it can be proud or humble.

Hands attached to parents can push the child away or hold him fast. Hands attached to children can clap for joy or hide one’s face in shame. A hand can speak its own language for those who have none of their own, or can remain silent when not raised in affirmation. Hands signify, hands gesticulate, hands are the first to be warmed when all else is chilled. Hands can tell a fortune, hands can show inside.

Look at the hands of a worker and you discover the tedium of ordinary chores. Look at the hands of the artist and you see into the soul. Hands are used to punish and to maim, and, in others, are the instruments that suture and cure. Our hands are the tools on the outside of our hearts.
On September 11, 2001, America changed forever. Terrorists used commercial jets as missiles, crashing them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The video of this tragic event will forever linger in my mind. However, there is one picture that reminds me of what a great nation I live in and how proud its people are. It is a picture of three firefighters raising the American flag after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Three firefighters carefully raise Old Glory, our red, white, and blue, as a sign that America will not fall by enemies large or small. They are encircling the flag like a halo as if to protect our symbol of hope. They remind us that Americans must be united to rebuild America and to maintain our freedom.

These men, dressed in full firefighter gear from their hard hats to their rugged firefighter boots, are trudging on through lack of sleep and the knowledge that they have lost many of their own. They are working through the night, with large, heavy-duty flashlights, some red and some black, hanging from their waists. The differing equipment makes me wonder if these men are from the same platoon or if they have traveled many miles from other cities or states to assist.

How brave these men must be, risking their lives to save others. The dust and ash on their faces and clothing makes me realize how much hard work and effort they are putting forth in the hopes of finding just one living human being in the remains of the World Trade Center.

The wreckage is all around, twisted metal and debris from the fallen buildings. The paperwork that was lying on desks moments before ready to be completed that day is now strewn all over New York City. There is a large gray flagpole, possibly from in front of the World Trade Center, leaning like a gun on a battleship ready to fire; a symbol that America will fight on and will survive.
The air is filled with thick smoke from the fire from the jet fuel ignited as the planes penetrated the buildings. Along with the smoke is the ever-present dust that was generated by the former Twin Towers, once known as the World Trade Center, as they collapsed into small pieces of rubble. This rubble was once the workplace of many individuals, now only memories to their loved ones.

The events and the individuals who perished on September 11 will never be forgotten but America must move forward for those still remaining. Enemies can make our buildings fall but they cannot stop the heartbeat of America. This reminds me of a lyric in Lee Greenwood's song, “God Bless The USA.” The lyric states, “Our flag still stands for freedom and they can't take that away.”

America has proven that it is stronger than ever, as can be noted by the patriotism shown by its people. Firefighters raising the American flag on a damaged flagpole and Americans displaying love and unity for each other are just some of the wonderful images of patriotism being shown in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. I realize now more than ever what our Stars and Bars really stands for—freedom and strength. God bless America.
wasting my time
looking at me
all of my greatness
was all i could see
always so proud
never sincere
telling myself
there’s nothing to fear
down in a hole
reflection gone
permanent black
all on my own
forced to look in
inside of me
ever afraid
of what i would see
ignoring Truth
going insane
seeing myself
small man in pain
facing the facts
sealing my soul
finding the way
out of the hole

who am i now?
broken like this
what did i miss? or didn’t i care?
what did i say?
what have i done?
now i’m the one in the pit of despair
didn’t know what mattered
reflection shattered

out of the hole

now i am whole
Rolling out of bed, stumbling over shoes, a necktie, and the occasional sock, Raymond finally reached the dresser. Once there, he pounded the electronic nuisance that had started this day. *Snooze*, he laughed to himself.

As usual, he wandered to the bathroom. He flicked on the light and was overcome by momentary blindness. He picked up the hand mirror next to the sink and held it behind his head. Performing spontaneous geometry in his head to get the angle right, he looked at the back of his head in the mirror above the sink.

There it was, peeking out through his black hair, almost mocking him. His father had warned him, “Keep wearing that hat, Ray, and you’ll go bald!” *Why didn’t I listen?* he thought to himself. *I never listened!* The patch of scalp was larger today. If only noticeable to Raymond himself, it was growing. He finished his morning routine and grabbed his keys to depart.

Stepping out onto his porch, he opened his mouth as the chilly morning air sunk heavily into his lungs. He always enjoyed that feeling. It reminded him that he was alive. Then the other reminder chimed in: the patch on his head almost ached in the frosty air. Raymond slipped on the old forest-green knit cap he had received as a gag gift just after the first signs of fallout. “You’ll be needing this soon!” they had said, mocking him.

*Never thought I actually would need it*, he thought. He grimaced at the irony: the only reason he needed a hat to stay warm now was because of all those years he had worn one in the summer! *If I only knew then*…

On his way to the factory, Raymond’s mind began to wander. He’d worked in that factory for twenty years, ever since that summer when he turned fifteen. He’d spent some time making the soles, some dyeing the leather. He’d even been an inspector. Number 42, that was him. There are few things in the life of a 17-year-old small-town boy that stack up to putting
your stamp of approval in a brand-new box of shoes. He missed those days when he was so easily brought to joy. Raymond fished in his pocket and pulled out a worn yellow tag that read INSPECTED BY 42 and he sighed.

As he continued on the path, which he had worn down himself over the years, he reflected on what else he had accomplished at the old factory. The last six months had been spent in the lace department making the laces, lacing them onto the shoes. He had even spent a seven-week stint running the machine that puts the little piece of plastic on the tips. *What’s that little thing called anyway? I made them for almost two months and they didn’t tell me what they’re called! That’s okay, I probably would’ve just ignored them anyway. Why don’t I pay more attention?*

Raymond pulled his cap down tighter, covering his now-throbbing ears. He watched his breath as it danced before him, then ran off to hide, invisible once more. A flash of bright red drew his attention to one of the trees beside his path. Quickly and without grace, he snapped his head to the side just in time to catch a cardinal in the act.

“Ah! Thought you could hide, did you?” he said to the bird with secret-agent sarcasm. The cardinal just cocked his delicate head and whistled.

“Don’t bother with begging me,” said Raymond. Again the bird simply chirped, then shook, rustling its feathers. “Well, we’ll let you slide this time, Agent Red. But next time, be on your toes! You might not be so lucky.” Raymond turned and resumed his jaunt, keeping one eye on the conspicuous bird for a few yards.

He laughed to himself. *Am I that bored these days?* he thought. *I need a hobby. Maybe I can develop a new kind of toupee.* He laughed audibly, then sighed, again feeling the sting of the cold, even through the cap. *One with really good insulation.* He could see the factory now through a patch of dead trees. The evergreens blocked the view of anything that wasn’t a part of the forest. But around the edges of the forest were trees which had packed up for the winter and the space allowed Raymond to see to the front doors.

Soon the joyous walk through his memories and his vigilant watch for renegade cardinals would be interrupted by another day of piecing together shoes that he would never wear. He sighed, his breath putting on an encore performance for him. Brisk steps had become a trudge. His head, forest-green cap and all, was hanging down now. He breached the edge of the forest and stepped onto hard asphalt. The old road was crumbling at the
edges, weeds and dandelions poking through the cracks. Raymond stopped and smiled. “We can’t keep ya down, can we? You always find a way.”

Raymond scuffled across the path, this one man-made, not like his path in the woods. The door handle was rusty, cold. It squeaked as Raymond turned it and reluctantly opened the heavy old door. The sound of the machines was clear even at the door. He slid off the warm, comfortable cap, and rubbed his head. One last deep, cold breath and he stepped in.

A little red bird landed on the cracked asphalt. As he chirped, the door squeaked its way shut. He hopped a few feet across the road, stopped, cocked his head. Then he went up into flight, disappearing back into the woods.
There are times when I start to speak, I feel I have something enlightening to say. I feel I have the ability to inspire, enlighten and help someone along the way merely by the words I say.

Then there are times when I am frozen; I want to speak. I want my ideas to be heard. I want to make a difference. But I am silenced. Silenced by my own fear. Silenced by the whispers of others. The whispers that mark you. The crippling fear of what others may think. Fear of being rejected for my views. Fear of not getting the idea across at all and being marked Inadequate. The fear of being openly opposed.
But am I justified in not speaking at all
am I more afraid of hurting someone’s feelings
of stepping on someone’s toes
of ruffling a few feathers
or maybe upsetting
the establishment
that I sit comfortably in silence
while someone else
thinks
of my great ideas
of ways to reach our children
better our community or
feed a hungry nation.

I think not
for in me
is the power to liberate
that someone
who needs a nudge

In me is the spark
to ignite the flames of justice
in me is that liberating spirit
giving credence to those who feel it too
the confirmation
that it must be real
in that we all feel it within us

Only then will I be
a beacon of light
letting the light that I shine
be a light of insight, knowledge
and hope

Not letting the gripping
crippling darkness
of fear
encircle, encompass
or engulf me
I will speak
may my voice
be heard over
all my mortal fears
When Shock and Disbelief Turn to Anger, Then What?

Marie Wells

Sitting there, watching it, I could not move
All the while listening, trying to make sense out of what has occurred
trying to comprehend what it all means
It's twelve midnight;
where did the hours go?
There's still much I do not know
and need to know to comfort my inner being
before I can go to sleep.

I wake to the cool, crisp morning breeze
Same familiar smells, same backyard sounds
coming out of sleep, I think: another day.
Then my mind brings to remembrance
Another day . . . to try to make sense of it all.
Every hour brings more hard questions, with very few answers.
Nothing, nothing
will ever be the same.
As the tears start to flow
deep down in the pit of my stomach there is this knot.
I cannot be comforted. It could have been you or . . . me.
Eight days ago I was on a plane.
Go about life as before. How?
Impossible
Every fiber of my being cries out, feeling their pain, their loss.
Maybe a nap will bring some calm.
I suppose if I sleep I can stop the images in my mind
I suppose if I sleep the tears will subside
and I can better compose myself
to face the devastation in this page of history.
Eyes close, all is quiet and I drift off
but I do not dream; all is hazy, all is grey.
Coming out of sleep, grey rolls back to clear light.
As I open my eyes I’m faced with knowing.
I’m lying across this bed to rest from the unthinkable things
my eyes have witnessed hours before.
Now I must rise, only to face them all over again.
The veil is off and the rose-colored glasses removed
Everything is forever changed.
Whatever we do next
we must learn from lessons past
Patience is best . . . and fools rush in.
I hope we seek justice;
granted it may take time but
Justice is on the side of the right
and Justice will prevail.
The Taste of Flakes

Angela Moore

As the snow begins to fall all around me,
I lift my head up high;
My tongue protrudes to taste the flakes,
And stop each crystal passing by;
Large ones, small ones, short and tall,
Flakes so light they gently fall;
It seems as sudden as the snow began,
The falling flakes seemingly come to an end;
I gaze very carefully through the air,
And look again; the flakes aren't there.
Thick golden rays of sun broke through the thin pines outside my bedroom window. Perhaps it would have been blinding if I had the desire or energy to open my eyes. Over the years I have developed the ability to ignore the sound of my alarm clock alerting me to the arrival of a crisp new day. Maybe it is because I am all too aware of the snooze button that is slightly larger than the rest of the buttons and sits on the far right corner of this familiar piece of equipment that has been on my night stand for as long as I can remember.

In the silent moments between my piercing wake-up calls, I tried to steal a few more minutes of sleep. Today was a little different because it was my daughter’s first day of school and I silently wondered if she was aware of the change she was in for. Soon after closing my eyes again, I heard the sound of Brooke’s bedroom door opening, creaking from the rust on the hinges. I could no longer hide in the shadows of my room and the warmth of my bed. It was time to start the day again, a relentless routine of driving, working, cooking and cleaning, and, occasionally, if I am lucky, sleep before midnight.

“Do you have to go to work today, Mommy?” she asked as she loudly made her presence known. “Uh, huh” I grumbled half-heartedly. “But why?” she asked, a question I stopped asking myself sometime after my first car payment. For lack of a better answer, I simply replied, “Because that’s what happens when you grow up.” The alarm clock rang again, as if to remind us to stop wasting time and get ready for the day. We leaped for the snooze button and hit it at the exact same time, then turned to each other and smiled with gleams of achievement. As I crawled out of bed, I reminded her that today was a special day for her; it was the first day of kindergarten. She smiled with a sense of pride, and in an instant I saw my baby transform before my eyes into a little lady. Then we were off, racing against the clock to meet the same deadline I have had to reach every day of my life for the
past 20 years. Except now I had a partner, a teammate if you will. I felt a strange sense of comfort knowing I was not going to be the only one late for once.

Because of Brooke’s endless imagination and constant procrastination, I doubted if she completely comprehended the limits that restrict an adult’s life, although her new-found respect for time impressed me. After the TV was turned off, she yelled “Come on, Mommy, we’re late!” as she slammed the door behind her. I knew we were late but how did she know? She is only five and cannot tell time. After I acknowledged her demand, we rushed to the car and breathed a sigh of relief as we closed the car doors and drove off. On the way to school I asked her how she knew we were late. Her quick response tickled me: “Because Teletubbies was over.” She said it with such certainty it made me feel silly for asking. Amazed by her observation, I was left speechless.

We arrived moments later at the school, an institution that would take over where I left off in providing answers to an infinite number of questions. After undergoing the emotional experience of turning her over to her new teacher, I wandered through the motions of my daily routine. Sitting in traffic, I watched the exhaust of the vehicle in front of me form shapes like clouds against the black asphalt and concrete sidewalks. I was occasionally distracted by the sound of a horn of an aggravated driver racing against the same clock but with a different destination. Every task I attempted that day made me realize how complicated life had become. If only I could turn back the hands of time and enjoy cartoons before I started my day instead of CNN and the reality and tragedies of the world.

After all my obligations for the day were fulfilled and all my duties done, I tried something new. I followed Brooke’s lead and sat on the floor of my bedroom with my trusty night-night pillow in hand; I turned on Looney Tunes and flipped through old photographs. I was temporarily saddened by the fact that I had lost touch with all these treasured memories. I quickly recovered, however, as the memories of my youth and the simplicity that accompanied it gave me a warm, familiar feeling throughout my body. I recalled wasted days of laughter and endless games of hide and seek. I remembered my best friend and me trying to stay up all night only to have my mother throw a blanket over us in the middle of the night sometime after the local television station went off the air. I tried to remember when
things changed, at what age, and at whose direction. I considered several explanations, but each of them came up short.

It was on this day I learned that a child’s ability to teach is often greater than that of any adult. Through a fearless quest of knowledge, children explore areas of life that no adult dare try, only to find out that it’s not so hard. I came to the conclusion that one of the greatest lessons I learned in life came from the priceless actions of my daughter. Even with all its restrictions, demands, and stress, life is nothing more than a game waiting to be played, a space to explore, and a lesson to be learned through ever-changing experiences.
Say A Little Prayer for Me

Diane Baldwin

He Stood The Watch from dusk to dawn.  
A man in church sits forlorn. He lost his job, there is no pay 
A TV he must pawn this day.

He Stood The Watch for you, for me.  
A man at home on bending knee, prays to God to help him see  
A way to feed his family.

He Stood The Watch because he should. He stood The Watch because he could.  
With no relief for his low rank, two days and one-half his spirits sank. 
Tired and weary his strength had weakened, 
While standing watch his thoughts bleakened.

He Stood The Watch with eagle's eyes, and noticed the stars in the sky.  
He prayed a prayer not just for the Earth 
But for all the people life has hurt.

The man at home got a part-time job!  
The pay not much but better than none, on bending knee he still would pray, 
For tomorrow may bring one more day.

He Stood The Watch for day number three . . .  
The ship shook, men tried to flee, 
Many would scramble to escape debris.

Wet and cold and in great danger  
He began a prayer to God, no stranger  
Dear God Almighty . . .

Though unaware of the plight at sea,
The man at home on bending knee, 🙏
Prayed “Dear God Almighty, on this day,
Won’t you please make a way,
For those who need you to receive your grace wherever they may be.
Protect them all on this day and bring them home your guiding way

Though each unknowingly Stood The Watch.
His grace be to His blessed flock.
The sun rose slowly on the horizon
Off in the distance a bird chattered happily
I sat quietly listening
While around me, the blood-soaked ground, littered with corpses, sat quietly
The flies danced around the corpses as the sun rose
On and on they danced
Never out of harmony
As the sun rose
I Remember

Laurie Weckstein

The roar of the jet
startles my newborn reflexes
“Hush now, it’s just the sound of freedom”
murmured into my tiny ear

“Good night, daddy” we pipe under the door to the man
his head bent in the study of war
the desk lamp flinging his shadow grotesquely against the wall
the scratch of his pencil, his tired sighs

Roars of chaos echo on the reel-to-reel
“I’m okay” we hear on weeks-old tape
I clutch at the POW wrapped around my wrist
secretly glad he is a stranger

Shrill, descending Tomahawks whistle into Baghdad
bright arcs on winter nights
yellow be-ribboned lapels dominate the screen
intoning the far away “line in the sand”

Old men choke on 50-year-old memories
anniversary horrors
“Let us tell you about freedom’s high price” warn wise liquid eyes
living whispered words

Humanity fails, falls to earth
amidst unearthly screams from within and without
a billion dreams burning alive
fanning loud, defiant flames
The roar of a jet
strangles my anguished cry
“Hush now, it’s the sound of freedom”
murmurs his voice over the breeze
Take A Whiff of This

Vonda Danley

I am nosy and proud of it. Nosiness runs in my family; I suppose one may conclude that I’m genetically nosy. My nose has been the most sensible friend I’ve ever had. The love I possess for my nose exceeds the fact that it is able to detect food and give my face its proper proportion. Unlike Pinocchio, whose nose is disproportionate due to telling lies, the width and height of my facial protrusion is a family trait never to be artificially altered with plastic surgery. So with a Kleenex salute, I praise my nose for the many roles it has played in my life. Over the past three decades, my nose has aided my ears in keeping my glasses on, it helped me escape a burning car, and it has kept me abreast of my oral hygiene.

At the age of eight, I was out doing my normal tomboy actives: climbing trees, jumping over fences, and catching bees. With all my playing done I headed home, but on my way I spotted a red rose in the yard of a boarded up-house. Jumping one more fence to get the flower for my mother presented itself as a good idea—so I jumped. As I yanked the rose from the ill-kept rose bush, a baby bee fluttered around my head slowly like a swarm of gnats. With my hand I scooped the bee out of the air. Although the bee wasn’t still buzzing around my head, I opened my fist slightly to see if I had indeed caught the flying menace, I had. But when I peered into my hand the bee flew into my eye. After waking up from my eye surgery, I learned that the little four-winged pollen transporter caused severe damage to the nerves in my eye. Now I’m forever indebted to my nose for holding up the spectacles I must wear for the rest of my life.

Years after the bumbling experience, my nose, my glasses, and I were traveling to Vacation Bible School with my now dearly departed grandfather. Going his usual speed of forty-five miles per hour, less than the posted fifty-five miles per hour, he had to slam on his brakes to avoid hitting a car that pulled out in front of him. The smoke that filled the air from the screeching tires made it seem as if we were speeding down a dirt road. As we ventured
on to church I started smelling smoke again. I asked my grandfather if he had smelled the smoke, taking the answer to be “no” from his head shake; I dismissed it as the smoke from the earlier incident still in the car. A red light brought us to a stop three blocks away from the church; there I told my grandfather I still smelled the smoke. This time he said, “Only because you got one of them Gadsden’s noses, I’ll pull up here and take a look-see.” As he opened the hood, the force of the blowing smoke knocked his trademark brown-rimmed hat off his head. When I handed him his hat, he grabbed me up in his arms and hugged me. We left the smoking car and started walking the final three blocks to the church, but before we were five feet away, the car engine exploded. Although a few sparks hit us, I silently thanked my nose while my grandfather explosively thanked God.

From the neighbors’ yards in which I played to the churchyard in which I prayed, my nose was right there with me. Due to my love of onions and Doritos, I must rely on my nose to let me know when my chewing gum or breath mint is off-duty. Placed strategically above my top lip, my nose alerts me of the dangerous fumes escaping that could singe an innocent bystander’s eyebrow with a simple, “Hello.” Once again I thank my nose for its discreet way of helping me.

Many people don’t really give their nose much attention unless it is stopped up, dripping or sporting a date-damaging zit. Eyeglass wearers, take a moment and thank your nose for the upstanding nose it is. To all of you who ever left the stove on and smelled a scorching stink that should have been dinner, thank your nose and buy a smoke detector. And for those of you who don’t know the phrase, “Hold the onions,” thank your nose for not turning up on you. Many years have gone by but there hasn’t been a year when I didn’t thank my nose for all the pleasures it has brought to my life. Thank you, Nose.
Some may think that I’m a god
Because I hold the stars
Some may think that I’m Fort Knox
Because I hold gold bars

Some may think that I’m a produce man
Because I hold the fruit
And some may think that I’m an ATM
Because of all my loot

While some may think that I’m handicapped
Because I have one arm
And some will think I’m attractive
With just the right bit of charm

I’m not on a special diet
But I do watch what I eat
Sometimes a rich man will feed me
Sometimes a pauper from the streets

If you feed me I’ll give you the chance
To go from rags to riches
But I warn you, stay not long
Or wind up losing your britches

I’ve witnessed grown men crying
After losing all they had
Then turn and place the blame on me
 Saying I’m the one that’s bad
They sit and keep feeding me
In hopes of reaching the top
Yet I get blamed for their misfortunes
When they have the power to stop

What people fail to realize is
That sometimes I lose too
In the instance that my alarm bell rings
That means I must pay you

I really don’t worry about losing
So I feel no need to choke
But will you leave here with winnings
Or will you leave here broke?
Pain

LaVerne Cross

The heart bleeds red,
Scars deep, dark, and blue,
Scratches against my heart,
Don’t know how I made it through,
A woman’s pain unbearable and true.

The love I felt no longer exists,
What is a girl to do?
Who puts the swing in your hips
The sway in your walk
Who puts the smile on your lips
The laugh in your talk

Why does the earth shake
The clouds break
Why does the wind sing
The sun gleam

What makes the eagle soar
The lion roar
What makes the birds fly
The kittens cry

Does anyone know
Who started this show
A Windy Day

LaVerne Cross

The wind blows a cruel song
As trees bend and sway
Dust hurls in the air
And branches begin to break
Only to find that the wind has made the ground below
A beautiful decor for Mother Nature
A Sprite's Point of View

Damaris Rivera

A sprite is a small, mystical creature. Some people call them faeries while others call them brownies. They are said to be no bigger than one’s thumbnail. Their laughter sounds like rain falling upon the surface of a lake. Despite their small stature, their speed surpasses that of even the quickest fox.

Sitting upon a grassy knoll, she sits in utter silence near a stream. Stones worn smooth by the rushing spring waters create a maze for the lazy brook to wind through. A small frog looking for its mate hops from stone to stone, his lonely call echoing through the little canyon of water and rock. A small crayfish peeks out from beneath a large stone but, seeing the light, flees back into its dark, watery abode. In the distance a hawk cries out. Its meaning is unknown and I am quite sure I wouldn’t want to know.

Looking back upon the girl … why she is sitting there, I do not know. She occupies the small bit of space so quietly. The tree beside her offers a bit of shade though the sun’s rays steal through holes of absent leaves, illuminating her hair, which shines brilliantly, dark and rich in its natural state. Her skin is dark also, almost bronze. Unruly sunspots dance along her bare arms, a healthy glow emanating from the luminous specks. Her eyes are still a mystery. Though her hair hangs flirtatiously over her eyes, her lids are closed, shrouding her in secrecy.

Her clothing is simple, stained from grass and a bit of dirt upon her denim bottoms. Her shirt hangs loosely from her thin shoulders, its color now faded from years of constant wearing and washing. Her feet are naked and emerald blades of grass waving in the wind lightly rub against her soles. She must not be ticklish, I wouldn’t be able to stand still, my feet are so sensitive.

Trees, not as tall and looming as some, surround her. Their branches are thick and rugged, low to the ground. They would be perfect trees for learning to climb. The darkness of the bark on the limbs and trunk contrasts beautifully with the bright jade of the leaves creating the image of a lush canopy supported by shady pillars. Small stones and pebbles litter the ground near the
creek. Dandelions and wild lilies are scattered about, adding a bit of color to the bright, grassy canvas. Ah, such a glorious day! Leaning against a nearby tree is a canvas bag. Its color is worn and drab, the fabric wearing thin near the bottom. A pair of ruddy, odd-looking shoes lay there, carelessly thrown beside it. “Ah-choo!” Darn ragweed. Oh no! She must have heard me!

With a start the young girl opens her eyes. Blinking a few times from the brilliant sunlight, she only sees the tall grasses waving in the wind, but there is no wind. “Hmmm,” she mutters as she stands. Stretching her arms, she makes her way to patch of waving grass, which stands isolated though a few other patches of dark green grasses also dot the area. Farther down is a rotting tree stump, its base covered in ivy and grass. A few large stones rest at its now-shriveled roots. “How strange,” the girl whispers to herself. With a sigh, she drops her hands to her sides and makes her way off to gather her bag and picks up her shoes. “Always another day for sprite-watching,” she muses, heading away down the side of the creek as it sings its soft melody.

A small tinkle, like wind chimes, echoes softly in the air as a bright head of blond hair peeks up from behind the stump. “She's gone, Willowberry. Wow, was that a real human?” the eager young sprite asks, her milky, pale skin shining through the shadows. Her smile reflected her delight as she danced on a dandelion leaf.

“Yes, Clista, that was a human. I hope you are satisfied now and won’t ask for any more encounters.” The older sprite let out an exasperated sigh as he leaned against a vine. Clista extended her hand and took hold of Willowberry’s arm. Looking up at his face, she pleaded, “Oh, please, don’t tell me we can’t come anymore. Please, Willowberry. You are the only one who could ever really tell me exactly how the surroundings look and what the humans look like!” Her eyes were blank, sight was denied to her from the moment she was introduced to the outside world. Willowberry’s shoulders drooped with guilt. He rubbed the back of his neck as he tried not to look at her. Finally his eyes met hers and he felt his battle was lost.

“Fine, fine, the next time I find one around here, I’ll come and get you,” he said, reluctantly giving into her innocence. Her small face lit brightly once more. “Oh, thank you!” she cried, and took his hand. Together they made their way back through the forest to the sprite den.
What If Monkeys Could Fly?

Beccie McGehee

If we had shoes on our hands and gloves on our feet, if we should happen on a familiar face, how would we greet? Would we stomp a hello with our gloves down below and wave at their faces with flapping shoelaces?

If the world were square, it might be a big thrill to live ‘round the corner from Peru or Brazil. I might speak Spanish or Kalamazoo. Or make up my own language for me and for you. We would drink tons of coffee and do the hand jive. Then our square world might just come alive. We would dance in the streets with our gloves on our feet. And through reckless abandon brave a “Hello!” to weird Pete…and then run like hell.

What if being gay was in and straight was out? Wouldn’t that give the straight-laced something to think about? I would love to be in on that secret for one day. A fly on the wall with nothing to say. Just doubled over, laughing at my own Freaky Friday. Oh, to see third-generation money hiding their life to survive and get by and avoid any strife.

Oh, this is a good one and you might agree, what if every state lottery decided at three to award our government with their pot o’ gold? And the trick of this gift, to have and to hold, is to pay off the deficit, worthy and bold. I submit it would take more pots o’ gold, but this is “what if?” land where monkeys can fly. So our debt would be paid so our pride would be high.

What if dogs had ten fingers with opposable thumbs? After they ate would they wipe up their crumbs? Would they get their own shovel and clean the backyard? Would they sit around nightly and gamble with cards? Would they be so inclined to pet and scratch me? That would be too weird, unless I had a beard. And that would be scratchy!

What if monkeys could fly? Would hell, then, freeze over? Or would hell have to freeze over for monkeys to fly? “What if” is the key to Pandora’s Box. If we never pondered, the... world... might...just...stop.
Voices: September 11, 2001

LeeAnne Storey

I fear we had awakened a sleeping giant
America United
Two planes have crashed into the World Trade Center in
An apparent terrorist attack
– confusion –
Red Cross urgently needs donations of blood, money
Being compared to Pearl Harbor
Thousands still missing in the WTC
Bush: Freedom and Fear are at war
Recession
First time in history all flights have been grounded
Two WTC buildings have collapsed
– tears –
Terrorists may still be in the country
Thousands feared dead
American flags are everywhere
Dow falls, seventh straight day down
– hope –
Air marshals
NASCAR drivers paint cars red, white, and blue
Holy War if U.S. attacks
118 bodies recovered from Pentagon
Roosevelt battle group deployed today from Naval Station Norfolk
Several U.S. airlines may file for bankruptcy
Bush: We have suffered a great loss
– despair –
Threatcon Charlie
Brotherhood of firefighters
American Red Cross
Eighty countries lost people in the WTC attack
Bush: We are going to fight for our principles
 – reality –
No survivors found since Wednesday
Bush: We will not fail
115 people detained for questioning
U.S.S. Vella Gulf heads out tomorrow from
Naval Station Norfolk
Keep the faith
Bush: May God watch over the
United States of America
Carpe diem. “Seize the day” is a philosophy of which most are aware. However, very few of us implement its credo. Most of us take day-to-day living for granted. We become burdened with the mundane. Material possessions, achieving the “I wants,” worrying about the things we cannot change, and planning for the future possess and control our every waking moment.

Yet the philosophers and poets of old had the right idea. In the *Book of Songs*, which relates the heritage of the Chinese people, several poems express the idea of carpe diem. In Poem 28, the poets say, “There is no time to lose.” Whether one’s purpose is to pursue love, smell a rose, buy a car, or just say “I love you,” it should be handled expediently. We are not controllers of our fate and one major aspect of living is dying. Poem 191 states “When you are dead/Someone else will enter into your house.” Why wait when the waiting can be futile? Enjoy now. Seize the day!
The Candle

Kristin DiDomenico

The candle burns ever so bright
Like the sun’s burning rays.
Drip, drop, the wax slowly melts.
As the wind hits the wick, the flame
Dims and brightens.

The candle, like life, burns
Sometimes brightly and
Sometimes dim
Until the candle burns out
And life comes to an end.
Tidewater Seagulls

LaVerne Cross

Blue skies that overlook ocean waves
Shoreline beaches that clash into
The curve of outgoing tides
Seagulls call down to water below
Searching for fish as these birds land
These seagulls after eating land on the ground for a chance to sun
Their wet wings in the mist dry air
Without warning the world had turned itself inside out and upside down. Angel City was but one casualty, one pocket of a million others that were overrun and burning. Unearthly howls rose into the stale summer night, echoing through the empty neighborhood streets. From the suburban houses below, Angel City was highlighted with a dingy orange that turned the low, overhanging clouds a deep crimson. Smoke billowing from the bright blazes that were sprinkled throughout the city like grounded fireflies added to the dark shroud. Abandoned and wrecked vehicles and trash littered the streets. Everything in Angel City was dead, dying, or worse. Hell had been unleashed upon the world.

Heart thumping madly, Raymond Marx darted across Carter Street. The growls and snarls behind him were growing louder as his sneakers smacked against the asphalt. Raymond chanced a glance over his shoulder at the creatures pursuing him. Three beasts, dead yellow eyes wide, advanced onto Carter Street, his hot blood filling their senses. Illuminated by the dingy lights, their empty eyes met his. Raymond felt an immeasurable sense of fear overtake his mind and he picked up speed. Pumping his already sore legs, he continued across the street and over the sidewalk, which was covered in smeared chalk drawings, a ghostly reminder of the life that once roamed here. The creatures crossed the empty street as Raymond was enveloped in the shadow of the Mayfields’ large two-story house.

Blind with fear, Raymond stumbled over a water hose hiding in the ankle-high uncult grass. The ground rushed to him, taking the air from his burning lungs. His face wet with sweat and dew, limbs trembling, Raymond turned on his back, feeling quick bolts of pain travel his spine. He yelped as he looked up—standing a leg’s distance from him was the pack leader. At the sight of it Raymond began gasping for air, unaware of the sudden warmth spreading through his pants: he had wet himself. Clenching the grass in his bloodied hands he looked into the creature’s soulless eyes as it moved closer, it had no pupils. The impossible thing was as big as a riding
mower; its hairless skin wet and black. It rested its immense bulk on two thick forearms, elbows cocked outwards, and paws facing each other like some twisted cartoon bulldog. Flaps of shredded skin dangled around its ripped and blood-matted face. It growled, the remaining cheek muscle jigsawing its brow twitching furiously. Raymond turned slowly away from its horrific visage, not noticing the two beasts frantically pacing on the outside of the fence, waiting for the pack leader to make the first move.

But the beast in front of him stopped, sensing another presence. Its ear perked towards him, but its dead eyes, rolling in their exposed sockets, focused on something behind Raymond off in the inky shadows. The decaying demon just stood frozen, as Raymond was, but without fear. These creatures had no emotions. Nothing in Angel City did anymore. They were all just hollow, dead shells, their only motivation to hunt and kill and feed.

In the darkness behind him, Raymond caught the sound of a low, resonant moan which emanated from the shadows beyond the next yard. As the beast bowed its head in submission, maggots fell from its exposed cheek muscle and it began to back away. The sight of the maggots, mixed with Raymond’s sickly fear and pounding head, was enough to turn him aside as he vomited on the Mayfields’ shabby lawn. The two beasts outside the fence fled the scene, following the cue of their leader.

The creatures were gone but Raymond kept his face to the ground in front of the sweet-sour pile that he had created. He felt another spill coming but didn’t want to look for fear of seeing the creature lunge for him and feeling its hot, slippery teeth tear into his throat, ripping his flesh from his bones like boiled chicken. He stayed that way for a long time, knowing the second he looked up it would all end. Saliva, putrid with the taste of vomit, ran from his lips and burned the back of his throat. He clenched his eyes shut as hot sweat rolled into them like acid. Defeated howls echoed through the dead streets, warning of their return. Hunters rarely gave up on prey.
There is a beautiful garden where we used to live in Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis has many fun places to visit, but the place I remember the most is my secret garden. The garden hides from passersby; it only lets those with troubles in their heart find it. Past the church built in the side of a hill, down a wood-thick path, and over a small running stream, the garden waits patiently for its visitors.

The garden itself is very small, nothing grand about it. Crossing over the small stream, I walk along the beaten path. As I get close, the trees give way so I can pass through them and reach my final destination. Looking past the trees, there are stones that surround a statue of the Virgin Mary that sits in the middle of a pond. The stones create a heart around the Virgin Mother, with beautiful flowers surrounding them. Next to the flowers rest several flat stones for sitting. St. Michael, St. John, and St. Patrick take their places around the Virgin.

As I sit there, I feel calm and serene. In this beautiful place, no one can find me. I feel completely safe. I often visit the garden when I feel sad or lonely. Most people think that would only make the feelings intensify, but to me, the stone statues take away my burdens and give me peace of mind, filled with a joyous hope for later.

Now that I am older and no longer live in Memphis, I have no place to go, no place to cry, no place to mourn or scream for my losses. I also mourn for my childhood protectors in my garden. With a heavy heart and a cluttered brain, I always remember the way I felt when I was among the trees, the statues, and the water: so peaceful, so quiet, so serene. I often wonder if someone else has found the garden that might have been forgotten long ago. Maybe someone else now knows and feels the tranquility and peace inside their hearts as well. I know I still do.
I Love Nobody in My Heart

Jean M. Cormier

I love nobody in my heart
I love nobody in my heart
You walk out on me for no reason
‘Cause you don’t want me no more
I’m hurting and sorry forever
I look down and don’t want to see your face
The very shame on you that God sees!
Cause you’ve broken promises and the vows
I’m not proud of what you did to me

I love nobody in my heart
I love nobody in my heart
That’s what you wanna be
I decided to let you go
Someday you will be so sorry, if you change your mind
I will say everything is too late for me
How can I believe you?
How can I trust you?
‘Cause you walked out on me in the first place!

I love nobody in my heart
I love nobody in my heart
I can’t accept your forgiveness
‘Cause you hurt my feelings so much
I can’t take any more of this pain or grief
No way for me!
I decide what I wanna be
I wanna be free, I wanna be alone
I wanna move on to a new life!
I don’t want to look back at you
I hate to say but have to say
Good-bye, good-bye, my love forever!

The end!
Business and War: Is One Relevant to the Other?

Judy Fillio

The corporate battlefield is strewn with the remains of companies that failed to take the offensive and paid the price. This often occurs when a leader does not treat new competition seriously or simply pretends it does not pose a threat. By failing to seize the initiative, you can lose your competitive edge while others take risky but smart steps to advance their position. — John Wiley, 1998

For some of us, the closest we’ll come to commanding military troops in warfare is directing a company and its employees. Today, this symbolic representation is pertinent because the United States finds itself facing a war on three fronts: economic, domestic, and military. While most Americans don’t like these challenges, some business owners find similarities and believe each can be fought with corresponding principles. For example, certain tactics in business resemble those in wartime; indeed, the terminology is similar. Common phrases in business, such as presence, competition, sales force, propaganda, casualties, intelligence, and objective all have counterparts in warfare. Intelligence is essential to corporations in order to remain one step ahead of the competition or enemy and is vital to targeting a market. Presence or location in an advantageous position is primary. Objectives can be translated into missions, and the sales force represents the front line of battle. A mission statement is nothing more than strategy to achieve a desired result, and propaganda or advertising is released to persuade the public. Casualties of business are symbolized in the downsizing of a work force and business theory is global although varied in practice.

Needed for the success of a military operation are the troops; in business, the employees. For example, American entrepreneurs deviate in many ways from their counterparts in Western Europe. Although similar in purpose, the level of optimism soars in comparison to their European counterparts; notwithstanding, they are all operatives within a capitalist economy. By nature, American business owners are resilient; they share a sentiment of
invincibility with their employees, an intrinsic belief that everything will work out. In the face of current terrorist threats, potential military strikes, volatile markets, and deep recession, 73% of Americans hold to the view that everything will be okay.

The same holds true for various military policies. In many Western European armies, the operations are motivated by sheer discipline. Although discipline is required of our service personnel, it is not the singular motivator. The optimistic psyche of our troops is dominant; therefore, our spirit has the ability to shield against the ample disadvantages that encumber other militaries.

In the weeks following the first attack by a foreign enemy on the continental United States since 1812, we have been challenged to our core beliefs; our lives have been altered in ways unfamiliar to our indigenous annals. No longer are we automatically assured of stability in our work places, our homes, or even our futures. Our leaders, politically and financially, have encouraged us to proceed with our lives as usual. The Federal Reserve and Congress have poured money and resources into our economy in the most unparalleled amounts since the Depression era. Every day, there are reassuring messages from our military leaders; they are in control, and advise us to do our part by carrying on with our usual lifestyles, albeit more mindful of our surroundings.

Although we have long languished in the notion of casual ethics, it intrigues us to discover how quickly we willingly revert to the principles of our founding fathers, those magnificent visionaries who, while limited to only a brief experience with a nation, anticipated the demands and constraints of our civil liberties two hundred and twenty-five years later. Those resplendent men defined a spirit, an essence which has prevailed in our unity and a resilience unknown to any previous or existing society. This foundation, its building blocks inbred in every American, will triumph on the battlefields, domestically, economically, and militarily. America, represented by the likeness of the sovereign eagle, will conquer her enemy. For ultimately, we are an inspired people, secure in our unparalleled love of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
Deep

Bob Frenzel

Deep in thought
deep in sleep
deep in dreams
in trouble deep,
deep in kids
deep in debt
wonder if I'm
buried yet,
deep in despair
deep in regret
how deep, how deep
can I get.
It seems my dear
I cannot cope
could you please
drop me a rope,
It's bright up here
It's light up here
it seems my sight is
getting clear . . .
Time passes,
leaving the ashes of things undone in its wake,
I said.
She said
you have such deep thoughts.
The trees are changing.
It is an ominous sign,
A portent of the future.
It fills me with fear.

The trees are changing.
Why would such a peaceful issue
Cause me such an unsettled time?

The trees are changing.
I dread seeing the progress of nature
As much as the ticking of a clock.

The trees are changing.
The reminder
That they will not come again this way
For me.

The trees have changed.
Every year I find myself saying, “You cannot be serious!” as one of my four children hands me a list of required school supplies. What do they mean by “supplies?” I don’t remember my mother having to run all over town to five different stores to get the correct items to start the second grade. Maybe I just forgot, or never noticed. I guess I just assumed the paper, crayons, rulers, and glue were simply a part of my God-given rights as a student in the public school system.

Similarly, before becoming a homeowner, I just thought grass was part of the deal. You have a house and it has grass. Little did I know you had to haul in the dirt and plant grass seed, praying it grows as you water it religiously each morning.

I also have no memory of bringing home endless notes during the year requesting additional items for the daily activities in the classroom. Teachers seem unable to conduct class today without a stockpile of these frequently requested items: 1. baby wipes; 2. sandwich bags; 3. antibacterial soap; and even 4. cold, hard cash. What could they possibly be doing in the classroom these days? Changing diapers? Making sandwiches? Taking baths? Going to the mall? When I was in school, baby wipes had not been invented. So what did I do in class? How did I ever make it out of grade school without baby wipes?

I can’t forget to mention the projects assigned in grade school. I’ve done two already this year. My children are bright but there is no way they can make a face on a coffee can without me. When is the last time you let a nine-year-old use a hot-glue gun? Now, for those of you who haven’t had the pleasure of becoming a parent and being responsible for your child’s’ education, let me assure you that applying felt to a coffee can isn’t as simple as you might think. In my personal opinion a hot-glue gun should be considered a deadly weapon. I can show you my third-degree burns to prove it. You need to understand too, when they create the supply list they always require a
minimum of three glue sticks. Well, let me, a glue stick doesn’t cut it (or should I say stick it) when it comes to the types of projects they assign. They are smart enough when making up the supply list to ask for glue sticks; therefore, they knew at the time that elementary school children can not handle anything stronger.

I like to consider these assignments (fondly, of course) parent projects, homework for me basically. If my memory serves me correctly, my mom never spent endless hours creating my projects, all the while acquiring third-degree burns and a negative balance in her checkbook. So I can’t help but wonder, are things different these days or did my mom just neglect me? I suspect a little bit of both maybe.

I am not stupid. I do realize most of these things are attempts to get the families involved but enough is enough. Again, I don’t recall fifteen room-mothers and -fathers coming to my Valentine’s Day party. We had one mother in our classroom, two tops, and that was plenty. The schools put so much pressure on the kids and parents to have mom and dad participate. I’m not saying this is a bad idea, it is actually quite nice, my problem with it is I have first-hand seen the hurt, longing look in a child’s eyes when mom and dad couldn’t come, yet everyone else’s mom and dad and even Grandma did, or so they think anyway. Now I do know this, times have changed, both parents need to work these day just to survive. Back when I went to school most moms stayed home. Again I ask myself, why weren’t they hanging around the classroom then?

You can always tell the teachers who have children from those who do not. Those without children pile on the homework and parental involvement until they choke you to death: they have no life. Those with children are more laid back, give less homework, because they know more homework for the students means more homework for them. Don’t misunderstand me, I respect teachers. I know I couldn’t do what they do and I wouldn’t want to do it either; more power to them. Teachers are special people, at least they should be anyway. I also know they have pressures on them pushing them to produce a higher standard of education for our youth with little help from the system. Why the school system doesn’t supply them with the appropriate supplies is beyond me, not enough taxes being paid, I guess. Well, I would rather pay a few bucks more for taxes then go out on a scavenger hunt each August for my three-ring binders, number two pencils, and let’s not forget the ever-popular baby wipes.
I believe our kids need to learn responsibility for themselves and the three Rs. My kids do enjoy the projects and even enjoy the shopping spree for school supplies each year. Still, I believe the pressures put on their small minds and hearts by the teachers and even their parents are too much to handle for an elementary school-aged child. At this point, what are we really teaching them?

When my daughter Hannah wants me to help with her project and I say “No, you can’t do this part, it is too difficult for even me to do,” I feel awful when I look at her and see a frustrated look of disappointment in her eyes. I had to work one morning and my son Ryan had a “Breakfast for Moms” in his classroom—I couldn’t go. Both he and I felt like losers, isn’t that special? God forbid I don’t send in the Ziploc sandwich bags when they were requested. That mistake will surely set the tone for my afternoon when they return home from school.

I like it the way I remember it. Mom played her mom role, I played my kid role, my teacher played the teacher role, sandwich bags were meant for a sandwich, and life was simple. I think we need to get back to the “Leave It To Beaver” days. You went to school, came home; simple, it was all so simple then. Ward read the paper, Mom cooked dinner, and the Beav played baseball, no projects in sight. Those were the good old days...
I love a man my mother calls
low brow.
He lives in a trailer
and owns one pair of shoes.

“Nothing,” my mother proclaims.
“He will amount to nothing.”
I only listen to her words.
I do not hear.

At night when the air
is thick with promise
we glide hand in hand
through unlit streets,
whispering about making babies,
planting saplings, and living
amongst the evergreens of Eugene.

Back at his trailer
which is rusty and cold,
he shows me his drawings.
Beautiful charcoal lines
etched on crisp paper.
We dine on saltines while
talking of Sartre, India and Bonsai trees.
He tells me of faraway places he visits in his mind.
He reads me poetry by a dim light.
Afterwards, we make love
on his bed under a velvet picture of Elvis.

How uncouth to let but a peasant enter me!
I laugh all the way home, where the Wedgwood is waiting to mock me. The housekeeper prepares canapés and serves them on the silver from the hutch. I pretend to like them but secretly wish I were eating the saltines.

Mother wants me to attend a party that her friends from the club are throwing. I can invite a guest, as long as he is proper.

I go alone.

I sneak out of the ballroom when no one is looking and walk the five miles to the rusty, cold trailer. Inside, we read poetry and drink warm wine from a box.

Later, against the mechanized humming of the refrigerator, the air thick with the promise of babies and evergreens, Elvis watches.
Differences

Tracy M. Young

While researching famous quotes, I must have considered hundreds. Several by Mark Twain struck a particular chord. Mahatma Gandhi, Ben Franklin, Bede Jarrett, and several others touched my heart. However, the quote that spoke to my soul was one by Vicki Imbornoni. She said, “You laugh at me because I’m different. I laugh at you because you’re all the same.” Those words brought to mind memories from my childhood and feelings I had long forgotten.

When I was growing up, I never seemed to fit in. I lived with my grandparents, not my mother like other kids. My mother was a white Puerto Rican, and my father, from what I know of him, was a black Puerto Rican. I never felt that I had a racial group or social clique that I could identify with. In elementary school children would not play with me. In junior high and high school I had very few real friends. I was told I was not black enough, white enough, or Latino enough. My hair was not straight enough, kinky enough, or blond enough. My skin was not the right color. There was always something that accentuated the differences between the rest of the groups and me. Consequently, I spent much of my time at home reading and studying.

When you grow up with very little money, you learn to make do with what you have, and shop where you can. Kids would laugh at me because I only had one pair of jeans to wear. They would say hurtful things like, “Don’t you ever wash your clothes?” or “Don’t stand too close to Tracy, she doesn’t wash her clothes.” I knew that my grandmother washed my jeans every other day but that didn’t matter to my classmates. To them, all they saw was that I wore the same jeans every day.

It also didn’t help that I developed before all the other girls in my grade. I was the only girl in the third grade with breasts, which made me the target of endless jokes. Boys would try to toss things down my blouse or they would try to peek into it. Girls called me a slut and I didn’t even know what
that meant. I cried daily and learned not to wear blouses with scooped necks.

In junior high school, when young girls are experimenting with makeup and learning to flirt with boys, I was still “the odd man out.” Being raised by old-fashioned Hispanic grandparents made life a little challenging. I recall standing in line for lunch one day when I happened to hear a group of girls making fun of me. That day I had worn a skirt to school and they were laughing at my unshaved legs. All the girls had shaved legs and tweezed brows, wore makeup, and had taken to streaking their hair. My grandfather wouldn’t hear of such things. To his way of thinking a “good girl” just didn’t do things like that. It was around that time that I became aware of the average person’s dislike of those they perceive as being smarter than themselves. Since all I did was read and study, my grades were very good.

High school was more of the same; I didn’t have the right clothes, right shoes, or right hair. I spoke too white, I didn’t speak enough Spanish, and I didn’t use slang. I didn’t curse, I didn’t smoke, and I wasn’t allowed to date. When I finally met a boy I liked, that opened a whole new can of worms. He was white. Why wasn’t he black or Hispanic? Weren’t they good enough for me?

Glenn was different. He came from an old-fashioned family, and he didn’t mind the rules my grandfather insisted on. The first date we went on was to the drive-in. We had to take my younger brother and three of my younger cousins, but we had a good time. He must have really liked me to put up with my younger brother going on all our dates. As much as Glenn liked me, our peers weren’t thrilled about his dating a non-white girl.

Not too long after the start of high school several girls got pregnant. Boys and girls were joining gangs, and you were either a jock or a punk. Drug use became the pastime of choice and hanging out was to thing to do. Studying was something geeks did.

It was around this time that things started to become clear to me. In the beginning, the not-so-subtle comments and the general cruelty wore me down. As time went by, however, I started to realize they didn’t dislike me because I was so very different from them; they disliked me because I seemed to have something they were lacking. Many of them came from broken homes. They had no moral guidance and pretty much ran amuck.
My grandparents raised me in a traditional Hispanic manner. I had strict rules to follow and I was kept on a tight rein.

Today most of my former classmates are on welfare and food stamps. They live in run-down homes that they rent or they still live at home with their parents. Too many are divorced and have children they see only on weekends and vacations. Several are in prison or dead from gang-related violence. I was lucky. I may have dropped out of high school, but I didn’t let that hold me back. I went to night school and got my GED. I enlisted in the Navy and served for ten years. I met and married my husband. I had kids. The bank, my husband, and I own my home. I own my car and am pursuing a college education using the veteran’s benefits I earned while serving in the Navy. Today I look back and I say, “You laughed at me because I was different. I laugh at you because you are all still the same.”
accelerate prevaricate
living in a lie
wishing that the thrill of speed
will make it all worthwhile
obsession regression
drinking up the fuel
feeding on the roar of engines
living my own rules
pulse is racing fear keeps chasing
try to make it last
i found out too late that i was
going all too fast
watch the burn take the turn
speed my only friend
alone and driving endless roads
will it ever end

hopelessness
the beast that dwells within
recklessness
i always have to win
hopelessness
a silent scream of pain
recklessness
it’s driving me insane
My Bed

No Author

Where are you now, why have you gone
Is my body not soft, my sheets not warm
You used to yearn to get home to lie on my pillow
We would spend long nights and often long mornings together
You came to me to talk, here with me you lay
Here with me you played, but now you’ve gone away

Do you not want to come home to me

You could lean on my shoulder, a place to cry
Is my pillow not what you want, is there one other than mine
You would wrap yourself in my arms, cover yourself with my sheets

They are still open
Do you not want to reside in my warm body

You would run to me from fear, my shoulder would catch your tears
We were together each night, until this point here
Is there someone else, why aren’t you the same
Let me know if you have found someone else’s arms to ease your pains
Have you found a new home, should I find one too
Nights have become so lonely, when I’m here without you
I was made with a purpose, to have someone in my life
Here with open arms to keep them warm when the world didn’t treat them right
I found that someone and I thought it was you
But now I’m cold and can’t stay warm without you

Please, come home
In a year and a half, I experienced the two most special moments of my life, marriage and motherhood. I could guarantee without a doubt that my life compared to no other. Every aspect of my life seemed complete and perfect. I had a husband, a beautiful baby girl, and the desire to make the best of my life, making as many memories as possible, together, as a family. I had found the answer to what completes me and brings me the greatest happiness, family.

My husband received orders to go to Korea for a year. When one is a part of the Air Force or any other branch of military, deployments are common and families have to expect them at any given time. It really doesn’t matter how much you prepare yourself though, because finding out that your spouse and the father of your newly-born child has to leave for a year comes as a shock and feels incredibly devastating. He was scheduled to leave in January and the days before he left came and went faster than any days I had ever experienced; emotions became a tangled web in my mind. Hopelessness, fear, and overwhelming sadness are just a few of the many emotions that consumed me.

I made sure everything was packed for him and made sure not to forget to stick those fifty small love notes in every small crevice, crack, or crease I could find in his bag. I felt scared to raise our daughter alone but I kept thinking how selfish that seemed when he had to go so far away from all that was familiar to him and all of the people he loved. I thought the notes would help his pain like Morgan, our daughter, helped mine. Standing in the airport, we hugged each other one last time and I held Morgan as we watched his plane fly out of sight.

I now had to figure out how to live a normal life for Morgan and for my sanity for the next seven months. Kevin planned to come home mid-tour to visit us in August for Morgan’s first birthday. Everything fell into place while he was gone, at least much better than I expected. What was different
turned normal but there remained a lonely feeling that only his presence could replace. The sounds of the F-15 jets flying over, which once annoyed me, brought me comfort, as silly as that may seem; the comfort came because Kevin worked on those jets while he lived at home. Counting down the days until his visit didn’t go quite as fast as the days before he left.

After many months, Morgan and I stood watching his plane come into sight, eagerly anticipating his return. The day couldn’t have been more perfect. I finally had my family back together and I was ready to make as many memories together during his short month home. I just didn’t prepare myself for what happened next. I am not even sure I could have prepared for this difficult event in my life. The days following his return did not go in any respect the way that I had imagined it would. In my dreams I saw the perfect loving couple, trying to make up for lost time, growing closer together, savoring every last second before having to leave again. After seven months away from one’s spouse, I guess anyone would expect nothing less. Instead, I experienced the unexpected and the most painful days of my life. My husband would not touch me or hug me, kiss me or hold my hand, smile at me or even say I love you. I felt the pain from this and, for seven days, experienced being pushed away from the man I loved so very much.

On the seventh day, two days after Morgan turned one, I confronted Kevin. I wanted to know why he was so distant and whether he wanted to be with us any more, as a family. He didn’t need to say a word, his eyes told me that he didn’t love me anymore. It was three in the morning when he packed his bags, woke Morgan to kiss her goodbye, and told me he would talk to me again one day, just like that. I remember the day more vividly than any other day of my life. I can recall the guitar infomercial that was playing on the television and how cold the ceramic tile floor felt on my feet as I stood helplessly crying while he packed his things to leave. I stood outside our front door, holding my sleepy-eyed little girl, and watched him walk away. Halfway down the driveway he turned around and said, “I think you two should go back in now,” then he turned and left—just like that. The tears fell endlessly and my heart felt as if it had been torn out of my chest and tied to his blue duffel bag that he dragged behind him.

It was this moment in my life that changed me completely. He stole my heart and self-confidence. It seemed like he took everything away from me. My dreams, my ideals of family, love, and trust disappeared. I felt heartless, I felt worthless, I became nothing. I questioned God a lot, asking Him why I had to deal with something so devastating at twenty-two years old. My life, I
felt, ended that day. I knew there could be no possible way to get through this situation that I now faced. I could never be the same again.

Most people say that time heals all wounds. I am a firm believer now in time as a remedy for a broken heart because it was for me. I realized that I didn't need to be the same anymore. My husband leaving Morgan and me will probably be the most painful experience of my life but it became a blessing in disguise too. I have not gained my self-confidence back but I gained a greater strength than I ever knew I could have. Through my struggle, I became strong-willed and a better mom. I learned everything from the different terms used in the divorce process to taking care of the bills and all the business on my own.

My independence is thriving, which is both good and bad. I never found out why he walked out on us and finding this out would be somewhat of a closure, but I found out much more than an answer to why. I found out who I am without him and the capabilities I have on my own. I feel that people have to experience pain to grow and be strong. The pain is sickening when it all happens, but with time and support, the outcome is usually positive. Pain is a learning process and no matter how tough the situation is and how much damage is done to your heart; you can get through it. I would never admit to it being an easy thing to do, but I do believe that a heart can be mended. This process is much slower than getting your heart broken but this is one thing that makes you stronger. Painful experiences demand that you be patient with yourself. It does not mean that it is the endæin fact, it is the beginning, of a new life, a new you. I have gained experience that gives me the strength and knowledge to help other people with their pain. Talking to others about their pain and using my strength makes me feel that my pain was worth it. My life has changed completely. In the beginning, I thought it had changed for the worst, but, in the end, my life has become better. Some things in life just aren't right and are not meant to be, but if you can get past that, there is something better waiting for you. I didn't believe that, but when I got past it, I found a more beautiful life waiting for me.
Driving into town, the once majestic courthouse stares down at me, as if guarding the town square from all who would enter its domain. The surrounding buildings look on. Their peeling facades, once bright and cheerful, are now tired and without life.

I am filled with a profound sense of sadness every time I come back to this dusty little west Texas town. All of my ancestors, some of the first to settle the great state of Texas, lived here at one time. They have all long since gone. There was no reason to stay. This place has nothing to offer.

Anson, Texas: once a thriving farm town surrounded by fields of fluffy cotton. At one time this was a bustling town full of life, the epicenter of activity for Jones County. Sporting several department stores, a movie theater, and even a skating rink, Anson, Texas, epitomized small-town America.

All of that has changed now. As big business consumed the agricultural industry, small family farms began to go under. When they went, they took everything with them, like cutting the very heart out of a living, breathing entity. Without its life blood, the rest of the town didn't stand a chance.

Most of those farms had been in the same families for generations, but as more and more people lost their reason for being there, they began to move away. Some of the older people stayed on. Perhaps they felt a sense of loyalty, perhaps they were disillusioned, perhaps they simply had nowhere else to go. Who can say? But as the young ones left and the old began to die, the town itself began a downward spiral to nowhere.

Now there is nothing left. The hot Texas sun, the dusty, deserted streets, the crumbling neglected buildings, this town is locked in despair. There is an intangible feeling in the air; a profound, lingering sense of sadness. As though watching an entire town die.
As I continue past the courthouse and on out of town, I feel as if it is watching me. Silently pleading for my return. Hoping that I might bring new life with me to save this dying town from the inevitable. A chill runs down my spine as my imagination gets the better of me. I can almost hear the wind whispering as I drive off “Don’t go. Please don’t go.” And the courthouse looks on.
Mystery Man

No Author

How could you be so cruel to me?
Leaving my mother alone to raise me, you see
You hate her so much; you take it all out on me

I am only a child, growing to become a man,
and soon one day I’ll be dead
It is awful to say I don’t know my dad
Call me a bastard child or just call me sad
With these lonely tears that I cry,
Seeking you, I will try
To find your first-born child
That you abandoned for miles and miles

I know in the back of my mind you think of me
Although I am still in the same place where you conceived me

It only takes a second to pick up a phone
Don’t do this to me, Dad, and leave me all alone
With no male figure to look upon

Who’s to teach me all the sports?
Like playing basketball on the courts
Just to let you know that it does hurt

But until that day, we shall meet again
So please ask God to forgive you for that sin

And if you have not figured out whom this message is from,
It’s me, the little one, your forgotten son
The Shaman

Kevin Shackley

Crouching in the shadows of a rocky cliff overlooking creation, he closed his eyes, naked, face tattooed with the blood of ancestors, wearing a necklace of their bones. Releasing a smoky blast through pierced nostrils, The Shaman smiled . . .

Unaware.

The nimbus herbal haze softly ascended, carried away on Angel's wings, toward the heavens of Silence. Massaged in sun rays, the cloudy collage took the form of a ghostly horse. Aiming a spiraled horn, gleaming spurs of shooting stars, It galloped with the wind, to heed the conjurer's call.

Atop his heavenly steed, The Shaman soared over dream waves on ancient driftwood through spiritual caves,
upon whose walls are written
the euphoric runes
of nature’s wisdom.
In the distance,
red glowing vapor
swirling energetic pulses,
churning behind a falling stream,
beckons.

With a nebulous leap,
gliding on the Milky Way,
The Shaman disappeared.
Into the crimson cloud,
out of the third dimension . . .

Here, atop this ledge,
this earthen altar of meditation,
I follow The Shaman’s creed.
Walking
across a clouded bridge,
to set with the sun.
Severing society’s umbilical cord
with an eerie sword.

So my soul flows
with the cosmos.
Going Home

Jody Menzie

I was so excited! I was finally going home! After having been away for several years, I was finally going back to that tiny, dot-on-a-map town that I had grown up in — and I couldn’t wait!

Lately my job, the traffic, the crowded stores, had all become like a yoke around my neck, dragging me down, threatening to turn me into one of those never-raise-your-eyes, never-smile, never-talk-to-strangers city zombies. I needed a break. A couple of weeks wrapped in the arms of small town life without all the stress and noise of the city was just what the doctor ordered. Of course, in my rush to return to the simpler things in life, I found it rather convenient to forget that this was the same little do-nothing town that just a few years ago I couldn’t wait to leave.

Later that afternoon, while sitting at my mother’s kitchen table, I stared out over the vast Texas hill country that rolled right up to the edge of town. My senses were captivated by the pungent smell of mesquite, the brightly colored wildflowers, the serenity of the gently sloping hills, and … a Wal-Mart? Where did that come from? I must be imagining things. I shook my head and blinked my eyes. I looked again, certain that this retailing monster was just a figment of my overblown imagination. But no, there it stood. Big and proud and … big. Just plain BIG.

I gave my mother a bewildered look and demanded to know how and when our quaint, quiet little town had been conquered by this small-business-eating giant. As I sat in stunned silence, Mom gave me a quick run-down of the struggle that had ensued when Wal-Mart had come sniffing around, looking for yet another small town in which to implant a new store. I watched a sad smile play across her face as she recounted how valiantly the townspeople had resisted the chain-store invasion. But in the end they lost and Wal-Mart moved in, right next to Bill’s Five and Dime. Soon after, Burger King came and Buster’s Burger Joint left. The local market managed to hang on for a little while but in the end it too succumbed for Piggly
Wiggly was no match for Wal-Mart, the super store.

Ever the optimist, my mother was quick to point out the many and much-needed jobs that these businesses brought with them. But I could hear the underlying note of sadness in her voice that belied her outward show of enthusiasm.

I looked out again over the beautiful West Texas countryside and felt a deep, profound sadness for something that was forever lost to me. Clearly our small town of five thousand people had not suddenly turned into a vast, sprawling metropolis but, still, the threat of inevitable change was there.

After years of trying to distance myself from my humble beginnings, it seemed rather ironic that when the simplicity of small-town living was what I needed most, it was no longer there for me. Many years earlier I had turned my back on this way of life, looking for something bigger and better and now all I wanted was to get it back. I yearned for that intangible feeling of small-town America.

I glanced over at my mother standing quietly by my side. She looked as if she knew exactly what I was thinking, and she shared my sorrow.
Two ladies
Strangers, eating alone

I furtively glance
at her table
She serenely sees
me at mine

She white-haired, me blond-isized

Her feet comfy in uncool, white lace-up leathers
Mine shoved into chic, stiff Cole-Haans
Her pink blouse loud, giant flowered
My white t-shirt blending in quiet

I shuffle papers
looking important, needed fighting the cell phone
Self-conscious, alone

Alone with her soul
looking peaceful wrinkled, old content to be
Unconsciously alone

She, full of grace
Me, potential grace
She at the end of her life
Me at the middle of mine
I will be her one day
I'm afraid . . . and I hope

She leaves
lumbering, slow grace
stops to steady herself
hand laid on my table
her eyes find mine
we smile

I watch too long
where she disappeared from sight
my hand laid on hers
absorbing the warm gift
left for me
Three Poems

Jennifer W. Branton

Decision of Eve
The lure of the color drove me to eat the apple.
Sinking my teeth into the textured, meaty fruit,
I tasted the sweetness of red.
Pulling the apple from my mouth to see
The delicious juice dripping onto my fingers,
I realized the truth of what I am.

The End
Thought from spark, in the moist, electric plains of the mind.
Ongoing, never ending, until a person's last time.
After death, intelligence and answers will be born from one voice.
Arriving and hearing will depend on life's one choice.

Time
The clock tics its timely seconds.
One after the other, turning hands and patterned shapes fall into line like ordered soldiers.
From old to new, motion moves faster with no definition of beginning or ending.
It was one of those times in life you don’t forget. My Aunt Debbie and my three cousins were in the process of moving in with my mom, my sister, and me. My cousins were out in the neighborhood trying to make new friends. I was at my friend’s house across the street trading baseball cards. As I look back, I kick myself for being there on that life-changing afternoon. I never even liked baseball cards! But I was eleven years old and trying to be normal.

After a few hours of negotiating, I headed home. I noticed a bunch of the neighborhood ladies standing in the yard. “Oh, great,” I thought sarcastically. “What’s going on? Some boring old parent party or something?” Then I noticed that some were crying. I saw my cousin Candice sitting in the yard almost in shock. The looks on their faces were the kind that could mean only one thing. Slowly the images began to sink in: red, white, lights, truck. I had been so wrapped up in my dislike of my mother’s get-togethers that I had missed the large, cubical truck parked in front of the house. Had I not noticed the ambulance before?

I asked the first face I saw what had happened. “It’s Debbie,” she said. No other details were available and I didn’t need any. My aunt was in trouble, that’s all I knew. I stood outside with my family for five minutes or two hours, I don’t remember which. It was odd. My house, my home where I was always welcome, became off limits. Not because I was banned but by my own restriction. I was in shock like the others, numb.

I’ll never forget the sight, and my dread, when I saw the paramedics wheeling my Aunt Debbie out, pushing on her chest, some sort of plastic apparatus on her face. I was terrified. My good friend Nicole was holding my bawling cousin, Candice. Through her own tears she asked me, “Why aren’t you crying?” I’m stunned when I think back on my answer at the age of eleven, “The man of the house doesn’t cry.” The paramedics boarded the ambulance with my aunt and sped away.
My family flocked to my house to await any updates. The excruciating night drew out forever. “Bad news travels fast,” they kept assuring me. The hours dragged on. Apparently, this news, good or bad, was taking its time. Eventually it came: fatal cardiac arrest. We were crushed and spent what was left of the night crying in each other’s arms.

The next few days went by too slowly, though in my memory they seem to go too fast, like a blur. I wanted to remember every minute. But I was too numb, too busy being strong for Mom, to experience it in real time. I wanted it to all be over with, to be able to feel again. Now I wish I had allowed myself to grieve more, to be sad.

Debbie was in the funeral home for our family to view for two days. The funeral service was on the third. The three times I saw my Aunt Debbie, I wanted to reach out and touch her, to hug her. She used to give the best hugs, especially when I was crying. Every time I went up to the casket, I was crying.

But I was eleven; I was new to death. I was especially new to the social aspect of death. Was it wrong to hug someone at a wake? Certainly not anyone still alive but what about the one person I really wanted to hug? The one that wouldn’t be there next week to hug when I was crying? Being who I am, I didn’t ask. I just didn’t touch her.

At the funeral service, when they closed the casket, I knew. I had waited too long. My last chance had passed and I hadn’t realized it. I thought surely there would be more time, time to ask if I could touch her. Surely there was more time, there’s always more time…later. When the lid closed, it set in. There would be no more time, no later. I wept.

One day the following year, I came home from school and my mom and step-dad had that look on their faces. My grandfather had died. On the nights of the viewing, I told myself I wouldn’t let him slip away too. Each time I went to see him I was determined to touch him. But I didn’t. I realized it was happening all over again. Finally, I asked my mom, “Can I touch him?” “Of course,” she said, “do you want to?” I nodded. She took my hand as I reached out and placed it on his chest, like I had done for so many years. I took his hand in mine and held it. It was cold and wrinkled more than normal, but it was still Granddaddy. When his lid closed, I was ready. I said goodbye the best I could with the opportunity I had. I cried, but only for him, not the lost chance to say goodbye.
I've determined to never let the lid close again. Not before I'm ready. If I feel that someone does not know how I feel toward them, I make a point to tell them. If I have anything to say about it, no one will leave my life again unprepared. They will know all the things I've thought about them and prayed for them and wanted to tell them. I don't wait until they're leaving. I tell them while I have the chance. The only chance I have is now, before later is gone.
A Blessing in Disguise

George Sumner

Growing up, I used to think that working in restaurants made a person develop either a love or hatred towards children. It seemed as if all of my experiences with kids were negative ones. There were the huge messes of spaghetti on the floors at IHOP. There were the endless seats full of chips, salsa, and tortillas at Don Pablo. Who was left with the huge mess to clean up? Me! I never understood what the parents were doing when these rug-rats were making these enormous messes.

Why did these kids’ parents give them so much freedom? I always vowed to never let my children act like the ones I grew accustomed to seeing at my jobs. That always seemed to be a Freudian slip because I could not stand kids.

I always seemed to be at the forefront of anti-children talks. How can a parent tolerate all of the crying, whimpering, and poopy-diapers? Somehow, in my radical leadership of protesting against children, it seemed that I was destined to get what was due to me.

It was a beautiful spring day: the sun was shining, the wind was gently blowing, and the bees were buzzing, all in perfect harmony. Suddenly my girlfriend bursts into the bathroom with life-changing news. “George, I am pregnant.” Oh, no, not me, what have I done to deserve this? This had to be a joke. Was it my ridiculous thoughts on bearing children that cursed me? What was going on?

After accepting the fact that I was becoming a father, I began to go through a roller coaster of emotions. At times I was disappointed in myself for not taking proper precautions to prevent something like this from happening. At other times I was happy that the earth was about to be blessed with my seed. There was no denying that I was scared to death about the whole situation.
I turned to my mother for support because she had plenty of experience raising five children on her own. I came to her with this question, "What does it take to become a great parent, role model, and friend?" She replied, "You need to be a teacher, not only showing the good, but why the bad is bad. At times you won't be able to be a friend, just a father. Then and only then will you establish yourself as your son's role model."

I had to gather as much information as possible. There was no way I was going to be absent from my child's life like my father was in mine. At that moment I realized why I had such a problem with kids. It was not because of the messes on the floors or the dirty tables I had to clean up behind them. Deep inside me I wished I had someone there to throw spaghetti at, someone who would feed me chips, someone to call my daddy.

My son Anthony, who is eight months old, is the most important person in my life. Regardless of the messes he leaves after eating or the truckloads of dirty diapers I have to wash, he is worth the time it takes to clean up. One little goofy smile from him and my questions are answered as to why parents let their kids get away with the things they do.
The Day Before

J.D.C.

When you look at me
You see what I am today.
When I look at you
I see who you were yesterday.

I was not always who I am now.
I had dreams, I was loved.
I was rich in blessings
I was another man.

But you are now as you were.
I see no changes. I see only you.
Perceptions

Therese Stinson

They say I'm cute, have a nice smile
Do they dare look beyond the portrait they've drawn?
So simple I seem. Complex? Not me
If they only knew how deep I exist, the lengths I've gone

Perhaps one day I could explain
A day when the light has also shone on me
For when all questions are answered
I can share my thoughts with thee

My mind wanders each second, each day
I pray sometimes that it will stop so I can rest
This is why I cannot, cannot
Invite into my world a guest

My world is still uncertain
The location and purpose unknown
I long for the day to share my soul
For now I shall live here alone
Peeling Potatoes

Bliss Patterson

Peeling potatoes under this cold winter water and my hands are numb and bleeding from my work in the fields and my tending to your needs, while my needs are simmering like the apples on the stove only to be made into applesauce that is as sour as my love for you.

You talk to me like I am but a child needing guidance and constant correction. Your words are as cold as stones in the snow.

And at night you expect me to love you with my body, forgetting that it is connected to the mind that you deem so hopeless.

I am but a warm box where you fill your nightly treasures and a porter who cleans your house by day.

It is not your fault that you and I speak another language. Men and women, their tongues were made for such different lives than these.

I slept with someone last night and the night before that, and it wasn’t your brother or the man at the bakery, but a sister, not mine or yours, but someone’s sister and
she spoke to me with unspoken words
and with the same leaden heart as mine.

So you take the horse and the plows
and the potatoes that need peeling.
And when your hands begin to bleed,
bandage them like I have learned to do.

I don’t love you anymore.
It's Not Just A Pen!

Mary Sundberg

It seems so simple
Just to write what needs to be
reports, documents, letters, whatever
It's not just a pen to me
It's my gateway to heaven and hell
My friend
It knows everything and leads the way for me
Maybe to light, maybe to dark
Who knows but the pen
Poetry, books, plays, short stories, life, love, pain
You should see how the pen kisses the paper
How it slides and creates something beautiful
The simplest moves
It speaks and it always speaks truth
It's not just a pen
My Barbie Was A Filthy Commie

Anna Mosity aka Irish Peele Engel

In our family, my generation grew up in a really small town in North Carolina. Not just small, but remote too—an island, in fact. My grandparents were the first ones on the island to get a television. My grandad went up to Norfolk and bought a giant one, assuming it’d work just fine. But as it turned out, we couldn't get reception very well. You could halfway see one channel when the wind was blowing in the right direction. And actually, that was sort of a comedy in itself—everyone in the room would be chatting, going on about their business till the reception faded in. Then the room became silent—Grandmom had to look at her stories and the rest of us just drank in a little contact with the mainland, albeit brief. And as it faded out, we’d resume our conversations, chores, etc., again. I guess you had to be there...

Anyhow, the point of my story is, I kinda think my parents spoiled us with toys and stuff. Probably due to our lack of access to technology. So my sister and I began to accumulate an impressive collection of Barbie dolls. Not the fancy-pants kind either. Our Barbies were full-on liberated-women action figures! They ran in the sand, got thrown off of the docks (high dives), they surfed and they were scuba divers. We even had one we would tie to the grill of our Oldsmobile for trips to town—“mosquito Barbie” we called her. The only doll who received preferential treatment was our sacred Julia doll—and only because she was black. In the ‘60s there were no black people living in Hatteras, so it was natural that young children would be preoccupied with such a rare sight.

Then we discovered horses—as all red-blooded American girls do. So we began to collect toy horses as well. That’s when the trouble started. As it turns out, the rat-bastard toy designers who worked at the Barbie factory never took horseback riding into consideration when they designed Barbie's moving parts. Her legs only move from front to back, not laterally from side to side (that would be unladylike). So when you try to put Barbie on a
horse, her legs pop out of the socket! *Sah!* What kind of an idiot would
design a doll for little girls who can't even ride a horse?!

It quickly became apparent that we’d have to cross the forbidden gender
barrier and get some male dolls. I mean, at least they could ride a damn
horse! Lucky for us, our parents were very hip. So they didn’t balk at
getting us a G.I. Joe or one of the other male dolls made by the sexist, rat-
bastards at Mattel. I chose the blonde G.I. Joe with life-like hair.

And men being men, the male dolls quickly came to dominate our formi-
dable collection of ragged-out Barbies—even Julia. We began to think of the
Barbies as being utterly pathetic because of their lack of equestrian abilities.
Plus you could throw G.I. Joes farther (they were heavier). Eventually, our
Barbies became outcasts, social outcasts, who represented the male chauvin-
ist pig toy designers at Mattel (it was the ‘60s, what can I say?). They
represented all that was wrong with society in general—it was a conspiracy!

Finally, we just couldn’t tolerate these feeble representatives of femininity
any longer. We had to put them on trial—for treason! They were spies! They
must be spies! And while they were on trial, we strongly felt that society
should be protected from them—so we tied them up to the bedposts on our
beds! And we left them there for the remainder of the trial (which lasted all
summer).

I remember my grandpop walking into our room and gasping at the sight; I
think his hair stood right-straight up. Then he laughed louder than I’d ever
heard him laugh (he was hip too). By the end of that summer, we’d finally
obtained a conviction and sentenced them to move to Virginia Beach, an
appropriate place for hussy spies. We all moved.

Thinking back on the whole ridiculous story, I’ve always said that native
Hatterassers are a little on the paranoid side (as a native, I can say that),
possibly a leftover self-defense mechanism from the pirate days. Or maybe it
was just a reflection of the times coupled with a juvenile affinity to emulate
one’s heroes—in our case, Mrs. Peele from the TV show “The Avengers.”
Night Watch

Kevin Shackley

Night Watch,
Commander of the Sea,
took a shotgun shell
from the pocket of his shirt. In the distance
the moon,
Commander of the Star Brigade. Adorned with a star
his shirt sleeve covered his watch.
The moon,
reflected in the sea,
swam into the distance.

Before dropping his shotgun shell
he sang, “Me shell,
my belle.” A five-star
general, too much distance
stood between his night watch
and his Michelle. Separated by the sea,
under the same bright moon.

Never forgetting her or the moon,
he lunged for the shell
he dropped, that rolled into the sea.
Water splashed like the shooting star
he loved to watch,
streaking in the distance.

A speckled star in the distance,
like the moon,
seemed saddened to watch
cigarettes gather in the scallop shell;
his ashtray. Once a proud, reeling star of combat, his reminder entombed by the sea.

The salty sweetness of a sea breeze, spanned the distance to the nearest star, who twinkled to salute the moon. Like the drowning of his shotgun shell, all he could do was watch.

Night Watch.
Into the sea he dropped his shell.
In the distance, a star cries with the moon.
Vengeance of The Gods

Daniel Owens

The tears of the gods fall heavily.
Rivers flood.
The thirst of the earth is quenched.

The breath of the gods blows through the air.
Trees fall.
The seeds of the future are planted.

The energy of the gods strikes hard.
Forests burn.
The fruits of the earth return to the soil.

The fingers of the gods scrape the land.
Homes crumble.
Mankind is punished for disrespecting the earth.

The footsteps of the gods shake the land.
Buildings fall.
Mankind is shown his failures in progress.

The blood of the gods scorches the land.
Cities burn.
Mankind is sentenced to leave.
My days are filled with an aching sadness and my nights pass in black dread. My mountainous spirit knows you’ve moved in like an unwanted guest that won’t leave. I can feel you burning my toes, searing, pressing up from below. I know what it means. I remember you . . . in another life . . . the cycle of destruction and rebirth. I recognize you and I know it is time again.

I am Helen . . . St. Helen. My sisters and I, comprising a magnificent necklace of volcanoes, cascade our beauty as if our maker let loose a handful of priceless gems. Each of us a precious jewel, almost too beautiful to behold. It is our dazzling beauty that deceives and disguises one fatal flaw. Our mere existence flaunts a weakness in the fabric of the land upon which we are scattered. We are simply mountains. It is through us that the broiling fever-rage from below is finally and irrefutably expressed. I am the youngest in the chain and, sadly, I am the weakest.

I must warn my flock! The rising magma flows so close. The pressure is becoming unbearable. I am like a dying mother, only my death means not only my own demise, but, horribly . . . death for my children. My guilt consumes me. The end is near.

For months, I have wreathed a circle of steam at my peaks as a sign—stay away! I seep sulfurous fumes through my pores—something is wrong! Like a malignant cancer, I loosen my grip and let a sickening bulge appear on my north face—I am not healthy! I hope my warning signs are unmistakable. Please heed them, I pray.

The living souls that make me their home sense that I am not well. They feel the tremors that run through my body and they smell the reek of sulfur. Their keen senses tell them to hide and burrow, move away, fly away from my peaks, go down my flanks—toward the valley.
But the people! Their big brains and curious natures render them the dumbest creatures of all. Their intelligence has stolen their senses and instincts. They still come to me in droves, oblivious to my warnings. No! My halo of steam is not a beacon beckoning “to come” . . . it is a distress signal warning “stay away!!”

I beg you! Do not come today . . . scaling my heights in your hobnailed boots; do not come today with whining chainsaws that split the air, logging my trees; do not come today wearing swimsuits and toting fishing tackle to Spirit Lake; do not come today camping at my skirts; do not come today to watch curiously my final struggling moments. I am so sorry . . . I can protect you no more.

The moment has come. It is my apocalypse. It is the wrenching moment of sadness I have dreaded. I am not ready.

The explosion turns me inside-out. The force—unimaginable. Billions of deaths rent the air in a ferocious, unabated, inescapable roar—beyond comprehension. The lazy droning of insects and the cool, casual sweeping of evergreen boughs from a moment ago—gone. My new, delicate, spring-green cloak—now smothered by heavy, hot, slippery mud. It is as if every single bone of my body has shattered and I am covered in the hot, slick marrow. All around me and for miles above me, hot ash and burning chunks of molten earth shower down onto what is left of me—a smoking-gray, muddy moonscape. Bare, black trees smolder and lay deadly, fanned out like matchsticks. There is no sign of life. Time has ceased.

In the end, it is through Spirit Lake that my soul finally escapes. This life is over. My sorrow is freed.
As I looked at its emptiness; I became possessed by an urge to fill it
With words. So that they danced across the space, each one falling into
place.
And still, the words marched on.
Each one singing a song. The fire raged and the words blazed
And still, the words marched on.
I took on a look that was quite crazed
I’m sure that I was dazed
Still the words came and sang. I feared they would never end
Until the faint cry of a wolf in the distance floated through my window
Then I knew the pace had slowed; oh sure, the words still flowed
But the fire had dwindled till it glowed.
As I sat back to reflect, my eyes did drift to the page
And rest upon the words I could not reject
To discover the writing was not my own
But still, the words marched on …
Vancouver

Thorayya Said

The world’s open to explore
The gateway through my body
Let’s discover all we can
Let’s go where they can never find us

Where the night is quiet and caressing
And the stars the only guides
This road to nowhere
This Dark Path

May lead us anywhere
But can we really question
Can we even comprehend
The luscious spider webs
That lay before us

In unimaginable patterns.
What a delicious mood
To live in
Like sleeping in silk and velvet

Like sleeping in your arms
Forever and ever
Just us among our noisy
Thoughts
Holograms of Ascension

Anna Mosity aka Irish Peele Engel

It’s a strange scene when someone dies. Watching them breathe their last breaths, seeing the flesh-tones fade from their skin as it changes to a peculiar blue pallor. And as their breath becomes more shallow, a sensitive person can feel them slipping away all the more deeply. Deeper and deeper, until the sensitive living become practically breathless themselves. Simple words can hardly describe the profound feeling one has while watching another living creature succumb to life’s final release—breathtaking, intense, sacred, most definitely, but also inter-dimensional as well.

The first time, it happened purely by chance. I was coming home from the store and unexpectedly drove onto a dreadful scene in my neighborhood. Someone had just struck a cat and it looked like a fatal situation. There were a handful of people gathering in the road around the dying cat, but no one was doing anything. There was a young sailor who seemed to be in charge, probably a Navy chief. The woman who hit it had stopped to check on it. I secretly cussed her for driving like a maniac through a residential area, but at the same time I felt sorry for her. She had her little girl there too and they were both crying. Before I realized the cat murderers were present, I commented to the sailor about people racing through our neighborhood as if it were a NASCAR track. He agreed and said he lived right there and had seen the worst of it on a daily basis.

Even though it’s a quiet street, traffic was coming by. It seemed the humane thing to do was move the dying cat to the grass. I got a rigid plastic “For Sale” sign out of the window of our van and did my best to quickly slide it under the poor animal. Kind of like pulling the tablecloth out from under a set table but in reverse. The sailor quipped, “It’ll bite you!”—which was ridiculous. This kitty’s biting days were over. I carried it as gently as possible to the grass and set it down, sign and all. I felt bad for the cat too. So I stroked his fur a couple of times as softly as possible and did my best to silently say farewell, by using the best telepathic communication ability I could muster up (yeah, I know that’s ridiculous but I didn’t want to speak
my private thoughts out loud). And as the poor creature died, the strangest thing happened: he became holographic. Right smack-dab before my eyes— a furry hologram. By the time I realized the magnitude of what I’d just seen, he was gone and so was the hologram. And I wanted more than anything to jump up and scream, “Did ya’ll just see that?” but it occurred to me that no one else had seen it. So I raced back to my van, and tried to regain my composure as I drove home. I’m sure the others thought I was shook up over the loss of the cat, but actually it was what I’d seen that completely flipped me out. After a few days, I’d written the vision off as stress.

A few years later, our dog Buddy (who was 14) was losing his ability to swallow. My husband and I put it off as long as we could, probably longer than we should have. It finally came time to put him down. After our vet gave him the shot, he handed us a box of Kleenex and left the room. Of course it was profoundly sad seeing Buddy die. I sat on the floor and held his head in my lap as he slipped away. I hadn’t yet started to cry when it happened again: right smack-dab in front of me, Buddy became a hologram, a dimensionally morphing hologram. This time it lasted a little longer than before. When he was gone, I asked my husband, “Did you see that?” When he answered “What?” I realized he hadn’t, so I didn’t press the issue. Mostly because it was so weird, but also because the feeling was so personal.

Last summer, my great aunt, Dorothe, died. She had basically raised my mom and her siblings, so we were extremely close. She had a fantastic wit along with that biting humor you’d expect from a big-city retail buyer. It was a tremendous loss for us all. At her funeral in Toms River, we suffered through the eulogy and lined up to say our last goodbyes to her lifeless body—such a strange sight. I had put off going up to the casket and viewing her body before the ceremony because I knew it would only open the floodgate of tears. For the first time, she looked like everyone else in the family. When it was my turn, I took her cold hand and quietly thanked her for thirty-plus years of “CARE packages” (even the ones with pistachio pudding) and also for my forked tongue. Well, it was then that the strange sight got even stranger. As I held her hand, her cold vacant body smiled right back at me. As sure as the day is long, she smiled a big, toothy, ear-to-ear smile. A holographic smile. And I was absolutely stunned. I couldn’t move, I couldn’t breathe, and I couldn’t speak—another truly breathtaking experience.

And it was there with Aunt Dorothe that it hit me. Her holographic smile was a gift, a gift of perception.
Bulletproof Vest

Mary Sundberg

Type one: 
When I'm with you, I must have one
When I think of you in that way, I must wear one
When you kiss me, I must use one
Wait, you're not with me
I'll still keep one handy
Just in case that faithful day comes where you'll shoot me
Dead, shot my heart
It may just save my life

Type two:
When I'm with you, I must have one
When I think of you in that way, I must wear one
When you kiss me, I must use one
You've got it in your wallet, right?
Remember!
Children in the dark cause accidents
Accidents in the dark cause children
Self-Portrait

Bob Frenzel

Single, singular
fostered in laxity
tender age spent
fighting left from right
forced in mediocrity
discovered blondes don't
have more fun
under the compete gun,
lost in the city
teen years
spent dazed
legacy of
purple haze
living in
self pity,
long years walking
on the bloody
trail looking
finding nothing
pursued by the
ghost of imperfection
driven to blasphemy
encompassed about
by growing miniature
carbon-copy circlet
ever-tightening
volition in tow
by necessity
emancipation found
in every day
unlocking the wedlock
finding deliverance 
inside myself 
while smitten by 
the spirit of 
a kindred flame 
awaiting my liberty
Equality. Men have died for it. Women have strived for it. Minorities have fought for it. Still, it has not been achieved. Can it be achieved? For that matter, what is it? Without a standard for equality, it is impossible for a society to know when it has reached it. Does equality mean all people have the same standard of living, the same upbringing, the same opportunities, and the same treatment? If so, there would be no handicapped access to anything, that would not be absolute equality. Closed captioning would not exist, that would be special treatment. Obviously, equality is something more than just equal treatment. Equality is the Golden Rule. It is treating each and every person you encounter with the same respect, dignity, and unconditional love with which you would want to be treated if you were in their shoes.

In terms of life on earth, equality in this truest form only exists in rare, fragile bubbles of space and time. One such bubble took form over the course of a few hours one September morning in 2001. It started out as just a Tuesday. It went on to become the beginning of the “first war of the 21st century.” To the horror and disbelief of an entire world, four American planes were hijacked and three of them were kamikazied into three of the United States’ symbolic structures: the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In a matter of two hours, America’s twin pillars of capitalism lay in ruins, its symbol of impenetrable defense wounded.

As the depth of this attack sunk into the American psyche, the bubble solidified. All debts were forgiven for the moment and life slowed. In New York City, life halted, except for rescue work. Even Wall Street held its breath by closing down the stock market for three days. New Yorkers achieved a level of equality and cooperation unmatched in their recent history. City residents flooded, even overwhelmed, Red Cross stations to help their fellow citizens by donating blood. Hundreds of volunteers were turned away at the site of the rubble, Mayor Giuliani said in a news briefing rubble, that there were too many volunteers already. Across the U.S., rescue
teams loaded up to deploy to New York, donations were gathered for disaster relief, and memorial services were conducted. Where businesses were open, customers were more patient and understanding and businesses went the extra mile to help patrons. American flags waved like never before. U.S. citizens nationwide sympathized with each other and showed common courtesies often neglected during less trying times. Patriotism flourished as it often does in times of crisis.

Unimaginable pictures began streaming across the airwaves. Scenes of smoke and dust billowing out of lower Manhattan and armed soldiers deployed in a crowded U.S. city played throughout the day. One striking image sticks out above the rest. During the collapse of the Twin Towers, concrete dust flew like volcanic ash through the skyscraper valleys of New York City. Anything and anyone within several blocks was coated in a layer of the gray powder. As the cloud settled, a new race emerged: not black, not white, not Hispanic, not Asian, nor any other race seen before. This new gray race of humanity emerged, bonded together by their circumstance, united against an enemy.

The American gray race stepped out, stepped up, and headed back into the fray. News reporters, fire and rescue workers, police officers, and onlookers all became part of one team, one nation under God, under attack. No attention was paid to ancestry, sex, or age. No mention was made of income or political party. Each member of the gray race gave his or her all to the others. Mutual respect was a necessity; dignity, a given; love, a standard. For the next few hours, no minority rights were infringed upon. Not one quibble was heard about which agenda to follow. No argument was made about the task at hand. In the midst of the terrorist-created rubble pile, peace, unity, and equality reigned.

As is true in all American crises, however, the walls of the bubble of equality began to soften with time. The first signs of decay came after a few days. Reports trickled in of attacks on Arab- and Afghan-Americans by citizens seeking an outlet for their frustration. Lack of faith in the U.S. economy was in evidence when the stock market re-opened and quickly plummeted. Commuters resumed their road rage and most Americans commenced Operation Usual. Wisps of patriotism and equality lingered, but the remains of the bubble continued to fall. As the pieces hit, people blamed their neighbors and equality once again took a back seat to personal interest.

It is hard to tell now what will become of the U.S. Only time will reveal how true Americans are to their standards of patriotism and equality. Will the
Stars and Stripes continue to fly from car antennas? Will courtesy and equality survive? No one knows. One thing is for sure: another day will come when the enemy will rear its head, Americans will be startled, and a bubble of equality will begin to form again.
The driving feels effortless, the road a liquid ribbon slipping away easily behind me. Alone, my mind wanders, relishing the unusual luxury.

How could he not know that Big Red was dead, I wondered? “Have you looked at the fish lately?” he had asked the other night. Looking across the room, I was reminded of the inadequate feeling that sneaks up on me when I see a photograph of a familiar face. The photograph only manages to capture one single facet of that face out of billions possible. I suddenly felt inadequate. Even from my more distant vantage point, I knew there was nothing I could do. It was obvious that this was Big Red’s singular facet left—his “dead facet.”

He was on his side. His fluid, organza-like fins, which normally streamed behind him like a watery breeze, hung straight down with not even the slightest bit of life flowing from his silken tail. His dull white eye stared straight up at us. “Well, I haven’t noticed anything in particular about him since dinner but now that you’ve pointed it out to me, I’ve noticed he is dead,” I told him. I was annoyed that not only did I have to explain to the kids that their beloved Big Red was dead, but I had to explain it to their dad as well. Now, in the car, I chuckle to myself when I think about seeing him later— I’ll call him Big Kid.

I soar over the road and my mind moves on. Yesterday on the phone, my mom was evasive and suspiciously chipper. I realize that I feel uneasy and that I’m afraid to see her. The disease has stolen my pink, robust mother and left behind a terribly thin person who wears a weak, translucent smile. Every time I see her, I am more shocked. As I recall our last visit, I had worried out loud to her over the phone, “I hope the boys don’t get on your nerves this time.” She had fallen right after we left that day and lay there for nearly eight hours before my father came home from work and found her on the floor. We wore her out that much.
I wonder if someone will have to explain to me when she is gone the way I had to explain to my family about Big Red. Slowly but surely her facets are disappearing. I dread the day when her life has gone and there is only one facet left.

As I pull into their driveway, I am glad for the time on the road. I feel ready now when I go in to see her.
Our fear cast a sickening, invisible pall that filled up the sky.
It would float down and trap us under the billow of its parachute.
Pride stolen by occupying Germans, made up for in moments of extraordinary mettle,
my boyish dreams would imagine beyond
all reason, taking revenge, blood drops
soaking into our French soil—fear filling their eyes.

They had looked like gods to my 12-year-old eyes
that summer night when they fell from the sky
like torrents of inverted raindrops.
Moonflowers flying fearless into German flak, one chute
blowing over our farmhouse beyond
the barn, my young ears . . . later heard a click, like metal.

He filled up the doorway, moon glowing off his metal
helmet, bigger than any man, asking for refuge with his eyes.
Mother, father and my sisters gathered frightened around the table, beyond
words. I went to him and looked outside and gazed up to the sky.
Our lives filled with so much death, so unpredictable—a parachute!
I cried for the soldiers falling like teardrops.

The long look between my mother and father drops
like a bomb, the fear tasting like metal
in our mouths. Every pocket on him bulging, his chute,
stuffed quickly, bulged from his pack, our eyes
bulged too, afraid to look upon what had come from the sky.
The risks we would take to shelter him inspire dread, awe . . . and beyond.
He stays, like an animal, in the farthest stall beyond Coliche. He is shaving when I appear with his bread, turning quickly, his tunic drops open to reveal a star, not like a star in the sky, a star the color of a penny, a medal hanging inside his coat. His direct gaze meets my eyes staring. I finally leave, like a normal farm boy, down the hay chute.

Yesterday, I slid down. Today, Germans soldiers march up the chute. My breath comes quick, heart in my ears pounding beyond hearing. Sheer fear overflows our bodies and drops of sweat and tears fall as we huddle, barely breathing, eyes downcast. My fingers clenched painfully around his gift, the medal. My prayers to “please watch over him” surge to the sky.

Beyond all death, the open fresh sky breathes blue on drops of despair that course down my face when I hear them shoot my savior.

Eyes of a boy, remember the wary kindness and the treasured medal—from the nameless soldier.

Dedicated to my uncle, Richard H. Potter, S/Sgt., United States Army Recipient, Bronze Star Medal for distinguished heroism and courage on the battlefields of France in the summer of 1944.
Skeletal visions
of mislaid dreams
crash onto shores of uncertainty,
on the beaches
of uncharted islands.
Languid footsteps
of hopeless children
leave shadowy trails
on the wake of a passing ship.
Blood
Vessel
Intravenous tide,
rising in thermal frustration.

Sun
Dance,
eradicate a tainted atmosphere,
bake this stranded soul.
Beneath the crisp,
charred palms of my resort,
crushed melons bleed
sweet yellow puddles of defeat.
Shame
feasts upon the fruitful oppressors;
casualties of bitterness.

In sandy grains
of the past,
the ghosts of innocence
still play
two-hand-touch football
in the street,
laugh yesterday's laughter, 
swim in the clearest pools 
of yesterday's content.

But reminders of today 
erupt from these still waters 
of temporary refuge. 
Stealing this yesterday excursion, 
changing crystal waterways 
into swamps of turmoil. 
Worldly madness, 
chaos that pollutes 
the ecosystem of my heart, 
and drives it to distant stars, 
which burn in the furthest reaches 
of my perplexed inner galaxy . . .

light-years from sanity.
I push open the heavy glass double doors, holding one for Shannon, and step into a foreign land. The smog blankets the street so thickly that I can’t read the signs on the buildings across the street. Even if I could see them, I probably wouldn’t be able to read them. Despite the smog, the sun beats down on my face and shoulders. I wish I’d brought my hat with me, but it isn’t worth climbing the four flights of stairs up to my hotel room to get it.

It’s still early in the morning so people stand clustered on the curb waiting for the bus. Across the street, through the pollution, I can see a half-dozen taxis parked together blocking part of the road. The drivers are squatted in a circle on the opposite sidewalk, playing some kind of card game. Dozens upon dozens of old bicycles rattle by. We start down the road.

We need to make copies of some papers before class starts and Shannon tells me there’s a copy store just down the road, on the corner. I don’t remember seeing a copy store but I probably wouldn’t recognize it anyway. We pass a closed, decaying hotel with a large glass front and blue walls; a pair of dragons stand guard on either side of the filthy, unused doors—faded red scarves are tied around their necks.

“Why do all the dragons here have red scarves around their necks?” I ask Shannon.

“It’s because the Chinese people view the color red as the color of fortune and prosperity,” she answers. That made sense to me; nearly every building was partially adorned in red.

We walk on, and after a few minutes the sidewalk narrows and fills with cracks. Soon we have to step out into the street to avoid the large patches of muddy earth where pieces of the sidewalk have disappeared. As we continue, we pass an old man squatting in the mud by the curb, smoking a cigarette; two little girls play next to him. The three of them are wearing nothing more than ripped pairs of old, faded shorts. Shannon kneels down
and smiles at one of the girls, holding her hand out. The little girl walks over and takes Shannon’s hand and Shannon touches the girl’s dirty face. The old man smiles up at us and says something in Chinese. Shannon answers him and we move on our way. Shannon tells me that the old man is very lucky; those girls are his grandchildren and they are twins. In China it is illegal to have more than one child per family. By Chinese law, all second pregnancies must be aborted. The birth of twins feels like winning the lottery.

We’re now on the corner of Fu Chang Lu, a busy school street in the eastern section of the city. Shannon points to a small building with white-painted concrete walls and what looks like a cardboard roof. We step through the open door into a small room. The floor is a combination of mud, cardboard, and concrete. The smell of melted plastic and ink floats on the air. The room is smaller than my room back home but doubles as a home for four people and a store. High-tech printing equipment sit on desks and tables; this little closet has all the capabilities of any American print shop. Shannon gives them the papers to copy.

Beijing, China: I have to wonder at the different paradigms for life here. We head back to the hotel, past the old man and the girls, and I can’t complain about the heat or smog. At least I can go home. This is their home and they call themselves “the privileged.”

Everyone permitted by the Chinese government to live in Beijing is considered among the elite of the country—even the poor old man who sitting in the dirt on the curb.

I look back down the crowded street before going into the air-conditioned hotel. I think about the worst things in my life and look at these people. This is the most luxurious city in China. The rich are poor; the people are proud.
Mourning Flow

Kevin Shackley

A tear trickles down Her cheek.
Sad stream
longing for ocean’s happiness.
At night, sympathetic moonbeams
shimmer atop currents of despair.
Illuminating Her loneliness,
casting shadows of doubt
upon a desolate shore.

Merciful morning rain whispers
gentle drops of comfort.
Foggy mist gathers on the surface
of Her understanding.
Shrubs of solitude
sit scattered along the banks
of her relationship.
In the distance thunder rolls,
hinting of His whereabouts.

Past peaks and valleys of oppression,
through rapids of verbal onslaught,
the river stays its course,
wear ing away at the piercing stones
of her desperate plea.
Dew drops from a hanging leaf
fall helpless from the edge,
sending ripples of grief
on a search for missing Love.

Gathering on her chin
the tear drops to her breast.
Waterfall.
Destiny

Sarah Winfield Walker

He made his entrance like a winged horse
From a fictitious dream

My tears became tiny fairies laughing
Upon an angel-dusted stream

Built a fortress around my heart
Painting it with benevolent hands of grace

Held in his captivity, never to be unleashed
By any finite duration of time or space

A colossal fortune, I have acquired
In becoming the one ordained to find

That special man within you, my destiny
So pure, so kind, so heavenly divine, all mine
The medallion slipped through the cracked lid of the tiny chest and fell into the clear night. It left behind a world of death and ruin. Falling through the salty warmth, the medallion fell into a world of wonder and discovery. Gone was the smoke and flame of the world above. Gone was the smell of burning flesh and the screams of dying humanity. The medallion slipped past the curious sea bass and the timid octopus before coming to rest eleven meters down. With a light thud, it landed on a floor of soft, fine sand. Tiny clouds billowed out from its circumference. A barracuda cruised by for a peek. All around the medallion the charred hulks of the carnage from above cooled in the still depths. Moonbeams played like spotlights through the clear water. For the medallion, time stood still. I picked it up, rubbing the slick green algae from its surface, and I asked it to tell me a story.

Starlight played on the water with the glowing moon. Silver radiance danced with white firelight flashes and together they raced to the horizon and back again, under clouds gliding like dirty white pillows across the night sky. The silver-black water, its surface shimmering, trembled from the escaping gas. I watched from my perch in the rubber boat as the trembling water moved slowly about. In the depths below, a glowing beam illuminated dark, indiscernible objects and startled and disturbed the denizens. Whether darting away or cautiously approaching the beam, the creatures were strangely animated, if only for a second, in the obscene stage lights of the intruders. My eyes rolled back to the Milky Way, to the pillows, and to the millions of friendly smiles sparkling in the sky. A break appeared and the clouds dispersed as if by some secret warning; then the wind hit me square in the face. A cold wind, one from way up high, came down to put me back into my insignificance. I shuddered and my spine tightened from the chilling air moving rapidly around me. The dark surface seemed cold now, unforgiving and merciless in its obscurity and deep secrets. I turned against the air, thrust my hands into the pockets of my jacket, and clamped my elbows to my sides. The wind subsided. My hair stood up as I stretched...
a sore, tired stretch from too many hours in the vertical position. I looked at my companion leaning against the cold metal diving cylinder. His eyes were closed to the drifting clouds and the smiling night sky; his eyes were closed to the silver-black water, to its secrets, and to the dance of the deep taking place beneath us. But I did not feel then, nor do I now feel, pity for the souls who miss all that surrounds us, for it is not for everyone to see.

We came to this place, my fellow travelers and I, to find some piece of our past and some piece of our future. At the time, we did not realize why we were here or how it was that we came to this particular spot on the earth at this particular time. Something called me, something from deep within, said, “Come here to this place.” This place, I thought, what is this place you speak of? “You will know it when you are here,” it said. So I knew it. As soon as I was here, I rose under a midday sun and announced to all those around me, “This is it. It’s here.”

“What is here?” they asked inquisitively.

I looked around at the puzzled faces. “I don’t know, but this is it,” I said.

The sands below don’t shift like those through an hourglass but like the sands carried by a gale force, blowing, cutting, shaping and reshaping things that pretend to be permanent. Grains of sand, pieces of a puzzle: we put them together every day we live and sometimes they fit and sometimes they don’t. I listened one morning to a dream and I remembered the puzzle and the piece and where the piece fit. But I couldn’t see the space, the place in time where it fit. I thought it was gone and then we came here, all those who are supposed to be here. We came here to this place at exactly the moment in time we were meant to. And with our pieces secretly in hand, we began to construct the puzzle and the pieces fit.

A dark rubber-coated appendage suddenly broke the surface causing the water to explode into a thousand crystalline blue shards. The broken water then transformed into white foaming effervescence and undulated concentrically away from the central disturbance. The arm stretched stalk-straight and was followed immediately by the diver’s head and body. Beams from the light shot rapidly back and forth across my face, then pointed straight down, illuminating the other diver still ascending in the perfectly clear water. Transparent spherical shapes like hundreds of tiny crystal balls raced ahead of the masked face and the streaming hair of the one below the surface. The water relaxed; I watched the diver’s parting lips drop the breathing apparatus. He gasped, inhaled deeply, and created a vacuum that
prevented the utterance of any cognitive sounds. Then a thousand words that weren't words at all broke the silent air and came to my ears all at once.

Water formed around the partially open mouth and filled the cavity. The sea is attempting to hold onto a secret, I thought, as I peered at the outstretched hand and a single, shimmering, circular piece of history. The small shiny coin smiled back at me. I reached out, took its weight from the wet hand, rubbed the roughness from its surface, and raised it to reflect the moonlight.

“It's been a long time,” I said.
Black Gold/Black Death

Daniel Owens

Black gold they call it
When it is freed from the tundra ice.
All of mankind uses it.
We are made to depend on it and pay for it.
It powers our machines,
It powers our lives,
It lines the pockets of the cartels.

It poisons our skies,
Transformed by our machines
And delivered into the air we breathe.
But we cannot live without it,
This silent instrument of death
Disguised as a necessity.
Many are punished for the greed of a few.

It poisons our waters and beaches,
Painting black those who bathe in it,
Those who cannot wash it off,
Those who are dying because of it.
Death begins at the bottom rung,
At the first domino.
Eventually death will take us all.

How can we hope to survive
When forced to depend on pestilence.
Radioactive Man

Kevin Shackley

Digital desires run wild
through wireless minefields,
electronic heartbeats pump
fiber-optic blood flow.
Cellular sensations soothe
a solar soundscape.
Traveling through life.com
on the backs of web-based whirlwinds.
Lust to stay connected,
a cyber sex life.
Monotony rhymes with human;
organic cyborg.
Wired to mainframes
with power-line veins.
Weaving membranes
of stock exchange;
Computer Age
overdriven,
burnt into submission,

end transmission
You Sleep

Mary Sundberg

I cannot move
I'm afraid you'll wake up and leave
I do not even want to breathe
I just want to watch you sleep
It's 2:30 in the afternoon now
You've been asleep since noon
There are drawbacks when you fall asleep so soon
We don't talk, be romantic, or even miss one another—except me
I cannot see the way you look at me
Especially when you look “that way”
Yet I'll let you sleep the day away
Part of me says, “Life is too short to be doing this.”
But the other part thinks, “He's so beautiful.”
I won't leave
And risk forgetting all of this eve
It's just you and me
I want to touch you
I'm happy knowing you're mine
It's almost as if I shine
Being with you is my sweetest gift
Thank you for loving me
You just woke up and smiled at me
Now you'll fall back to sleep
I kiss you softly
Then walk to the door
But you call to me
Now we are free
Free to love
Free to talk
Do you feel the same way?
We'll just waste the day
I Am Deaf

Jean M. Cormier

Someone is calling me, but I can’t hear
I don’t understand why I am deaf
Maybe God blessed me for since I was born
Both ears are blocked, hear no sounds
I can’t hear anything at all, just quiet
I don’t understand what the world is about
But I can see everything and everywhere

Someone is calling me but I can’t hear
I feel like I’m alone in the world
My deafness never tells me
What kind of noises I hear
Only the vibrations that I can feel
My hands can use sign language for communication
I watch your eyes along with your body language

Someone is calling me but I can’t hear
I feel so much emotion
I have learned to become courageous and have faith
I have learned to accept that I’m deaf
I have learned to face the world
I have learned to meet any kind of people
No matter who I am

Someone is calling me but I can’t hear
I hear a heart of feelings
I have many deaf and hearing friends
Friends and I can cooperate with each other
I hear the beauty of life
Through my families, children, grandchildren
I hear of love and happiness
But I can’t hear
Someone is calling me but I can't hear
I hear with my heart of love
I hear music in my mind
My mind already learns everything
Now I understand what the world is about
But I can't hear
Thanks to God for helping me understand why I am deaf
“Do you know where Battlefield is?” I blurted through my open car window. I was rolling slowly along a country road in Chesapeake after driving around the countryside in circles, lost.

The bicyclist ahead was wearing bright, sleek Lycra meant for speed. It looked like he was cooling down: his relaxed posture was upright, his muscled legs pumped the pedals slowly but steadily. Any good bicyclist way out here will know his way around, I thought. Steering carefully, I sidled up to him from behind. Pressing the window down-button and draped over my steering wheel, I could see my inquiring expression in his super-cool reflective sunglasses. He was young, with a two-day blonde growth fuzzing his jaw.

We had a soccer game starting in ten minutes and I could feel the part of my brain that normally controls politeness and restraint being overcome by the panic of being late. I thought for a moment that I must have startled him with my blunt question: “You know, Battlefield Boulevard?” I said, slower this time. He didn’t answer me and I realized with horror that he was struggling. My brain quickly recalculated, reevaluating the situation: I’m frantically bombing around the pastures of Chesapeake, lost . . . I spy a sleekly muscled bicyclist ahead of me. . . I sneak up behind him. . . quickly, carelessly, I rudely demand information, my question tumbling out of my mouth, fast and easy, as if I was talking to a person . . . who doesn’t stutter.

Even though I couldn’t see his eyes through his mirrored lens, I could imagine the torment in them. My stomach lurched. I hated myself suddenly for shattering his peace. As we both rolled along, slowly, in tandem, I willed myself to be patient and wait out his humiliation. I realized I was witnessing a terrible battle between brain and mouth, a battle that I had started. I didn’t care now if we were late for the soccer game. The game was reduced to minutiae as I thought about the minute-by-minute travails this handsome young man must endure every day. I wanted to tell him how terribly sorry I
was. I realized that his riding must be one of the few respites he gets from a world that constantly ... talks.

It was excruciating to witness his slow, stuttering struggle. We rolled along. Me, smoothly, effortlessly. He, struggling from head to toe—balancing, steering, stuttering.

Finally the battle came to an end. I hadn’t understood all that he had managed to get out. None of it mattered any longer. I thanked him, trying hard not to be too profuse, pretending all was normal and fine. Lamely, I trilled, “It’s a nice day for a ride!”

Moving on, I watched him in my rear-view mirror, noticing that he made a u-turn. I watched his back as he moved steadily away; his head bowed.

Driving slowly now, closing in on Battlefield Boulevard, I lamented other battlefields.
Something You’re Not

Aaron Lachman

Nobody sees you crying for help
To see you in your cage
But I know what’s happened to you
And why you’ve become this way
If no one will listen to you
Then you’ll be what they expect you to be
But I know it’s just a façade
What you are now is something you’re not

And you’re reaching for a hand
And you’re screaming in your head
And you’re lonelier than before
And you’re trapped in a corridor

The walls you’ve built are three-sided
And I’ve been standing at the other
My hand extended and waiting
For you to reach out and grab it

I’ve done all I can do
Because you’ve done the same for me
But what will it take to bring you around
To realize that you’re safe now
And nothing here can hurt you.
Once there was a blossom
Growing in a field.
All it saw upon awakening
Was the forest of tall trees.
It felt insecure and so inadequate,
Because it was so small.

It waited and waited to grow as great
And tall as the trees,
But grew more beautiful instead,
And soon died in misery
For never attaining the height of the trees around it.

Another blossom
Upon awakening, was grateful for the chance
To greet the morning sun.
It too saw the majestic trees,
And on doing so, looked at itself
And saw that it was different,
But oh so beautiful.

It was cheered by its beauty,
And each day of its life,
Took pleasure in itself
Until the day it died.

A casual visitor to the field
Noticed the two flowers.
Withered side by side
And only noticed that each had died.
Why Am I Here?

no author

There is a place to go for two people who love each other. I am here, I have found this place, but now where are you? Did I find a shortcut or did you make a wrong turn? Did I find an easier way that you just haven’t learned? We started the same day and with the same intentions, now I’m here—in love—wrapped and fenced in. Maybe I’ve arrived too soon so I’m still waiting, but each day of anticipation is leaving me more impatient. The thought of you not arriving leaves me with a sense of fear and each day leaves me wondering: why am I here?

Sometimes I find myself walking but you’re not by my side. My life is led by love yet my love is led by a lie. I tell myself that you are coming; you’re just on your own time. So I wait for your love but still give you mine. I can’t help but wonder; it’s how I pass each day. Could it be your mind is here with me but your heart has gone another way? Maybe there is another person, for which stronger feelings are felt. Maybe you want me to have it but it’s still with someone else. My head is filled with confusion, my heart filled with fear, my body filled with chills, and my eyes are filled with tears. I have so many questions but only a few that are clear—mainly, why are you not and why am I here?

Being here is too painful, I need to return home.
Still

Sheryl Legere

No trains,
No planes.
Everything is still.
I can only hear
The occasional car.

Is this the calm before the storm?
spite is felt
it leaves a welt
hate can break your will
cold disgrace
will mar your face
or send you into hell
back at one
from whence they come
the darkness flows in time
violence makes
a violent wake
that you will have to ride
you who mock
ignore the clock
you speak and then forget
your time ends
and reminded
of harshness you'll regret
round it goes
round it flows
elliptical pattern neglect
get insulted
then tumulted
you’ll learn more respect
words of hatred
out of place
come back screaming
in your face
break the cycle
talk it straight
spit them out
your words of hate
A picnic hamper between us
Hansel and Gretel-like,
our rocking-moon guardian
faded the shadows of hunchbacks
and mellowed their saw grass tongues.
The sun was hiding
in the sand beneath our blanket.
Remember? You laughed—

Afraid you’d read plainly
a face held between your hands,
my lashes lay on my cheeks.
I didn’t know what else to do
but kiss you first.

There were distractions,
The Drifters, beer and persuasion,
decisions that felt like choices.

Let’s not grow up you said,
your finger playing
in the hollow of my throat.

A moonstruck rhythm
lapped those squandered days;
made it lyrically clear
why God made summer
and sugarsand beaches.
Society has been plagued with a controversy that is so complex, it has not been able to enact binding laws either in favor of or against it. For years this country has heard moving and convincing arguments by advocates for each side. This taboo controversy is abortion. And while many people are against it and call themselves pro-lifers, the fact that no law has yet been passed banning it completely should show them that no one is ready to let the government dictate what can or cannot be done to one's own body.

Adamant proponents of pro-choice are missing a key element in their arguments and speeches. This key element is the same argument opponents have been making all along. The fact is that abortion is a horrible way to erase a mistake. Abortion is not a solution; it is not to be taken lightly. A human life is priceless, no matter how small that life is. Abortion is wrong and should be considered so by the church and the individual's religious beliefs. But punishment should be left to a higher power, especially since ultimately the crime has been committed against that almighty higher power.

The controversy is: who is that almighty higher power? Does society want to give that power to the government? We live in a country that defends its claims of freedom every day, freedoms we take for granted. Yet there are laws prohibiting us from some of the simplest of freedoms. For example, it is illegal to ride a motorcycle without a helmet. Since doing so would only harm the individual not wearing the helmet, why does the government have the right to force this law on society? Or the law stating it is illegal to ride in a vehicle without wearing a seat belt? Again, the only harm would come to the individual who chooses not to protect himself with a seat belt. But that's just it, it should be up to the individual to choose. After all, isn't that what this country claims to be all about: freedom, the freedom to choose?

The simple fact remains: pro-choice does not mean pro-abortion in any way. It simply means pro-choice. The complex decision of whether to go through
with an abortion should be left up to the individual and her family. It is a hard decision to make, hard enough without having to worry about legal consequences. Simply making it illegal would not make abortion go away; it would just become more dangerous since it would not be regulated and would have to be carried out in a criminal manner, leading to even worse complications and outcomes.

Do we want our government to have this authority over us? Limitations should be set and facilities closely regulated, but our right to choose should not be compromised, ever. If we start with abortion, what’s next?
Standing here looking at you, you appear to be sleeping. Eyes shut tight and hands folded so carefully over your abdomen. Your makeup is immaculate too, not like I remembered from before. I wonder who chose the red lipstick you are wearing? Quite frankly, it looks ridiculous. A mellow shade of rose or a simple pink would have brought out the color of your hair better. Maybe I am being nit-picky but I just want you to look your best.

I try to think when we last met. Two or three years ago, I would guess. It was at the A&P market. I turned down the cereal aisle and there you were, studying the back of the All-Bran box. I walked slowly toward you without saying a word, wanting to make sure it was you. Then you looked in my direction and gave me one of your toothy smiles.

In your squeakiest voice you said, “Hi! Long time no see!” I couldn’t run, so I forced a smile onto my face and nodded my head. Running over to me, you gave me a big bear hug and began ranting about nothing. After twenty minutes of tuning you out and shaking my head in agreement with everything that you said, I lied and said I had somewhere to be. A bit surprised and disappointed, you hugged me again and we parted company.

I only wish then that I had taken an interest in your monotonous, prattling words. You always tried so hard to be a friend to me but I refused to accept your offer. Each time you extended your hand in friendship, I seemed to smack it down; after all, you were trailer trash of sorts. What would my friends—a no, my parents have thought if we had hung out together?

You in your tight, faded jeans; me in my designer slacks and Liz Claiborne sweater. We were like oil and water, an improbable mixture. I would see you walking in the rain and drive on by. I know it may have seemed mean but it was all in our best interest. Your trailer friends would never have forgiven you if we had associated. They would have expected you to change
for the worse. Anyway, how would they have felt if you had become too good for them and their kind?

Now all of that is irrelevant. It is too late for us to be anything anymore. Your friends sit behind me weeping because they have lost a great friend. I wish I had known how great you were. All of the people I called friends have moved away and they never call home. I sit all alone thinking about all the lost opportunities I had to get to know you and I cry. If I had only opened up my heart to you, there is no telling what happiness I could have experienced.

Well, I have to go now. Reaching down to touch your hand, my fingertips are greeted by an unearthly chill that rises from your body. I hesitate for a second, but I finally touch you. Now I reach out to you, wanting to hug you and rant for hours and hours about nothing. I am too late. “I’m sorry,” I whisper before turning towards the door. Walking slowly away, I keep my head down, not brave enough to look into the eyes that were burning into my skin. Reaching the doorway I turn back to take one last glimpse of you and apprehensively wave goodbye.
Aquarium

Angela Moore

Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle, the heartbeat of the fishless aquarium.
Bubbles rising to the top,
Gravel sitting lifeless on the bottom.
The treasure chest full of jewels,
Waiting, waiting for someone, something to enjoy its beauty
Or just waiting to close its lid on life.
Stand Tall

Randolph Irwin V. Vitales

When the suns seem dark,
When the oceans seem too deep,
When surrounded by howling wolves,
When the clouds seem to hide,
When all is dark and quiet,
When the buildings seem to be higher,
When all of your strength is spent,
When all is gone,
When all is hopeless,
This I say,
Stand tall,
My friend;
For tomorrow will bring new things for you!
The sun will shine and give light,
Have peace and stand tall.
Nature's Warm Embrace

No Author

Spring's rays spill over onto the red oak's leaves,
This magnificent tree standing 80 feet high,
A canopy of death this great tree is.
Denied are the lilies that light cannot reach.
Nature's will imposed, Darwin understood.

Autumn's gentle breeze blows down the colorful leaves that hang from
hibernating trees,
Their colorful beauty untouched by anything else.
Their great multi-colored beauty springs from death.
Their beautiful color, a savior for spring flowers
For they create a layer of safety upon the ground for the new seeds.
They lay down their lives for nature to save for spring's renewed growth.
The sacrifice nature imposes on them.
The rulers of the skies leave their nests in this season
Even these graceful creatures are not able to stand up to her punishment.
Preparing for the freezing of the air and water from which they received
their livelihoods.
Flying to their salvation in warmer skies.
Natures prerogative must they follow or die.

Summer's heat-scorching waves pound down on pine-needle trees,
A little of their life evaporates away with each beaming ray
Their outstretched limbs drained of water becoming vulnerable
To those sparks of fire which ignite in summer's high heat.
Too dry these limbs are and a fire has started
Beautiful golden flames ignite a limb of the tree
The golden tint spreading to all appendages
Fire's orange glow the tree surrenders to
Charcoaled bark screams in pain
Baby bluebirds left chirping for their mother, she arrives too late.
The energetic little squirrel returns to his home
Ashes are all that is left, his gathered acorns turned to dust. These upturned creatures nature turns her back on.

Winter's snowflakes, those crystalline patterns drift down Onto the backs of running wolves, their gray fur turning white. Their majestic bodies flow over snow so white, their mark they leave behind.

Six white-backed wolves, knotted muscular legs pumping, chasing the frightened doe,
Her powerful legs pumping strong, her children must she live for. A malicious root grounded in the snow she does not see,
By this root does she now die. The six white-backed wolves jump on their fallen prey
Their powerful jaws ripping and tearing at taunt skin, for they must live for their children.
The dying doe emits a high-pitched wail, not for her life does she scream but for the life of her children, all dead for who will take care of them now.

Nature's tight grip surrounds us all, crushing us with her power. Her beauty draws us in and her cruelty crushes us. Unaware victims are we all in her sadistic game of life. Her beauty can amaze you and her cruelty can destroy your soul
Inside an old gas station, painted vivid green with ’60s-style flower-power stickers on the window, live millions of beads. Strings of beads hang from the walls and drawers open to reveal almost a hundred boxes, each containing hundreds of beads. The store is a rare and unique jewel among the hordes of souvenir shops and beach stores in the Virginia Beach resort area. Glass, clay, crystal and metal have been transformed into little morsels called beads, each slightly different.

When I started working at Beads and Rocks a year ago, it was crowded with tables that were crammed with everything from earring parts to antique African statues. The floor was dirty with strange debris, a mix of dust, dog hair, and loose beads—beads were in every crevice and corner. Behind the walls of displays are what we call “back stock,” a place where inventory is a bad word. Thousands of shoe box-size boxes fight for space on the shelves. Only our most dedicated and serious customers with an adventurous personality are allowed in the back—one never knows what might be lurking behind the walls. I have found one-of-a-kind antiques to incorporate into my jewelry and once I found a small brown lizard beside my unique find.

Over the past year since I began working at Beads and Rocks, the store has undergone a complete transformation. The floors are now clean except for the occasional refugee bead that will roll many feet to the nearest corner even if it is dropped only a few inches—Murphy's Law of Beads. The tables in the middle of the store have been removed, creating an open space for customers. I replaced all the dingy brown boxes that had been priced with magic marker—and re-priced over globs of Wite Out—with fresh new white boxes clearly marked. We created a display of dancing-rainbow light beams in the large front window of the store. It is amazing in the afternoon sunlight to see the colors bounce around the room and reflect off quartz crystal clusters. The outside of the store was also repainted in the same
vivid, bright-green color. A new rainbow-colored sign above the door now says Bead Creative.

Regular customers are amazed at how the store has been transformed. Many of them tell me they don’t know how I can keep up with it or even stand having such a job. It is truly a never-ending war—little bead soldiers stand in boxes waiting for someone to give them the ammunition to tip over so they can make a break for the floor. It is a difficult job that only a true bead lover could understand and appreciate. When I go through the drawers of beads, ideas flow through my head as if the beads are talking to me. I can only stand it for so long until I am buried in my design sketchbook drawing and scribbling as fast as I can. Like everyone I get tired of having to do so much to keep up with the store but there is a power that keeps me here—the surge of creation.

There is a secret energy that lies in this old green gas station. It is the power that comes from creating something from nothing and the journey that an artist takes when creating his or her work. When I am creating art, the world is my puppet. Art is something that exists between the artist and the world but is not created by either. Art exists. When I finish a piece of art I am no longer the same as I was before I began it. At Beads and Rocks I feel surrounded by creative energy.

It is not simple to explain why I love this job or this place. Maybe it is the disrupted state and the jumbled ideas and what they may one day become. Like art, this place has taken me on a journey to discover who I am and opened my eyes to the infinite possibilities of the world. Part of the aura of this one-of-a-kind store is the knowledge of how many people it has taken on such journeys, from the owners who travel the country selling beads to past employees and the many faithful customers who know this store is like no other. People often look from the road at this bright-green old gas station and wonder what it is like inside. Many just come in to see what it is all about as if its surge of energy can be felt from the road and is drawing them in.
Do creamy elephant’s noses pass beneath me?
Are you really here?
With me?

Chocolate-glazed donuts spin in circles,
My eyes transfixed.
Is this real?
Or are you a dream?

Your love I hear professed
Told to me
In dreams I understand
Fantasy springs to reality
Orange-tailed dragons fly
In dreams.

Did heaven really touch me?
Or was that your smooth gentle hands?
In dreams
Your touch, soft cotton bunnies.

Candy canes,
Lily petals
And dragon flies
Dance before me,
In dreams.

Did the sandman send you
To dance before me?
Are you real?
Do dreams become reality?
Or reality turn into dreams?
Purple-spotted lilies sing in answer.

Are you sure you love me?
My own self reflection
Peeks out from the frog pond.
Resting places for them blocking my view
You love this?
This moonlit reflection of me?
It's hard to believe
In dreams
I understand.

Long-tailed fish splash their water on me
Oh, wait, they have fins.
They must be in my dreams.
You look at me and smile,
Whisper I love you into my ear.
This too
In dreams.

Dragons fly away
And fish grow fins
Then you say you love me
In dreams.
This Doesn’t Have to Be Love

Mary Sundberg

Softly, love is standing here with its demands
Slowly, I think I’m letting go of all my plans
But why, why am I afraid to give into this?
Why are you afraid?
This doesn’t have to be love
But it’s all I can feel
It’s all that I fear
This doesn’t have to be anything at all
It’s too hard to fall from this high above
Now do we have to call it love?
I hold back from everything that I want to say
I don’t make commitments that could break
I’m so afraid to give in to this
This doesn’t have to be love
But it’s all I can feel
It’s all that I fear
This doesn’t have to be anything at all
It’s too hard to fall from this high above
Now do we have to call it love?
I need a little time to think things out
Do I really want to give myself?
I can’t believe it’s happening so fast
Because I don’t want to bring back what I left in the past
This doesn’t have to be love
But it’s all I can feel
It’s all that I fear
This doesn’t have to be anything at all
It’s too hard to fall from this high above
Now do we have to call it love?
The Attic

Giada Robinson

Here I sit
All alone
Staring out a dark window
I watch the rain come down
So quickly
So quickly
I hear the thunder roar
So angry
So angry
And I hear the silence creaking
Louder
And louder
As I sit here
In my attic
Quarrel

Alan Lachman

Is this goodbye?
Watching you walk away,
My feet hesitant to follow you.
An angry word,
A bad decision
The final outcome bleak.
The second chance fades to nothing
And nothing lasts forever.
My Grandfather's Place

Jonathan Drum

Just outside of Shiloh in North Carolina there is a small gray house that belonged to my grandfather. Having grown up in a city, I always enjoyed the quietness of my grandfather's house and enormous yard. I had never seen such a large expanse of grass in the city. There were many things to do out there with my brother and cousins, like playing tag, fetch with my grandfather's dog, or football. Sometimes my grandfather would break out the croquet set and let us play with that for a while, and when we got older he would let us ride his small motorcycle around the yard.

In front of the house was the porch where the grown-ups gathered to talk; the kids would sometimes sit with them and listen to the stories. Just past the porch was a massive oak tree that my brother and I would often climb to see who could climb the highest. Beside the tree sat a swinging bench large enough for two. Sometimes I would swing so high in that bench it felt like I could fly. A few yards down the road was a cemetery surrounded by large pecan trees. My brother and I would go there every Sunday that we visited at my grandfather's house. We would pick up pecans that had fallen to the ground and skip them in the ditch adjacent to the cemetery. About a mile down the road was a convenience store where our dad would take us to let us pick out some candy. We were there so often that the owner of the store knew us by name.

Sometimes it was too hot or too cold to play outside so we would stay inside. The grown-ups would take over the living room so my brother, our cousins, and myself would hang out in what we called the purple room. It was a spare bedroom that was no longer used and everything in it was purple, from the carpet, walls, and ceiling to the bedspread and curtains. There was a small television that we would watch or use to play Nintendo. Sometimes we would just play board games.

I think about my grandfather’s small house a lot lately and how much I miss going there. It was like a second home to me where I felt safe and comfortable, and thinking about it helps me remember simpler times in my life.
The argument between my mother and me was at a stalemate but I was bound to have the last word. “What in God’s name were you thinking? I was 15 years old!”

The question hung in the air, suspended by frustration and supported by a complete lack of understanding. I saw pleading in my mother’s eyes before she looked away. But not for a moment did her ramrod posture weaken, born of the strength of wisdom gained from sources known only to her. “You would have gotten married anyway regardless of what I said or did. You know you would have.”

Exasperated, I shot back, “Well, if it was my daughter, I would have stopped her. Come hell or high water!”

It was 1990, the year I found out that my eldest daughter, Marcie, was pregnant. As an honor student in her senior year of high school, she was excited about entering college in the fall as a pupil of veterinary medicine. From the time she was old enough to explore the animal kingdom, our home was a refuge for rabbits, dogs, cats, and ferrets. Of course, many of our wayward guests were never introduced to me prior to their arrival. For example, the ferrets were in residence for two weeks, stowaways in her bedroom closet before I was made aware of their existence! As a single parent, I had painfully learned to choose my battles carefully. I reasoned, what harm could it do, really, to have a few rodents sharing our abode? That day in 1990 made me long for the time when my biggest concern for my daughter was what she had living in her bedroom closet. And I resolved not to let her make the same mistake I had, no holds barred.

Alternately, my mother had a hands-off approach to parenting. Her style reminded me of the U.S. Constitution, written for a self-governing people. But seriously, I ask you: how many of us as teenagers are governed by anything besides hormones? Although not pregnant, I had decided to get
married! Can you imagine? And now my mother was telling me that there was nothing I could do about my own daughter’s pending marriage.

For years, the argument about our conflicting parenting styles continued. And in the long run, my mother was right. There was nothing I could do to stop my daughter’s marriage, although I doggedly tried. I never consented, resulting in Marcie retreating to a justice of the peace without the benefit of family or friends for support. As for me, it would be a long time before I would grasp my mother’s philosophy on child rearing. This understanding began after I asked my mother to record the family history on cassette tapes. Because she had lost her sight as a result of diabetic complications, we agreed that this would be the easiest way for her to accomplish the task.

Several weeks later, I walked into her room and found her diligently at work on the tapes. My eyes slowly adjusted to the dimly lit area. In contrast, the sun persisted; its brilliant rays piercing streaks between the drawn venetian blinds. Her white head bowed while her sightless eyes roamed as though she couldn’t quite retrieve something from her memory. Awkwardly, she fingered the tape recorder. The flesh on her hands collapsed between the veins, much like the peaks and valleys of her life. Seeing her so engrossed, I closed the door quietly, still anticipating the long-awaited results.

When the time finally came for me to listen to the completed tape, I dropped it into the machine and pushed play. My mother’s voice filled the room, but more than that, something filled her voice. The emotions I heard resonating from that recording were never before heard from this reserved lady. Excitement, passion, pain: all were there. Something was being revealed that she had never spoken of, except perhaps to those who were a part of the story. Hanging on her every word, I learned why.

His name was Richard, and he would change my mother’s life forever. She was a freshman at Ohio University; he was a junior. Sounding youthful in her excitement, her voice gained strength as she talked about the first time they met. She fervently spoke about campus football games and pep rallies, dances and big bands, and stolen moments under ancient elm trees acting as a backdrop to their flourishing love.

Later, their age group would be known as the Greatest Generation, their young peers fighting and dying simultaneously on two foreign continents. But for now, within the sanctity of the campus grounds, there was time for making future plans together. What my mother hadn’t counted on was
Richard’s patriotism. Remorse rang loud and clear in her voice as she talked about his death. Sixty years later, she still carried the burden of regret; she hadn’t grabbed her chance for happiness while it was available. It was all so clear to me now, her reaction to my marriage and that of my daughter’s.

I have long since forgiven my mother for what I considered poor parenting skills. I have also forgiven myself. For the familiar ramrod stance that my daughter took with me that day in 1990, I am grateful. It forced me to recognize that responsibility for her happiness was never mine. I have also learned that happiness might only be offered for a moment, fleeting through our lives like a kite, tail trailing, inviting us to grab it.