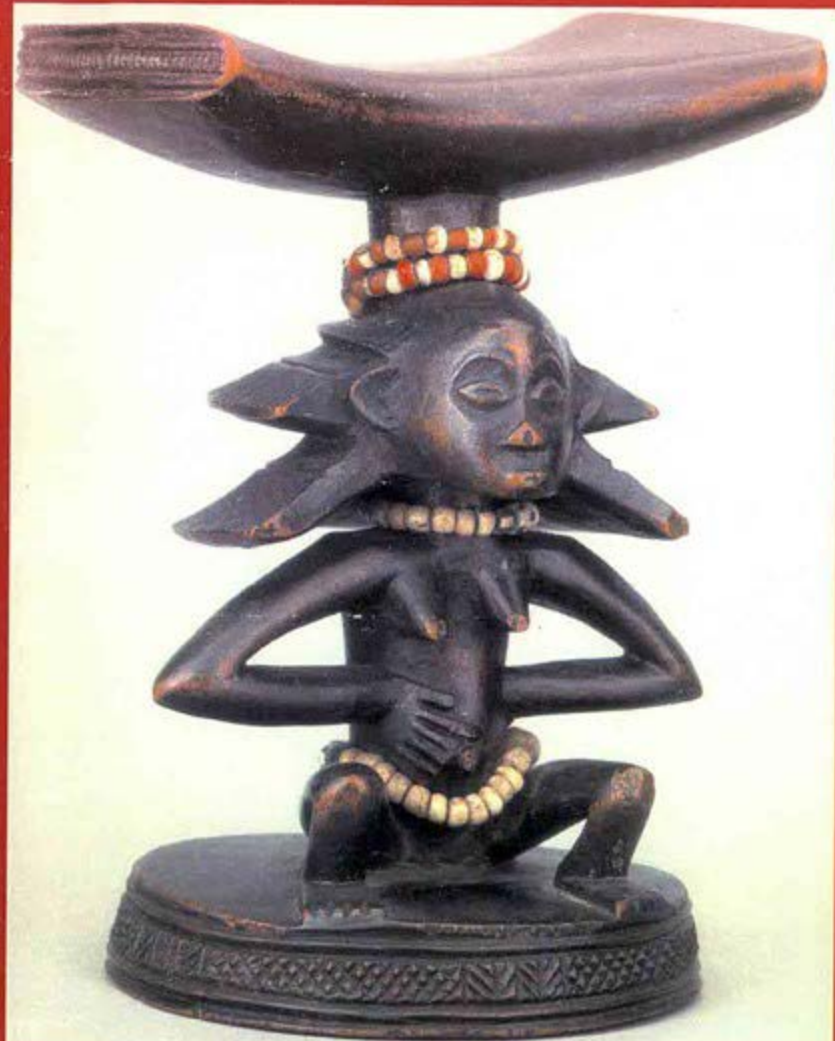
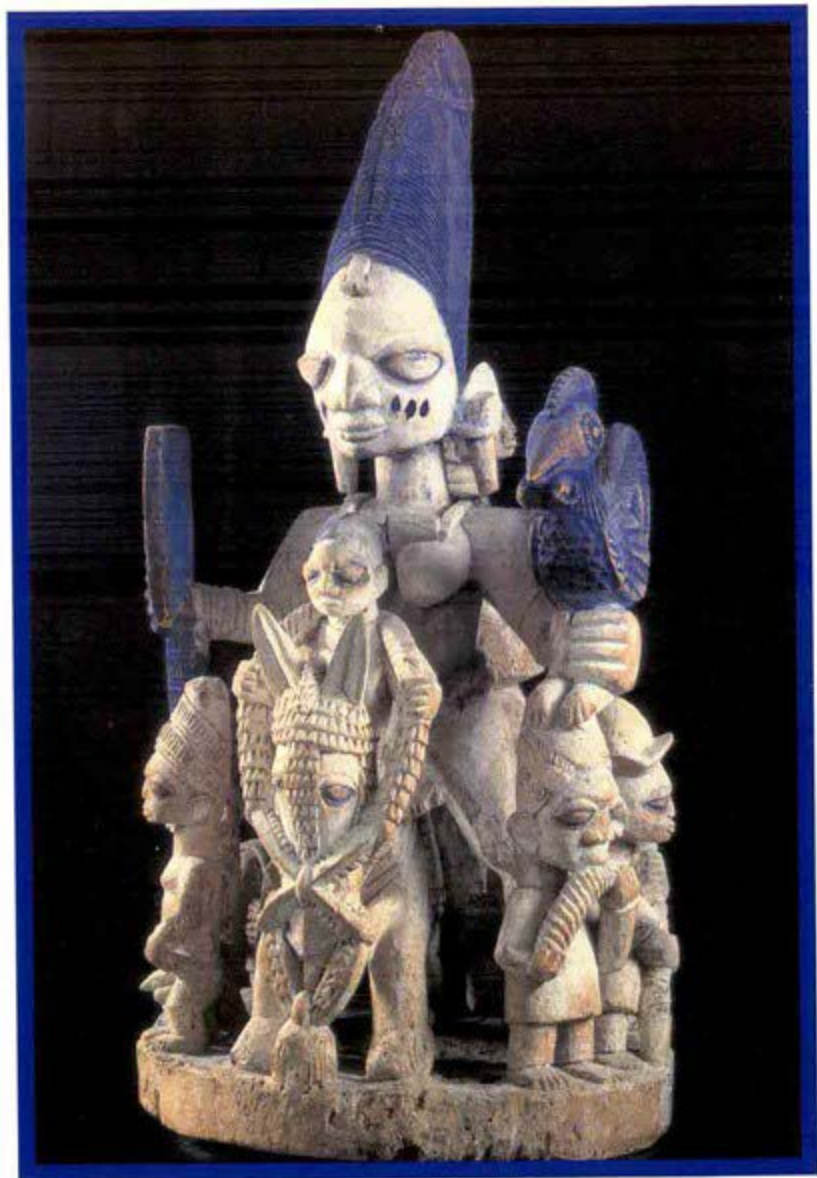




Orpheus



California State University, Bakersfield



Shrine Sculpture, probably first half of 20th century
Attributed to Oshamuko, a Yoruba Artist, Nigeria

Orpheus

A Literary Journal
Volume XXVII

Dr. Solomon O. Iyasere, Advisor
Jack M. Beckham II, Reader

Orpheus is an annual literary journal produced by California State University, Bakersfield. All submissions must be typed, double-spaced, on 8-1/2" x 11" paper. There are no restrictions on subject matter, length, or theme; however, poems over one hundred lines are rarely published. Any use of profanity must be crucial to the understanding of the work.

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Orpheus

California State University,
Bakersfield

P o e m s

Sol Neely

Conceit of Wound

I. *paroxysm of negative capability; authorship of a god's lost self*

nauseous is the wound of becoming...
faced with a vision, the void ruptures into
 consciousness
as embodied impulse of word made self,
 as self resembling word:
there is but one possession of this word:
the wound of its own non-possession.

the language of consciousness compels itself
towards one moment of exhilaration,
a tonality of impulse echoing & reverberating
within the abysmal relief of memory,
moving upon itself as a nightingale moves upon
its song with invisible wings;

surgery of self, flight of identity.

wing of mind dissolving in unfolding,
crumbling & creasing further in intentness of flight
into impalpable shards & prisms of voice:
vocal shrapnel falling against the static of its own indiscernment,
falling mute against the rage & silence of its own paroxysm,
falling against its corporeal ashness

with eyes that refract into language --

eyes that are the abscess of firmament

 of silvered poems & calibrated explosions.

into the void,

 a thump of bruised sound...

Sol Neely

all light is softly fallen parallels
birth torn from horizons, self ripped
from stone: vow one: these
eyes are stronger than chains,
weaker still than light.

& all over, the parallels burn into
each subsequent parallel:
bent axis matched with warped matrix,
distorting all our supplications;
our dithyrambic sensations
hallowing the graphs of our horizons;
each to the other, with lips confessing mystery,
we drown in the oasis of our own sweat,
smelting the irons of our shackles,
imposing vows where only impulse exists;

we suffocate in the prayers of our
unrequited passions,
laid out, stretched, & cut
by our own creations:
 stones spilling out from our stomachs.

* * *

star, cataract, guitar

* * *

word is wound of mystery,
of cold folded flesh of shadow;
we are empty-quivered archers,
firing diversionary missiles of intention
against untargeted space, delineated emptiness,
drawing fire upon our own reflections
to initiate *ourselves* back into their own mystery,
back into a mispronounced oblivion
of self into mystery of sacrosanct syllable;

& yet i cannot sew up this wound,
i stitch sinew with the spine of a
porcupine or the hollow stem of a lost feather.
my skin is unadorned hieroglyph, cipher
of all the ancient voices.
already i get the feeling that this is my last
courtesy of death
i black out as all these gestures empty out into
the guise of absence...

& on a page between two words i noticed
that not all things are equal.
In between two voices a vision of valuation.
 a sprint of shadow.
 an avalanche of history.

* * *

but each stone arranges into mountain,
each globule of sweat conforms to lake,
every hand reaches for limb with flesh grafted into bark,
every passion nailed to the crux
of an accounted eternity, judged here
on the dissolute edge of
its disembodied heart, the herald of theses
hammering against this order.

O the tension of a touched autonomy:

what metaphysics we assume in perspective;
what perception we assume from
 point of soul
 less, specter of heart

* * *

my chest erupts into the broken-up jargon
of tongue, of some echo thundering across the

Sol Neely

imprecise geometry of truths, of teeth detonating
across unscaleable skies (of rays azured &),
settling into the very silicon sinews of impulse...
of electronic muscle spasming into ontological
indifference.

to mutilate & rekindle the heart.

II. *flesh of self made word: the question of archaeontology*

grandfather' in the desert, tossing bones,
reading crimes, steadied on the horizon
with wings breaking out between breaths...

O victorious rebellious angel!
archaic god of golden compass:
with one foot steadied in the center
rotate the other, there is your name
carved in the desert, there is your word,
your intimation of horizon, the
circumference of your heart in
wind-stretched sands:
a lifetime of intoxication in three steps.

skin dust,
man overcome
in the innocence
of his own
overcoming.

in the beginning was the wound:
radial dismemberment, sacrificial genesis; all copulation & co-polation;
here was the positioning of the first altar,
above which tumbled in locked talons
death & the winged heart; no language,
only shrieks & razored

Sol Neely

vocables in the dueling ratios of blazed sound;
soon speech settled into
the circumference; every echo a
volcano erupting in dark cave.
words fell like ash onto the tongues of fields:
geomantic bas-reliefs; hypostatic omphalos;
the serpents' eyes turned upon themselves,
burning with capacity: their tongues at
each the other' forked ends
like talons locked & tumbling:

for the first day we sat like that,
brooded & kissed. death & the winged heart.

with death came prophesy & the first sacrament;
with heart came broken horizons & first graves.

* * *

ritual & burial. art & negation.
then came fracture of interval by which
we measured our voices in terms
of vicissitudes & frequencies:
 militant gematria
 of formless infirmary.

in the caves we paint; in the caves we bury;
fire sharpens our sticks.
ritual of burial; art of negation.

* * *

Grandfather: soul: overture of history:
 ashen burial, organic hallucination,
 sacrifice & tattoo

* * * *(exunt)*

Sol Neely

with very patient hands came god the owl,
form of silvered wings & turquoised feet,
form of consciousness, dance of identity,
flight of tongue in hyperborean ecstasy;
then came spirit, dance, grandmother,
radiant suns: all pyre of combustables, swift
gods of unmixed elements, rain & the reservation:
dust like flesh, incapable even of crucifixion.

we are an entire tribe, with an entirely broken heart
heart overcome — talisman of apocalypse.

grandfathers in the dirt, tossing bones, reading crimes
we carry children upon our backs,
steal fire's smoke, chisel icons in tempered flesh, burn in ritual:
haunt streams with steadied spears.

& chests of corrugated sinew

* * *

flesh of self made word:
O protean owl; how swift the seeds
carry past even you -- your
deviant identities & incidental forms
do not so much suggest flight as penetration:
a variable space of infinity:

O your wings tangled in death's
mystagogic winds!
how they struggle for shape in irrepressed skies:

Word & wound
blade & nail
chaos & cosmos

* * *

And thus he confided:

*and yet, i did not die this afternoon, nor did you,
and in this shared metaphysical assumption
we shall set against each other
with the frail ethics of memory.*

*do not expect whispers, do not expect strange
soliloquies of vain dismemberment, do not
expect universality in immediacy, do not
expect interruption of silence, do not
expect a fondness for maps or artifacts --
& in the intervals between face*

do not expect resemblance.

III. *asphyxia of overture*

heart beats irregularly without
warning, synapses misfire without
warning, electrons jump orbit without
warning, guitar string breaks across its
emptiness without warning,
album skips on the phonograph without
warning:
in this way absence subverts even origin,
O choked & cruel repression of violin draw.

star is signature of insomnia,
chance of sublimity in this

the kiss of violent theory.
death portrayed on a thin plastic card:

touch here, turn this, read to me.
look there, where we stood,
under the star-light curvature of bad omen

Sol Neely

i stand here armed only with
your ostensible innocence. blazes
of reciprocal infidelities. warning.

winds scrape this land clean, prepare
the cerement flesh, convince
the azorine eyelids to close & sound
out in the dusk; i extract from the wind
what for the moment i need; harvest of
ripe vocables: sensitive to the pinioned
wings & their gradual decay. lay there,
& i will toss up words, off the cliff & across
Dover, & watch
them parachute above the nervous hills.
lay there, & i will paint you as icon, as
cerulean arcograph of fatigued nimbus.
pointless, the azure heart thinks
of the trembling weighted hand. air.
& with every draw of breath an assumption
of new voice, an assumption of new value

moment is echo of eternity slipping
away,
& slipping away
still.

word is silent asphyxia of
wind: (breath of strained afflatus)

& poem
is slow
Suffocation ::

IV. *a season in paradise*

*And Reb Assoud: "of creation, but not
of God. For He was never, at any time, created."*

*-- Edmond Jabes, from
The Book of Resemblances*

...for god was never,
at any time,
innocent. you said:
*there must be something
he wishes to share:
not stars or tigers,
or the serpentine
apotheosis of desert.*
perhaps retreat; perhaps
the otherness of a
son' death; perhaps
the axes of crucifixion
the sword of vacancy
wielded against all our
banishments, against man.
father, we are exiles
fated to be devoured
by the subtle effacement
of creation or
the still more subtle
annulment of innocence.
do we not hold each
the other' memory
in vengeance?
i have never left the
equation of the cross,
my mother with her
shroud took only my
name, & death's the wound
asserting only another
threshold. doves perch

Sol Neely

on both our houses &
keep vigil over the wounded.

he suggested:
*god was always a numerical
system of distinction, a technology
of linguistic assassination.*

* * *

my words fill space & obligate time.
i put off death in the name of the father.
you are the obligation of my words.
as i am the obligation of your silence.

* * *

Sol Neely

Equinox Eclipses Intimation

nothing is disclosed in these closed hours.
all is crowned by an halo
of occupation -- a static field of revelation.
i draw a circle around my name;
i assume a ratio to the equatorial plane.

i cannot afford to lose a breath.
the lung exfoliates into rudely concentric
layers of verse. rocks shatter in fire.
there are no movements -- only the
reversal of our ontologies: the
subversion of inertia: the dogma
of furious abandonment. unpoliced
riots of sound dynamite the equator.
escape to the continental divide,
in the meantime.

fingers & strings trace
the latitudes & longitudes
as violin & voice imbibe
a strange reverb.
ancestors & aboriginals split
the hours, tune their instruments
to the music of upturned graves, the
dispunctuated notes of buried
shadows & shells & skulls
(some melody of atonement).
the skeleton of atlas struggles be-
neath the burden of his lost flesh.
everywhere eyes spill gravity: rabid
poet scribbles an ode to every body part
retracing the laws of division & equality
hammers the texts spine against his
lover's navel to retrieve his lost eyes.

Sol Neely

solstice sustains what equinox
eclipses -- assails us with dust
in the desert, reconfigures
a still unconsummated marriage.
the earth awakens to drive blood through its veins.
i wait for a sign, a pulse.

Sol Neely

A Thousand Pages Toward the Sun

...if only morning meant oblivion.

-- Jorge Luis Borges

the night prior to oblivion, the maelstrom of morning,
a dream rehearsed for four and a half billion years
under such weight of curtain, in such theatre of composition
of recurring and sustained audience.

i interrupt the bed of dido, rob aeneas of his canopy,
drive the acolian daggers to the very staged heart
of calypso's fiber-optic stars.

did i not tell you she
was innocent? was not the king still a silver-corded
bag of flesh, strobed in storm, now naked carried
across the planked expanse? back to the oblivion of his
unweeded garden? preceded by the ignominy
of old age and immortality? his nakedness is the
interruption of desert, the flower of this wasteland;
his sanities are tossed seeds upon dry
rocks—and i am his breath of fool.
against his foolish breath. O what morning breaks?

your harps are incidental, your music validates only the myth,
saints toss roses from balconies, or else lower them in
applauded baskets across invisible diagonals. from stage
to stage i leap, destroying all with a toss of this coxcomb:
the morning star, halo of oblivion, music of crashing orbs.

someone calculates the spotlight, the thunder, someone
whispers verses from behind the usurped categorical scenes,
someone delays in remembrance, stabbing the players
behind draped nostalgia, a resemblance of interruption.
the opera and the scream... the stage a labyrinth, the script
a thousand pages toward the sun, burning by its own vanity.
i am not the architect of this house, but the collective discourse

Sol Neely

of its scenes. no, i am the godded machine dismantled
at last by the players' refusal, insistence.

O cordelia, icarus,
i too am assailed by an army of shades

Sol Neely

Static Libretto of Crooked Throats

four and a half hundred years since
shakespeare found his paper
would not accept his ink.

with perfectly calculated variability
emerged the following equation:

*genre of impossible efficacy, or sublimated solipsistic otherness.
global autobiography, or the universe reflected in the soul's tarn.
violent theory of narcissus, or cruel ubiquity of self.
maenads to fell macbeth, or hamlet to slaughter orpheus.
identity without precipitation of death.*

i wish i could translate the fault of this pen,
or the abridgment of archetype,
to understand delay, or murder in time
by the blood of this last feast, the last epiphany;
i would bring to the fool his pen, paper, candle,
his own image as a suggestion of freedom, or he insistence
of laughter strobed between the frequency of ambition.
(or translate the ghost back into his death)

i count the acts, the scenes, the players and the idiots,
as cruel metaphysics of icon.

mean organ, you never knew the stage, or
the authorship of such architecture,
were never so innocent as your own trapdoor
of inexorable breath, or beneath you the marble lungs
of reclining kings -- though paupers have since kept your time.

my text is full of holes, some of which are self-administered.
some of which parody themselves in direction
of suggestion, warning, or prophecy.

Sol Neely

here in the fair usurping twilight, resistance.
capitulation and then recapitulation.
static libretto of crooked throats.

my pen is more a syringe than implement of blade.

Sol Neely

Murder/One/Totalization

i have killed you & return now to collect your
crucible of ash -- your geometry of effacement.

i throw coal at your eyes your genitalia
for life, or a vigil, kept by assassins;

a vigil, or a sublimation of prayer into
its mathematics where here i keep the
breathing cinder, the ceramics of liturgy
beneath pages of aberration, epiphanies
of obsession, birthing shrouds of poetry

a breathing cinder to
undulate like wings
buried under desert sands:
like some palpitating
hesychastic omphalos
(or a phoenix escaping
the gravity of its death?)

you did not die like Cordelia, like so much
living flesh adjusting to uncertainty (such
as the curve of infinity as it approaches its
impossible asymptote)—no, you did not die
like god on the axis of resemblance, or
even like a thief crucified against the mystery
of some other's golgothan death, stealing time from
the bifurcated ritual of space, as unrecognizable
carion handing limp before the sun:
or dark iconographic flesh that slips from its nails
& slopes from hills reflecting into still darker seas.

rather, you died naked like the golem of some mad angel,
like the erupted semblance of narcissus, not in trans-
mutation but translation; you died in sameness;
you did not feel the echo pushing at your back;

Sol Neely

your eyes in-themselves were bleeding icons,
yet in the vacuum of facelessness you collapsed
 & died like a star.

i hold your ashes as all the ancient faces
of all the ancient poems

i am the echo that fell in love with its own inaudible
effacement -- the assassin who gave you irreversibility
& unpardonable reverence, who promised redemption
only in the bitter ritual of annihilation, of totalization,
who cradled your uncritical gaze like the circumference
cradles its center, beheld in the reverence of violent
mutuality; coal, ash, water—this is not medicine,
but your presupposed & incapable pyre

how the ash works through its fire!
as language works through its face!
as icon & rose work through all
 their necessity!
as time works through its own reciprocal self!
& echo works its way through voice!

 & fire of ashen works
 works its way...

i kicked you into the icon of your self.
i am the rigor behind your question of love.
i write & rewrite the impugning echo.

Abbas P. Grammy

Rain

Sky is angry. A lightning bolt illuminates the dark. Thunder strikes. Rain starts pouring. Birds fly hurriedly. Pedestrians rush indoors.

I arrive home, soaking wet, yet cheerful of walking in the rain. Sisters, frightened, seek comfort from mother. She whispers a prayer and blows safety wishes on them. The sky's rage intensifies. It is as if the goddess of rain is whipping the clouds to make them cry from pain. Mother stands to say *Namaz*. Sisters look at her frightened. Father lights a cigarette and listens to the news.

Anchorman: Tonight, sky will be clear with patchy clouds and dusty winds!

The image jitters badly. Father turns the TV off. Mother goes to *Rokou*. Sisters stand to say *Namaz*. I search in my memory for school lessons.

Teacher: Clouds are formed from evaporation and condensation of seawater. Raindrops are formed inside the clouds when the temperature drops. Clouds carry electricity. If clouds of different charges collide, lightening occurs. The sound of lightening is thunder.

Mother finishes her *Namaz*. Sisters go to *Rokou*. Father is sound asleep on the sofa. Rain pours even harder. A lightening bolt illuminates the dark. Mother says *Salavat*. Sisters finish their *Namaz*. Thunder strikes again. Rain continues to pour. I go to my room to change.

Beatrice Wiltrout

Generation

this is our generation,
sucking down caffeine, booze,
sorrow, and glossy-paged
self-image
in mega corporation stylized
chains of pseudo-bohemian
coffee shops.
our generation was born long ago
and is still learning how to
totter upright, still trying to form
our first coherent words around
our technicolor pacifiers,
shoved into
babbling mouths.
our generation has no face,
has no ideas, has no idols,
has no identity,
and is not trying terribly hard
to find any.
our generation is stumbling
down the road toward the goals of
the last generation
blind to signs leading to our
promise, our fulfillment.
our generation dreams of
becoming
beat, cool, hep-cats,
dharma bums, the
rebirth of ginsburg or dylan,
going on the road, cause there is
nothing original left to do.
our generation can't seem to find
our place among the demigods
of the past, of the present,
of the future.
our generation looks through

Beatrice Wiltrout

blue lensed glasses and can not
understand why everything is so
dim.

our generation will never truly
understand hard toil or days
that last only as long as the sun.
our generation is digital, mobile,
techno babble and newpeak;
a brave new world for a
terrified generation, too
filled with self-loathing to love
each other.

our generation will hide behind
the remains of our shattered
concepts
of rebellion and madness,
never truly realizing our
potential for greatness.
This is our generation.

Beatrice Wiltrout

Is This A Personal Attack?

you have created yourself
in an image, false
two-dimensional.
so wrapped up in your
concept of you
that you have forgotten what
it is to be human.
you don't have real pain,
joy, or even fully formed thoughts.
instead, you cry tragedy,
laugh drama,
and speak in fashion and trends.
cooler than thou,
projecting your empty
idol for everyone to
worship, but you are
the only one bowing before
the altar built to your self.
so long you have masturbated over
the desire you have for you
and your passion for
self that you have become
numb to anything
other than your own touch.
living behind that mask of
false feelings you have become
blind to what is real.
shoving out lines to
anyone who will take them,
you bury yourself in
your own fable.

Beatrice Wiltrout

Poetry

was i once written in an immortal moment?
in day-time dreaming have i even once
conjured heavenly images of saintly salvation
calming the agonies of a tormented soul?
have i ever been lovingly, gently adored,
made eternal through another's words?
have i ever been a poem
written in your hand?
black ink
white pages
an instant captured in perfect chiaroscuro
memory so exquisite that you dare not forget even a second

Brandy Rodriguez

Nimbus

*Could you imagine a world where I never said a word
Silent as a monk and viciously ignored like a girl
A place where all that passed did not see a glow
But rather a lamppost on their walk to the evening show
Nothing special to be listened to or laughed with care
Just another Joe, no magic this time, (wink) I swear*

*I do try sometimes to bring that world of silence to this one
Training myself to restrain, refrain, and just accept the mundane
Ironed my pants just like the other blue collar
Get the same hair cut like them for a dollar
Sing the same song
Hoping to just belong*

*La la la la la, doo doo dee, I want to come out and play
We can have fun, lets be one, and I will show you the perfect day
Something is wrong, It creeps behind the air that flows throughout my cells
I don't feel right, taunting me with ideas, demands, cursing me with evil spells
NO! Focus, It means everything that I must behave
I gave my word that I would be silent after that day*

*I held everything inside, even when I was angry, you never hear a peep
But inside my head, I hear the screams every second especially when I sleep*

*I must confess to you my dear, that there is only little time
You must leave, get away from me, my body is no longer mine
The voice that tells you he cards, the hands that opens your door, the eyes
that look into your heart
Acting!...I am a quick study, I could care less about all that was, I can't wait to
tear this shell apart
Manifestations, repressed memories, dysfunctional neurotransmitters, call it what
you will
It's only so long it can be held in till it becomes the monster that can't be
stopped with pills
How glorious is that moment when I am reborn, resurrected, and mysteriously rise
Soon, I will be back inside all your thirsty minds the instant this one's will dies*

Brandy Rodriguez

Murmur

Given every chance, you waste it on spending your time with nothing. You were granted the most amazing organism every constructed, the human body, it heals itself, it can reproduce itself, hell it can even set itself on fire if you try hard enough, but what do you want to do....destroy yourself. I could understand if you were suicidal and wished to die in a battle dealing with the psychological-emotional effects of honor, pride, and even that candy of love. However, most of you choose a less nobler way, annihilating yourself with booze and synthetics. What is the fun in that? You are nothing more than mortal waste, never pushing yourself to your maximum potential, accepting compromise. Please, Gods weren't made like this.

Now look, I am not complaining. It is your 62 expected years and falling, do as your little decaying flesh pleases. As you are out filling your lungs with smoke, your mouths with liquor, stomachs with filth, note this, I am growing stronger. I rest when you waste, I focus when you make noise, I run myself into the dirt when you sit down. With every beer you take I become five times stronger. Every puff you inhale I age one less day. You could say I am doing this to get back at my father, you know he always loved you more than me.

But I am gong to show him, I can't wait for the day for you and I to meet on the apposite sides. I have been thinking of that moment every time I take that extra step, read that next age, dig a foot deeper. It will all be worth it, for that glance of amazement, that second of doubt, and the sound of your expected fall. I'll take advantage of your greatest weakness, the one that you have made for me since the moment you opened your eyes for the very first time. I'll get what he never gave me.

I'll wait for you outside the bar, behind the alley of your favorite steak house, or you may even see me as you stumble to your front door. Trust me, I won't take long. Like I said, you were given a chance, given the gift, but you didn't care. Before I take it, I want to hear it beat in your chest.

I will be the energy that moves your hand.

Camille Gavin

Beware!

Blinklessly serene
yellow-eyed hoot owl gauges
creeping encroachment.

Camille Gavin

Message Interrupted

Ebony crow squawks
 a-top fence post riddling
 pale dove's fragile croon.

Emmy Darling

Untitled

she was the
pretty penny:
her own little
bit of luck; that
wild Jackie who
was never different
but changed
everything.
Words can jumble
and cities crumble
but noble Jack
always sang with
her voice like
stained glass.

Emmy Darling

Untitled

whisper and let
the sky
press my words
to its ear
for if the love
of a woman
buys the night,
the moon is
its price

Emmy Darling

Untitled

offer no resistance
to the lingering moon
and make no promise to time
our day is short
but the heart is deep

Emmy Darling

Untitled

Beneath stars
that fly and fall
like sweet ash,
the sky is reborn
and I am found
in the glory
of night

Emmy Darling

Untitled

she was the
pretty penny:
and above me
burn the hundred
mysteries though
my words come fast,
my heart has
outpaced them into
that bright point
where the stars
will scream
around us

Emmy Darling

Untitled

the stars chill
me with their
baleful glow
and by the depth
of their distant circle
Do you remember
seeing the sky
for the first time
stars on a string
they stand firm
it is I that
shiver and blink
spinning
in the giant's hand

Gabriel Diaz

The Ocean

I entered the ocean on a windy night
How could I not?
I was captivated by the force of the waves;
they seemed to be calling me
Stepping into its cold existence, I could
feel the kingdom beneath
So there I was; within the sea, floating
farther away from shore
What is the attraction of the ocean's mystique?
Could it be something beautiful?
Amidst the icy water I could still remember the
summer smell of the forest
Trapped in this watery grave, I miss the joyous
times, but there was always something hidden
The ocean can be a wonderful place, there is just
nothing beautiful now
Have I reached the bottom of the sea?
Think of the pleasant thoughts that await me there
What dreams will keep me warm?
Let no nightmare haunt me anymore

Gary Graupman

Herman

Herman was a junkie, not just any kind of junkie
But a Texas junkie and an overweight Texas junkie at that
He had steely blue eyes with pinpoint pupils when he was loaded
But being loaded was not the only thing his eyes gave away
Herman had the look of a man who was never loved
It showed in his eyes along with many other things
On a daily basis, his eyes broadcast despair, hopelessness, misery, anguish....
But most of all his eyes showed the FEAR
The fear of using, the fear of quitting, and the fear of living
Herman went back to Texas; he said to kick--to Jones
I guess he didn't get to Jones--he died with a needle in his arm
In a cheap motel in the bad part of town
No big deal--happens all the time the local coroner said
I always wondered what he could have been if someone had loved him

Jack M. Beckham II

Untitled

To The Blue-Eyed Girl:

Hello Sweetheart, do you remember me? I am the tongue; I tasted the sweetness of your innocence. I tasted the bitterness of your misery. I am the eyes; I mapped your artless flesh. I witnessed the light of your purity minify. I am the hands; I caressed your flawless body. I bloodied myself with the murder of your chastity. I am the ears; I fed on your soft words. I still hear your crying in the God-filled silence before sleep arrives. I am that man; I am a monster.

Yes Sweetheart, I remember you. You are the blue-eyes: filled with so much wonder, now clouded with the pain. You are the cream-skin; cynosure of virtue, now polluted in your shame. You are the sweet-smell: an undefiled fragrance, now acrid violation. You are the soft-lips; eye-closed kisses, now obdurate mutilations. You are Beauty; I am the monster.

I think of you always.

God I miss you so very much Love is a tainted thing Like my desire
Love is a caustic thing Like my need to own your beauty
What did I become I do not want to understand My brain is hot
It is ironic Understanding is my castigation It works that way sometimes
I suffer But not enough God I miss you so very much I remember you
I hope you have forgotten me

Your Lover

Jane Granskog

Because I Love

I walk with smiles on my feet
and splash in puddles of sunshine
for no reason
but that my crystal fine web
has the sparkle of dew drops
on warm spun golden strands.

Jane Granskog

Webbed Reflections

There must be spiders to spin
those fine lined filaments
from transient nodal souls,
for there they are:
strands of black despair
spewed from the unaware
and desperate, reaching,
seeking meaning in loneliness;
and fine fuzzy gray products,
of fleeting light in darkness,
limp dead reminders
of a past long gone;
and then
maybe a few
in time anew
of hoped for liquid sun.

Many different shapes
and lengths and strengths--
the mind-etched latticework
of processual spider art?

Jane Granskog

Untitled

The pain of love is recognition
of the possibility of its absence.

Janet Pierucci

The Date

He raped my daughter
As I lay watching Jay
In the safety of my bed

She cried out for me
To help her miles away from
The protection of my presence

As I laughed at
One more fast paced joke
And snuggled into the down

She lay in the vile stain
Of his semen for hours
As she struggled to call

And confess the deed
That others would accuse
Her of inviting

Her body ripped open
And bruised convulsed
Once more in twisted protest

How she had trusted him
To respect her dignity
And right to consent

Then her voice on the phone
Mommy he hurt me
But she didn't know

Although it was over
Her pain had just begun

Janet Pierucci

The Observer

You are the only one
I ever let
Watch me undress

You sat still
Observing my every move
In silent anticipation

Your cool blue eyes
Surveyed my emerging body
As I shed my skirt and blouse

When I stood before you
In my most
Intimate apparel

You rose and
Moved toward me
Stopping an arms reach away

I could feel the tension
Build as I carefully
Hung up my clothes

As you turned your
Head ever so slightly
And blinked your eyes

I reached into the closet
And selected my well
Worn jeans and sweater

As I pulled the soft
Fabric over my hips
And slipped the top over my head

Janet Pierucci

You knew it was time
And we moved
Toward each other

Then I reached down
And picked you up
And you began to purr

As I stood stroking
Your soft white fur
You nuzzled my neck

With your tiny wet nose
You welcomed me home
Your day had begun

Janet Pierucci

The Seduction

His gaze kept mine locked
Into the moment
As he reached out to touch me

His breath was warm and familiar
As his body moved gently
Toward the center of my being

At the last minute he turned
And curled his body close to mine
And began to purr

Jason Grist

*Brazencool
for Kerouac*

Brazencool then
Running in a hard set-
Ladies and laughs
And not giving a fuck-
We pooled our money for all the
Beer we could buy
 Searching for what was unrecognized
 and stumbling upon repentance-

Jason Grist

Fortune Wind

Suddenly gusts of fortune wind
Sends leaves downward spiraling
Out away from trees
Dying in flight-
But light reflects off dying leaves
And surely they are thankful
This soberdecaying state,
Grass dancing all around
Wind whispering encouragement
Lifting them
From potential gravesites.

Jason Grist

Lonely Friends

Come and go for a walk my friend
We'll walk both near and far,
Share a secret of your soul my friend
With no care for who you are.
Trust in me my sacred brother
I'll take nothing from this deal,
My eyes reveal an open window
With no dust upon its seal.
Reveal naked truths to me my brother
I stand with palms upright,
As dusk fades to dark
I see glimpses of your plight.
Across frozen fields you've fled my friend
I know just how it feels,
We've traveled the same path my friend
With scars upon our heels.

Joanne Schmidt

J.S.

Just as the light settles
Oiling the lamps about to swing
And chasing the ashes in silence
Not as the breast rises in breath
Nor in movement with the amber ring
Except in the 18 carat pen tip.

Searching in brown pools of laughter
Changing in rhythm with billowing fabrics
Holding a keychain to your finger
Melting the gold rings into paper weights
Inhaling the incense from your thoughts
Desiring the calm blue of robin's eggs
Tasting the pleasure of fine sand.

Joanne Schmidt

Choo Choo, Here Comes The Train

Your love is like a train depot
Lots of tracks intersecting
Lots of trains taking turns
 to pass and
 move on to new
 voyages and horizons.
Your love is like track networks
You hop from one train to the other
Not knowing which one to take
How long to stay on one
Before a nicer, newer train passes by
That looks more appealing
A flash in the sky
A bright light in the eyes
A pounding train passes
And the light is transformed
 into instant pitch
 black darkness
But its a comforting darkness
Which train to take
Which whistle to blow
Which track to choose
Which direction to travel
It's all so complex
It's all so complicated
Like our brains
Like our hearts
Like a new cerebral synapse.

I want to make choices
I want to make good ones
I want to make right ones
I want to make love
 on a train
I want the sensual touch
 of your body

Joanne Schmidt

I want the depth of your eyes
I want the depth of your flesh
Come to me
Come back to me
Heat, is just what you are
Heat in the heart
Heat in the thighs
Heat in the tongue
Heat in the fingers
Heat is yours
Dance on my fingertips
Dance to my love and affection for you
Dance to the heat of your sway
The comforting sways and wild jerks
Of the good old choo choo train.

Larry Etue

Guests

The doldrums
found me

I didn't
seek them

they searched
and searched

'til they
found me

for it seems
they're uneasy
without a host

so I'll suffer
their presence
for awhile

then when
they tire of me

gladly see them off
as I would

any other
viral infection.

Larry Etue

Alley Riches

The sun-blocked alley remains a
perpetual shadowland with
no illumination through the buildings
of business and commerce,
A concrete swamp of fetid odors
dampness ever present.

Long before the truck arrives
dumpsters are searched by salvage crews,
bedraggled refuse of our species
furtively making their rounds
quick as feathered meat-eaters
scratching over road kills.

The dumpster store is open
no waiting, no cashiers,
one rule only
beat the truck.

Boxes and boards for shelter
bottles and cans for cash
discarded food, newspapers,
magazines, stock reports
throw it in the cart
supplies for the day

work done by eight,
that's AM if you please,
now sit with fellow 'streeties'
pass time and the narrow necked sack
nod to the eyes of the nine-to-five
provender sources and give thanks
to the gods of the alley for the bounty.

Larry Etue

The Wall Street creed of
"timing plus effort equals success"
is faithfully followed
in the markets of shadowland.

Larry Etue

Anachronisms

Arm in arm
the couple shuffles by the hotel
on their daily walk

slowing, stopping,
remembering,

nodding to each other
they share a private smile

it's ten stories high
holding a library of memories
within stained lead painted hallways
and a faded grand ballroom,
her fire escapes appearing as abandoned
scaffolding, workers nowhere to be seen

and so she stands, this architectural queen
from the 'Roaring Twenties,'
stands defiant as aged sister buildings
defer to the iron ball or the dynamite

ah, but even queens have a limited life span
and a diesel fueled fulcrum, one ton ball
at parade rest, awaits the hour
of destruction, operator indifferent to
the shuffling couple's reveries

it's urban euthanasia for this old lady that
proudly mocks the building codes,
red tagged unsafe, yellow tagged 'no trespassing'
current provider of free housing for
vermin, roaches, termites,
waterbugs and addicts

Larry Etue

however speak not of current
to the shuffling couple
whose memories are in the 'twenties'
when they were young
and he was king and she was queen
and the ballroom was grand
and the dancing was never
going to end.

Larry Etue

Jettisoned

Street coroner preachers
mixing with everyday sinners

sidewalk strollers moving
among alley dwellers

all reflected in storefront windows
mirroring society's multiple
images in dirty glass

once someone's bright hope
the alley dwellers now belong
to yesterday among the unwashed,
the unshaven, the uninhibited,
mostly, the unknown unscrewed
from the customary social sockets

and as those 'uns' gather at
bus stop libraries to read of
a world of which they are not,
and which views them as not,

their cigarette butts are cast aside
as more useless than they are and
fall among the rest of the street's residue
to be now reflected in gutter pools and
eventually, like their smokers,
swept from sight.

Larry Etue

Latepayer

I truly believe that my payments
remain seriously overdue
because my birth entry myth
has it that I, too, was not
delivered in a timely fashion,
playing 'catch up' ever since
and for cause and effect
that's as reasonable a reason
as a reason could reasonably be
except to my creditors
who don't appreciate the mystery of
myth and display their ignorance
to me every thirty days I'm past due.

Larry Etue

Sarah and Minnie

One seventy, the other seventy-two,
neither remembering their own names,
talking to memories
calling for a mother and sister long dead.

Both sit an arms length apart
grins fixed but not really smiling
eyes open but not really seeing as
colors blur by with voices attached
uttering words without meaning
for Sarah and Minnie.

Then somehow, through their brains'
tangles and plaques, Alzheimer's
cursed encroachment, Sarah's extenders
connect with Minnie's receptors
drawing each to the other.

They stand, hold hands and walk
down the hall chatting in non-sequiturs.

Sarah has found her mother
and Minnie her sister.

Now all is secure
among the tangles and plaques.

Larry Etue

Fanciful Views

Thoughts of Utopia
conceived in the womb
of romantic vision
quickly dissipate into
the realm of remembered fantasy
allowing us to avoid the present
which initially utopian in wish
transmutes to nostalgic remembrance
all too quickly honoring only
those two twins of time
future and past
while neglecting
the immediate.

Larry Etue

Thoughts

Thoughts in multiples
march through my
mind's gray folds,
field's for folly
and rare insight,
gods to be honored
but not adored,
minor deities
clamoring for recognition,
some playful,
some truly useful,
some frightening with
their requirements,
some bewildering
but all roam unfettered
seeking being
through acknowledgment,
many my very own,
some from others
from long ago
when I couldn't think
and still cling to life
in my brain,
all equally important
and I must choose
which to favor with behavior
so that others may know
my observable "me."

Linda Kay Nash

My Own Mind

my own mind constructed a cage
without a door for the escape my soul demands
erected as shelter from regaining my life
delaying my debut as mother of my deceased child
entrapping me in the internal war that I wage

a lock hangs within reach on the illusory door
as if the only obstacle to assail
knowing the combination to be but a few simple digits
challenges me to construct the sequence to free myself
thwarted by my sentence to endlessly endure yet more

prisoner of my emotional war
caught feigning control of the pain
while struggling to remain free
captured by my own demons
dismayed by the content of their lore

weary combatant from incessant subliminal attack
numbed from forced emotional evacuation
disoriented without a recognizable image
unable to find the person who lived my life
unsure if I even want her back

captive as my life is suspended in time
my cage remains impenetrable
while I remain lost inside myself
and my own mind

Linda Kay Nash

Where I Am Not

All along I thought my torturous climb
was an ascent to the pinnacle of acceptance
Where I would view my future from the peak
then journey forth with vision of what could be

Rather my emotions have navigated me
to another sight, before unseen
To which I have been descending
off course by an extreme number of degrees

How could I have been climbing down rather than up
in my careful examination of each step along the way
The horizon must have been hidden by the summit
I was striving to ascend
My internal compass reversed
by the magnetic force of the grief that I hold deep within

I only know where I am not
My only vision is of all that I choose not to see
The once cryptic words
carved in the stone wall that I face
Now scream
the implications that they bring

Christopher's year of birth and death
follow the immutable letters of his name
Commanding my motherhood away
with all the benefits that once soothed my soul
to See, to Hear, to Touch my only child
the essential places my heart still needs to go

If he can not be seen
then what need does my sight satisfy
If his voice can not be heard
then how does sound serve me

Linda Kay Nash

If I can not feel the warmth of his touch
then what do I need to feel

Have I led myself back to the rim of the abyss
the Black Hole that I once fell in
Seeing nothing but darkness
Listening but hearing silence
Feeling nothing through my pain
Caring not to live another day

Will I freefall back into that vortex of grief
where I merely exist to simply breathe
There is no tomorrow to contemplate
hence not even today matters at all
Only a state of psychic pain
that holds me captive without reprieve

M. T.

To B—

Creature, beautiful demon of the night.
Wicked smile-sinister laugh.
You walk in floating water
You touch the unreachable heights.
You sold your soul for a piece of the sky.

I hate your loving ways
for you this maiden has sin.
You are what the masses talk about.
Old ladies chat about you-
the sign of the cross after your name.

Lord of the dark secrets of my nights,
Ruler of my Heart.
You dance in the fire of my eyes,
You bath in the waters of my desert lands.
Your indescribable beauty has my world stopped.

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Transparency

Shall I show you my true face?
Late-blooming water violet, daughter of dragons
Everything all at once or as my colors change?
Would showing my face make anything clearer?
And what if you saw someone else in my mirror?

What is my face against the teeming depths of space?
What is this tissue against life and all its issue?
What is my birth against all that we are worth?
What is my despair against the energetic air?

I see through myopic eyes with scars
I breath with injured lungs
Hear through perforated eardrums
My skin so often burnt, my guts resected
My nose broken and broken and broken
And by grace see well and sense and meet the world

I trail dressings over pavement-covered earth,
Pondering how to let you know me, see me;
Giving shreds and threads so you can build a nest of empathy
I am not easy to see or be, we are so many, many.

The truth is that I lie. It's true. The truth would be too hard;
Truth would take far too long; your senses would be jarred.
Instead, I use facades that stand for what is true.
They may not work, but in a crunch it's all I know to do.
But what I'd like, in truth, would be for you to know my heart.
I haven't much experience but again I make a start.
I could build a bridge to me;
Safety in transparency.

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

I Know the Roads

I know the roads of Hell
been down to all the sites

stumbling down precipitous grades
letting go the guard rail
yielding lower

chasing phantoms
called from distance
legs worn down running
pelvis long undone
giving in

screaming down alley
cornered overpowered jumped
down fighting blood
burning rage
hawking sputum sweating

spent
gasping breath
lying heavy sticky
full

asphalt comes into focus
scraping my face
a bird pecking my hairline
its feet scratching my ear

searching for tidbits
cross the mad landscape
finding over time
down high road and low
lies falling away

a breeze lifting

Mary Lou MacIrvine

been down and back
so many times
I know the roads

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Hidden Works

With dusk just so
this time of year you see
the hidden works

A man in leg irons working
with an upward grin
Heart clamps quieting the throb
when you step off the job
Ancestral curses spinning
webs inside our ears
Garroting and gags to
desecrate your breath

Hipcord tortures
cinched from what we've learned and taught
Guts splayed and flayed and
pinched in burning knots

And worms and insects indicating hope

Yet through the dusk we
dance and drink and joke and smoke
And take our knocks
And gobble junk and watch TV
And seek folks out
with keys
that fit our locks.

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Running On Regular

Hey, I'm fading here:
The local quicksand of grins and showing interest,
Old jokes creating moats and no man's land,
Locked in close and blocked: so far away,
Breath deadened in the grip of measuring minutiae.
Lord, how have I abandoned you?

What trick can foil this disease,
Release new stuff to breathe and please?

I search blind for some gimmick of
Oxygen and blood, red or blue
Some living sprout, authentic juice,
Some catchy come-on or confession
To trip the latch
And open the sluice
So I can flow to you

Mary Lou MacIrvine

Detaching

I cannot
get my house in order
stacked papers slide
skew-wise
closets hiccough
and spew out jumble

refrigerator hot enough to bake in

taps turning on at odd times
water pouring down in sheets
bathroom floor sodden
detaching
falling through

unbidden knocking
I stumble to the door
as the foundation shifts
and no one is there

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Upping the Amperage

If it weren't for that accidental
touch of warmth I'd still be complacent
and blithe but *no*,

there was that shock: it was *WHOA*

awe and terror rolled over
in bed in my downstairs rec room

and split my fucking armor

that was when the floods and
suffering began
and the excitement day and night

getting used to more and more

I confess: woe
broke up my calcified life
upping my amperage for love

and I walk about in public
keeping private
the throbbing mystery of renewal

while something inside me still itches
to bust out
and turn up the juice
let my hair stand on end
take life hot
without words or motions

at the risk of burning fuses

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Hollow Wind

I fight shy of
death's machete,
fear the reassuring smiles of
 heroin at my door,
hear the hollow wind of Hades;
 another habituée
to hack at my heart.

A new character steps onstage;
the floorboards groan
 in foreknowledge.

Oh, help me, God,
I, too, have been like Hell,
 how hapless still,
brought suffering into others' hearts
 and they had me.

How do I say,
"Happy to meet you"?

Who would walk willingly into
the whirling blades of tomorrow
 that they could see?

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Motionless

something
happened
I am gray, half
lifeless
motionless
a heavy
foot upon my sternum

pain between my eyebrows

a great flat moonlit landscape
humid
without a breath of air

wake up, legs
anybody home?

Paul O. Ero

A Reason

His lungs spewed hollowed cries
grief stricken people
grabbing at dying straws of faded dreams
man who sees the faces of God
in every man, woman and child
has been plucked from us
by hate
like an unripe fruit before its time

His lungs spewed hollowed cries
that reached eternity
in the hearts of heartless men
the seeds of love he sowed
find fertile grounds
in the least likely places
germinating and taking root
in the most cruel of minds

His lungs spewed hollowed cries
he managed a smile regardless of pain
sacrificing his dreams and zest for life
urging us to recognize
that love is mightier
than the bullets of war
a reason we hold on
a season we remember with hope.

Paul O. Ero

FRIEND

In practicing the humbleness of soul
I glow in the glory of dawn
The child in me frees
My spirit to laughter
Intoxicant for ageless sages
Trusting the innocence of youth
When the thought of you
Dances upon my heart
A frown never crosses my face

Paul O. Ero

The Goddess

The smiling scantily dressed goddess
luxuriates in heavenly sea breezes
an opulently enriched abode
in the heart of an irreverent soothsayer
the soothsayer that we all are

Vision seethes innocently in myth
inherently always in truth
chasing shadows in shadowed caves
really never beyond reach

The goddess is happy
the world is what it is

The Soothsayer's longings
is whirled by his desires
anguishing in haste
immersed in the illusions of dimensions abridged
the goddess is to be his

And belong she does
to those who interest not
in possessing her
to those who ask not
for a fidel relationship

Her love permeates everything
selfish she is
in sharing with all
is love
and that the goddess is
for she knows
you are not different from her

Robert James Berry

Shame

When my mind was in pieces
I watched half-men in their wrath
Punch through glass

Men tied to their iron-framed beds
Laying glass-eyed hours in the
Appalling wrack of their selves.

Others toddled the eccentric circles
Of their own prisons. We all
Had our hell, individual, unto us,

Our minds inhumed inside
Burning sepulchres.

In humiliation you rattled the padlocked grille of the
sky,
Counted the bars of green light printed across
The bile-green ceiling

And each day the fan writhed in its socket
You were numb to the orderlies who
thrashed weak old men for sport.

You just lay, lay the other way, on your bed,
Your rack of shame.

Robert James Berry

The High Weald

Where the gravelly anger of our first fathers settled
The land cedes into infinity.

Saxon successors that moved like a
Levelling beast through the boroughs
Until hate was a river in spate:

Time cannot expunge all that spent blood.
Or the bullying ways of thanes
Who imposed their will.

Thus when gales hurl mediaeval obscenities
Or the sea's stink leagues off
Recalls their visceral tongues

The past is thrust back down our throats.

This land may be tilled and obedient now
But it remembers more vicious times.

Robert James Berry

War Music

Across the backs of the years
Kings break like reeds

Ascendant, vanquished,
in a chronicle of implacable feuding.

This war butchery never abates.
Lust for dominion is infinite.

Sanctified men have blood-drenched these parishes,

The centuries planted a raven battle flag
On these monster-haunted fens,

Till history tells of two rage-blind soldiers
Whacking each other with shovels.

Such times do not fade.
The sun still spills in the sky
With the gore of conquest

Until on every page of our annals
There is blood, ash.
Such brutal war music.

Susan Stone

Untitled

That morning
as I drove east on Highway 58,
as I'd just begun the climb up
off the Carrizo Plain,
as I was thinking about you
and the fumbled weight of our efforts,
as I was feeling the weight of that sadness,
I saw him standing
just 50 feet from the road,
his coyote ears alert,
his grey-brown stillness
a faint silhouette against
the grey-brown hills of October;

Struck by his stillness
I slowed the car.
His forelegs were firmly placed
as if resisting the movement of the earth,
his head forward,
his shoulders pushing against the sky.
his head slowly turning
as his eyes followed my movement.

but he didn't move.

Around the next curve
I found the reason in the middle of the west-bound lane,
her long coyote nose in a pool of blood,
her grey-brown fur rippling
in the wind
blowing down
off the Temblor Range.

The road climbed
but my eyes were still on the plain,

Susan Stone

still on that gaze,
pulled down by the weight
of his unformed question.

...and I thought of you
divorced
after 20 years of marriage
and the weight of that sadness,
the weight of "what now?"

Terry Tripp

Alone I Freeze

The changing of the winds comes so turgidly
From the raging sea to me I breathe
When there was two this was surfeit
Her arms around me captured in the heat
I remember her smile when these snowy times came
The feelings within my heart reacted the same
her hand in mine and connecting eye to eye
I thought I would hold her until the day I died
Still today I stop from my steadfast path
While a chill of memories run down my back
Not having her to keep me from the freeze
It's alone I walk and alone I breathe

Lee McCarthy

Waiting for Company

The mystery of where
it came from,
how long it can last
there by itself--
one stark cloud
floating in a hot blue sky.
God wants the whole stage
for the marvel of himself.
He hides
unless offered nothingness,
the mind blank as air.

The unconscious houses everybody.
Boarding house, flophouse,
halfway house, big house:
busy and demon-infested
as a Hieronymous Bosch painting.
Dreams come pell-mell
out of a shape-shifting chaos
that hopes to kill you with lightning,
lay you out cold on the earth.
Food for anyone who needs a bite.

God loves silence.
Chaos loves noise,
the screech and whine of itself
in a run-away train.

Sleep wears you out,
but the first moments of morning
kiss you as if you've just been born.
Like that first breath
before you began the cry
which became your life.

Lee McCarthy

And then--
Oh, God--
And then, you opened your eyes.
It was enough almost
to make you
shut your mouth.

Jeremy Russie

21st Century Digital Goethe

A photon from My TV dents My eye.
In an instant My brain registers it,
Decodes it, combines it, processes it.
My occipital—never good at keeping secrets—
Blabs the info to the rest of his friends.
With serotonin and dopamine levels low
And with spirits playing in my head—this photon—
This photon with its mass-like properties,
This light wave with no mass at all
Does not delight and entertain but rather
Makes My situation grow the grimmer.

My TV—My drug—My sedative—My delusion.
My once babysitter, My old friend, My now lover.
New car, peace symbol-like *embalm* on its *girl*
My thoughts drift—
Why can't I drink gasoline and emit toxins out My ass?
Nietzsche himself told Me "God is dead."
—Looking around I believe him.
But where and when was His funeral?
If I were God, I would have Twain do My eulogy.
He has a way with words, and we all know how much he
Loved the Old Man.

A photon from My TV pierces My eye and
It scars Me for life.
My eyes close instantly from the pain, and
I can hear Satan on My TV selling a product
"Guaranteed to revolutionize masturbatory efficiency."
Mephistopheles taps on My window.
Faust barks three times—letting Him in—scaring Me half to death.
Why does he come over when he knows I'm watching TV?
He told Me the "Underground Man had been beaten to death by a cop."
And here I thought he would die of liver disease.
I would sell My soul for some sleep.

Angela Armitage

Core

The mousetrap snaps as she fingers it,
licking caramelized bluffs from the tip.
His facial sit-ups ask legends.

He removes her cocked eyebrow,
feeding weevils to the slot.
Ladybugs fly as her jaw falls.

The two rock in gawking smiles,
letting silt lodge inside noses.
Lips and tongues are old news.

Crabs peep up from rock dust,
thousand eyes see thousand eyes.
The sun makes hula hoop spotlights.

Look, he points at gulls snatching;
here, she coos, with nails digging.
The ocean snuffles, all lonely foam.

Angela Armitage

Raised

freckle-faced overall boy, wash
your hands (I see the stains of
this afternoon's chicken) sit
tight, smile rarely—whatever
you do, don't pick the flowers.

cowlick in tow, speed along the
highway. Don't crash don't
shake (I know that's not the
steering wheel) Kiss maryanne;
laugh about it—adjust yourself.

yesterday you dreamed of
corn meal and honey, didn't you?
stop it- I'll take the switch.
if it makes you feel better, you
can choose which to get hit with.

Angela Armitage

Opposable Thumbs are Important

When she opened her mouth, only a tongue came out. They had expected fire engines, or maggots, or little frogs with hooked teeth. Only a tongue, sadly, and all

it did was wiggle around. The stars hung cataleptically, acting neither cowardly nor special. The gaseous things refused to even blink or shoot because stars don't

really do that sort of thing. The dirt didn't suction and swallow pumas or skyscrapers. Everything stood as it should be, indifferent to her perfectly human, though

delicious, kisses. This surprised them, and several hands were thrown protectively above heads as though bombs or boulders would drop. But none fell. One woman fainted

and the prostration wasn't significant because she soon woke, scraped and muttering ouches. This disturbed the fellows, so they grabbed themselves reassuringly. Yes, still present.

Yes, still stiff. But then they remembered that it was only their hands and her tongue, not some catastrophic Gwinevere. The throng cried. It was quite romantic of them (her

tongue still milled about), but there were no rivers of tears or hearts pierced with tiny daggers. After the kiss, they said goodnight. Everyone returned to work in the morning.

P r o s e

Anna Darling

The Gumshoe

I had just decided it was time to close up shop and enjoy the evening when the knock came from my office door. It couldn't be my landlord, he *never* knocks, and since it wasn't the landlord, it was okay to open the door. Who would want a private detective at nine o'clock at night? Someone in big trouble, someone in desperate need of help. Or else someone who has spent all day being turned down by every other PI in town. Probably the latter.

"Come in!" I said, and a gorilla in a suit entered my office. That is to say, he might have been human, but it was hard to see past the fur—I mean hair. He cracked a smile that would have bought an orthodontist a two-story house with a pool.

"Mr. Malone wants ta see ya, Gumshoe," he said. Two-Tone Malone, who got his name from his signature black and brown suits, used to be the second biggest mob boss in town. I say used to because he's moved into the number one slot since Ricky the Fish met with an unpleasant accident. Although the police were unable to explain how Ricky could accidentally step in wet cement before going on a midnight swim, they instinctively knew it was an accident and looked no further.

"So what, you're here to take my picture?" I answered. There was no way I was going to turn down a request from the biggest gun in town, but I had my pride.

"It would be in your best interest ta come wit me. Otherwise, I would be forced ta use less than pleasant methods ta convince ya," he mentioned persuasively. I shook my head at such an obvious cliché and grabbed my jacket. I wasn't going to get anywhere bantering with Jo Jo the dog-faced boy so we left by mutual agreement. It wasn't long before we pulled up in front of Malone's Soda Fountain, the official front for the Malone Speakeasy. My hairy new friend took me straight in to see Mr. Malone himself. He stood behind his shiny mahogany desk in, you guessed it, a two-tone suit. He must have them tailor made, I thought idly; he was far too large for off the rack suits.

"I require your services Gumshoe," he said with no preamble. "You don't need to know *all* the details." I was opening my mouth to protest, probably in an ill-advised wisecrack about my specialty being in ESP detective work when he said, "The less you know, the less you can be forced to tell under 'persuasion.'" As I digested this less than pleasant reminder of

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Mr. Malone's business practices and acquaintances, he said, "This is for you," and reached into the top drawer of his desk. I didn't get this far in my business without being a little paranoid (okay, maybe a lot paranoid), but I also have some common sense. It said that Malone would hardly have wasted his time with a cover story if he just wanted to kill me. Therefore, he was probably reaching for something harmless in the right-hand top drawer of his expensive desk. My paranoia acknowledged the sense in this and I shifted my weight to allow for a quick drop to the floor, just in case. His hand came out of the drawer to throw a partially eaten sandwich onto the desk, smudging its shiny finish. I relaxed, awaiting an explanation.

"It's our only clue," he said, gesturing towards the salami on rye. I raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Find who ate that sandwich and you find our thief." He looked expectantly at me. This was my cue to do the Detective-Inspecting-the-Clue bit. It was a perfectly ordinary salami on rye with a couple of bites out of it. As I looked closer, I noticed that the salami wasn't bitten through cleanly. It was more mashed and pulled than bitten. The bread also had a mashed look about it. The teeth looked regularly spaced, no help there. Ever notice that there are very few six-fingered or one-armed criminals in the world? I suppose it would have been too much to ask for the crook to be missing every third tooth.

"Any ideas on suspects?" I fixed him with a stare that said, don't do my job for me, just answer the question. Wealthy gangster or not, I ran the investigations.

He shrugged. One of my guys suggested the night watchman." Not exactly the most enthusiastic of leads, but we've already established that this wasn't going to be easy. "Let's see him," I said, committing myself to the Great Sandwich Caper. That sounded too cheesy even for me. I have to get out more.

Tubbs Stubbman, the night watchman, looked as his moniker suggested—tubby. I wondered why Malone had hired him. He usually goes for men who can tackle more than a seven-course meal. Maybe there was more to him than met the eye, or, maybe it was supposed to be a cushy job and Tubbs was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was hoping so; I wanted to wrap this case up as soon as possible. Two Tone hadn't mentioned a time limit, but I didn't want to linger.

Tubbs was obviously nervous. He showed all the classic signs of guilt: he stammered when answering my questions. He sweated (although Malone kept the place well air-conditioned). His eyes darted nervously

around the room, refusing to meet mine except for the briefest moments. Of course, these were also the classic signs of fear. That would usually be another reason to keep him on the top list of suspects, if it weren't for the two large and hairy goons that breathed over his shoulder during the entire interview. I'd be nervous too. Normally I would tell Malone's goons to get lost, as I could take care of myself. However, this interview was mostly for show and what was a show without an audience? I knew he wasn't our guy at the first glance. I would like to say it was a gut feeling that had never led me astray, that my hardened detective's intuition was like a compass for crime and guilt. But that wasn't it. It was plain, old, unromantic observation skills. The sandwich Malone showed me really was a clue. It was eaten by someone with dentures. I knew at first glance that the night watchman wasn't the thief. He had a terrible overbite.

"What do you want?" he quavered.

"Your life story. What do you think I want?" No need to soft-pedal it with Malone behind the investigation. He was a man who appreciates results more than methods, hence his chosen profession.

"I don't know nuthin about that! I told Two-Tone, I wasn't even in the room!"

"Shouldn't you have been in the room? You were the guard, right?"

"I had a lot to drink that night. A man's got needs you know! I was in the bathroom."

"Do you have any witnesses to collaborate your whereabouts?" One of the goons, Jimmy Elbows, gave me a surprised look, but Tubbs was busy denying everything. In fact, the denial was out of his mouth before I'd finished the question. I nodded to Jimmy's partner-goan, who took Tubbs out.

When they had left, Jimmy Elbows turned to me. "You always ask a guy who was in the bathroom wit' him? That's kinda sick."

"That's the point. It was a bizarre question and Tubbs didn't even notice. He was so nervous, he let me ask him if he took other guys into the bathroom with him. What kinda guy would let me get away with that?"

"Maybe he thought you were gonna pin it on him."

"If I asked you that, what would you have done?" That did it. Everyone at Two-Tone's should have mirrored the look on Jimmy's face. This type of business tended to attract guys who were very concerned about their reputation as tough guys. Tubbs was just killing every goon stereotype there was. Could it be that the movies were wrong? Are real goons just pudgy

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guys afraid of losing their jobs like the rest of us? Nah.

"So, ya think he did it?" Jimmy Elbows interrupted my musings.

"No, but he is guilty of something." I needed more information.

"What's Tubbs' story anyway?"

Johnny shrugged. "He worked at the Speakeasy for a while. Then started talkin' about wantin' ta move up in the organization. He'd been on about it for a while, then Malone let him have this guard job."

"He was in security at the Speakeasy?"

"Nah, he was a waiter or dishwasher or something."

This whole case was starting to feel wrong. Why on earth would a guy like Tubbs be promoted to security in a place where security meant the real thing? I mean look at it: Malone, Speakeasy, illegal activities, and Tubbs. What didn't fit in this picture? Perhaps his outward appearance was deceiving. Maybe he was a real tough guy underneath. Malone must be a good judge of character. He wouldn't survive ten minutes in his business without some way of judging who was a good tough guy. Besides, he handpicked his last lounge singer from his waitressing staff and she's been the newest big thing around town for six months now. It's part of how he stays in business.

Tubbs applies for a job at the Speakeasy. Someone takes one look at him and says he's got janitor written all over him. Tubbs takes the job because...Because why? He needs the money. That's always a possibility. Or, he takes the job because he's used to being mistaken for a softie and plans to work his way up. Okay, he proves himself a good, loyal worker and starts making noises about promotion. The squeaky wheel gets the grease and it eventually comes to Malone's attention. Malone, a good judge of character, decides to give him a shot and assigns him to guard duty. But he failed as a guard. What does that prove? Tubbs wasn't cut out for security after all? But, that makes Malone completely wrong about Tubbs. Well, maybe Malone didn't hire Tubbs for the security job. Maybe it was an underling who will soon be answering for his mistakes. That doesn't work either. Malone is too much of a hands-on kind of guy to allow the people under him to hire worthless guards. He would have weeded them out long before they were in a position to hire other idiots. Something doesn't fit. Tubbs is hiding something. What is it? Why did Tubbs Stubbman ever get the security job? I filed these questions away for later and moved onto the rest of the interviews.

I went through the entire waitressing staff, sharpening my tough-guy detective routine and generally showing Malone that I was earning my pay.

No luck. Everyone on the waitressing staff was really an actor and was just waitressing until they made their big break. They all had perfectly capped teeth. Trust Two-Tone Malone to get the best looking waiting staff without having to pay extra for it. Although, to give the guy some credit, he does audition periodically for new talent for the Speakeasy and allows anyone to apply regardless of previous experience. Of course, this gave him a monopoly on their talents for the duration of their contract. The guy was all heart.

I had finished interviewing all the 'security agents' Two-Tone had around the joint. They were all your cookie-cutter macho men. Tubbs was definitely beginning to look like the redheaded stepchild of the family. I couldn't wait to find out how he fit into this theft. In the meantime, I started toward the kitchen. I was getting a gut feeling that said if I intimidated the kitchen staff, I might get something to eat. When I walked in, everyone in the kitchen stopped what they were doing and stared. I would like to think my reputation preceded me, or that I had 'Hard-Boiled Detective' written all over me. But, I think it was the expression on my two hairy-escort's faces. They were men of action whose sole purpose in life was to bust heads and whatever else was necessary to get results. I think my non-violent tactics were wearing down their nerves. Suits me fine, I've been in action situations before. It's only exciting until you get shot. I could deal with a little boredom.

"Is everyone here?" I asked in my professional tone of voice. I could tell I hadn't lost my touch as two of the short order cooks winced.

"Everyone but Gramps, he's gone to get a pack of smokes," offered the chief. I nodded, making a mental note to track down this Gramps later, and started in. Gramps showed up before I was through with my second victim--I mean interviewee.

Most of the staff turned out to be more actors, waiting for their big break. You can't throw a stone in this place without hitting a dozen future Clark Gables. Evidently, they were paid less than the waiters. Most didn't have caps on their teeth. Perhaps they were going for realism. Yeah, right.

I broke for lunch before finishing with the kitchen staff; after all, I was in the right place at the right time for once. I conducted informal interviews disguised as conversation throughout lunch.

"This is excellent," I said, motioning to my chicken sandwich. It never hurts to get in good with the people who make the food. The recipient, one Tommy Dobson, glowed with the praise. "So, tell me more about this part you're auditioning for."

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"Well, I'm trying to expand my repertoire, so I'm trying out for the part of an old man reflecting on his life in this play," Tommy responded with enthusiasm. I nodded and he continued. "It's a really complex part. I'd love to get it. It could very well be the big break I've been waiting for. I really want to understand what's going on in his head, y'know?" I nodded again. I had heard this sort of thing a dozen times by now. "I've been researching this part for months now. I'm bound to get it. I've even been following people who resemble the character around—to get their reactions and movements and stuff."

It was one of the reasons actors make good waiters. They're always studying their customers for some part or another. The customers enjoy all the extra attention to their orders and drinks and tip accordingly. Everyone makes out. The waiter gets free up close and personal info, not to mention the tip, and the customer gets their undivided attention.

"I was using Gramps as one of my primary sources of information," Tommy continued, "cause he's about the right age and all. But, he didn't really work out. So, now I have to start over and rework all my theories."

"Really, like what?" I asked, mildly curious. Tommy needed no more encouragement. Like most of the would-be actors, his art was his favorite topic. If one could phrase the question right, Tommy was a wealth of information.

"Well, my character has all these regrets about life and stuff. He's at this point in his life when he feels the need to confess and justify his actions. You know, the whole 'Should I have taken that turn in my life?' thing. I saw Gramps in a close conversation with that chubby security guard who used to wash dishes for us, Stubbleman, or something. Anyway, he was head to head with him about something and I thought it would be a perfect model for the character's relationship with his son. But, Gramps said that he didn't have a son and had never really known that Stubby guy. Obviously, he's in some kind denial of his son because of his weight and low-respect job. That's just not what I was looking for in this character. So now I have to find another model to see which of the behaviors and attitudes hold true. Hopefully, all that work wasn't for nothing."

Well, well. I think Tommy just became my best friend. I chatted with him a bit more and promised to recommend him to any producers or directors that I ran into. I finished lunch and interviewed a few more dishwashers before coming to Gramps.

"How long have you been in this job?" I tried to look bored and

uninterested, befitting someone who had just spent the better part of the day asking the same questions repeatedly.

"Oh, a while now," Gramps said, switching his gum to the other side of his mouth.

"Are you happy with your work? Has anyone looked suspicious or angry lately?" I asked routinely.

"Well, you know. A job's a job. But this one's been pretty good. The only fight I know about was whatever went on between Jon and Smithy." That one I had already heard about. As far as I could tell it was an artist's dispute over why they had both chosen the same monologue for an audition. Hopefully, someone would point out to them soon that 99% of audition monologues are from Shakespeare and the odds were good that two would be the same.

"If you think of anything, please contact me directly," I said.

"Sure thing," said Gramps, flashing me a brilliant smile, and left.

It wasn't until later that day, in the middle of an interview with the lounge singer, that it dawned on me. Gramps' smile came back to me in a flash. It was a beautiful smile. He had white, even teeth that showed no nicotine stains at all. Gramps was a non-smoker.

I reported to Two-Tone at the end of the day with a light in my eyes and a spring in my step.

"You seem pleased with yourself," said Malone, narrowing his eyes.

"Did you find a lead?"

"Find a lead?" I replied, my eyes wide and innocent. "Why, Mr. Malone, I've cracked the case!"

"Please enlighten me." Malone leaned back in his expensive leather chair.

I spilled my guts. "Your thief is Gramps, the short-order cook in the kitchen. His dentures tipped me off. Actually, I knew the crook had dentures from the sandwich you gave me. Gramps' teeth blew his cover. Whenever he wanted he could claim he needed a pack of cigarettes and leave with no questions asked. He had the perfect excuse to leave his job and wander far away. But, where was he wandering? To a rendezvous with his partner. Gramps was in collusion with Tubbs Stubbman, the night watchman!"

Two-Tone looked surprised, but not as surprised as he should have been. I decided to play it straight with him.

"It was a setup, right? Actually, it was a setup within a setup. Someone

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infiltrated the Speakeasy. You got suspicious, so they sent you Tubbs—a scapegoat. You'd find out it was Tubbs, figure you fixed the leak, and go on with business as usual, leaving the real mole to continue reporting on your every move with you none the wiser. But, you're no easy mark. You know Tubbs was too good to be true and, thus, there must be someone else. All you had to do was follow Tubbs to his partner and their boss. But, that would be showing your hand too early. Now that you have an ace in the hole, why give it up when you can just hire a private detective to be *your* front. I come in, finger Tubbs for the theft, and give you a reason to take care of him. I can only assume you knew of my superior reputation and counted on me finding the real threat and tipping your hand all the while keeping the infiltrator and his superiors in the dark." I finished, resting on my laurels, and awaiting the applause.

"Actually, you were the cheapest detective we could find on short notice," said Malone. "We figured you could probably muddle your way through fingering Tubbs; after all, I gave him to you as the first suspect. The mole would then inform his boss of a job well done and, as we were monitoring all communications and stoolies, all we had to do was see who came out to take Gramps' report."

So much for my superior reputation.

"However, I will generously reward you for your added work. If you're as smart as you think you are, you'll keep this to yourself."

"I'm smart enough not to start betraying clients, especially clients in the 'Soda Fountain' business," I said, stung by this attack on my principles. "Besides, you're the best bet for repeat business I've had in months."

Malone acknowledged this reasoning with a nod and I made my getaway.

I had just finished the sign announcing the raise in my rates when there was a knock at my door. Now it couldn't be my landlord, he *never* knocks...

Elizabeth Cunneff

The Bridge

It was raining. All the local weather people were predicting flooding in the canyons. The floods came in late winter and early spring when warm rains hastened snowmelt at higher elevations. This kind of rain at this time of year was known to raise the level of Bitter Creek twenty feet in an hour turning the normally benign, meandering creek into a raging, roaring monster that would do violence to everything in its path. It could pick up an automobile and drag it for miles over boulders, scraping and grating it into twisted parts and shards. The recently re-engineered and reconstructed State-maintained canyon road would be ripped away by morning, the remains deposited somewhere between there and Searchlight along with barely identifiable cars and bits of destroyed homes and out-buildings.

A man would be dead by morning when the monster lost fuel, energy, and interest. Dismembered, he would be dropped off unceremoniously: left, like an abandoned toy, on the banks of Bitter Creek between here and there.

Weeks before, John Robert Benjamin stood on his bridge in a tattered plastic poncho, high-water boots, and a soaked, tied-down hat, raging back—shaking his fists—at the angry, rising water. He was feeling agitated but had already outwitted fear by renaming it—a trick he learned in the army. He saw flashes of eerie greenish light in the gray-brown water as it ferociously swirled beneath the bridge. He realized large rocks were causing the lights—boulders colliding on their way downstream—what he witnessed was the lights from tiny explosions, caused by the friction. The bridge trembled from the constant impact. It felt like electricity coming through his legs and reacting throughout his body. His home was high, out of the monster's reach, but the bridge . . . was it tall, wide, and strong enough? If it makes it, he thought, his combat engineering skills would have to be recognized. The locals all thought he was crazy.

"I already did it once," he muttered, "and if I can beat this monster again, they'll have to respect my bridge, damn it!" His best friend accused him of being out of touch with reality . . . J.B. hadn't spoken to him since.

He had lived near the creek for years and accepted its temperament. J.B. appreciated the dual character—the moodiness of the creek. He considered it his personal adversary: like Ahab's whale. And, it certainly

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was a mighty opponent when it was in a bad mood; but when it was a lazy little creek, it provided. It provided a breeding ground for a million frogs that would croak their changeless tune to him in the still evenings. It provided water to every living thing. It was, at those times, a friend to all. The creek was fed by two immediate tributaries upstream, and the watershed high above, but also by an underground spring below, on J.B.'s property. The spring, with its lone goldfish (God only knows how the singular fish got there and thrived year after year) provided his irrigation and household water via a pump, a holding tank, and gravity. So, in the late spring, summer, and early fall—the quiet times of the year—J.B. was on good and friendly terms with the creek. Bitter Creek was his benefactor, and the water was sweet.

The cabin he once built there had been burned to the ground, similar to J.B.'s entire life. His woman and children had left him. He pined for the two girls and remembered the times he sewed their tights for school and braided their hair. He did not want to remember the times he frightened them with his outbursts of temper directed at their mother—calling her a skinny slut and worse. He didn't want to remember their huge eyes—speaking to each other in the silent language only they understood—trying to put their Briar Horses away quickly and retreat unnoticed. J.B. loved his children. He did the best he could, but they left anyway. And he followed. He went looking for them willing to do anything necessary to keep them all together.

During his absence, one of the locals, who decided the abandoned cabin would be a great place to drink and party, dumbly and drunkenly set fire to the place. J.B.'s cabin, built hastily with only his own strength and driven by the need to shelter his family, was charred and ruined when he came back—alone. Krystal, the girls' mother, wouldn't speak to him. She had her brother tell J.B. to get lost or they'd call the police. Also during J.B.'s absence, a flash flood had punched a big hole in the land bridge; and the entire culvert that the creek, in calm moods, had trickled through was now gone. He no longer had ingress and egress to his land. So, as he sought the missing family that didn't want to be found, both the cabin and the entry to the property were taken too—and that was just about everything but the land itself. The land above the flood plane, with the charred remains of the cabin, the melted copper fireplace hood that he had banged out himself, now too worthless even for the scavengers . . . the thieves who followed in the path of the guy who burned it down . . . the land itself was

all that remained.

When he returned after years of living here and there—down in Flagstaff or Kingman—wherever he could find work, he could not bring himself to rebuild the cabin. He slowly picked through and cleared the rubble. He slept in his truck for about a week and kept clean in the creek until he could replace his stolen pump. He bought supplies in Searchlight, or if necessary Kingman, but he wasn't eating much. He grew a little thin.

He began to picture a bridge that could span the creek at its worst. It would have to be set into a deep foundation and be fastened tightly to abutments on both sides. He created a crude footbridge and parked on the other side for awhile. But as he stared at the footbridge from above, he kept picturing a fortified wooden bridge that he could drive over. He could then make the climb up to the property in his truck. He began to formulate a plan. He planned a timber trestle bridge, like the kind made for trains, that would easily carry the weight of anything he might want to get up there. It could carry an entire combat battalion . . . tanks and all.

Getting any housing materials across the creek was problematic. J.B. got a tent and, for a few summer months, he slept in that. He got some work framing other people's houses . . . mostly survivalist types who found they couldn't survive at all without someone around who could build and fix things. Eventually, J.B. bought a cozy trailer. Louis Vasquez, a local guy with grading equipment, helped him build a temporary land bridge to haul it up there. Now he was comfortable enough even to have a woman over when he wanted one. There was usually someone around who would visit—women he met at the General Store or at a bar in Searchlight would occasionally drive up. One lonely divorcee named Robin came by occasionally. He began to enjoy her company.

There was no television. He had a radio and had rigged some antennae wiring hoping to receive anything from anywhere over the steep surrounding mountains. Sometimes he could get soft rock on 108 FM out of Kingman, but mostly it was talk radio (and it infuriated him). It was not a life that offered much comfort, and mostly he was alone.

He coveted the bridge. He wanted the bridge in his imagination to become reality. He drew it and improved it over and over again. Slowly, he bought and found the materials. He fortified the abutments with huge boulders that Vasquez helped him move. He built two gabions, which reached deeply into the creek bottom holding rocks of all sizes. The smaller rocks filled in the gaps between the larger ones in heavy, steel mesh cages he

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constructed. Shaped like small freighter ships, the gabions pointed courageously upstream. They would provide the firmest possible foundation for the trestles. He placed the phone-pole timbers deep within the gabions that sunk into the creek bottom. The abutments were doubly fortified when the top finally went on. Anything could be driven over this bridge. You could land a plane on it, he thought, rather grandiosely.

And there he lived and worked and intended to stay for awhile.

He missed his children.

The creek made unenthusiastic passes at him the first and second winters. But the third winter was different. J.B. knew the signs. The hills were soaked and the water table was already very high by January. By February, any rain at all would make a difference in the stream's size. The creek would begin to grow and get angry again.

Then a big storm came in March and knocked down the levee above J.B.'s property. The water had its own ideas. It refused the diversion the engineers had provided, which normally took more than three-fourths of the water under the road and away from the bridge. It was attempting to create an abandoned oxbow out of the far bank. The levee, built of decomposed granite, sand, rock, and whatever else was around, contained an old car door. The water behind the broad flat door, demanding immediate access to the most direct downhill route, created a tremendous force. Thus, the door was spit out and propelled broadside, directly toward the bridge. Instead of protecting the bridge, the levee had been an aimed and loaded gun. The car door gathered deadwood and other materials on its front side. When it finally hit the bridge, it swiped one of the trestles out from underneath.

When the water finally subsided, the bridge was still standing—crippled but defiant. It slumped where the trestle had tried to drag it along until the fasteners finally gave out. Its fatigue was obvious. The one gabion was a twisted mess about ten feet from its original location. Now empty, it had grabbed desperately onto something with deeper roots than its own and managed to stay there, hanging on by a single wire. Most of the trestle's component parts were within two dozen feet of the bridge, also hanging on there as if through some personal determination.

J.B. summoned all his strength. He began gathering back what materials were still close by. A surprising amount of unbroken wood was retrievable, but it took days. He nearly drowned twice in the still swiftly moving stream while he pulled, dragged, levered, winched, and coaxed his bridge

back into shape. He was able to prop it back up with one phone pole and fasten it at the bottom in a makeshift way. The bridge has been severely compromised. He made repairs hastily, supposing the worst was still ahead.

About 17 days later, just when he thought he, and the bridge, might make it after all, it came.

The storm began in the afternoon. By 3:00 it was already dark and the creek was high. J.B. stood on the weakened bridge in his tattered plastic poncho, raging back at the angry, rising water. By now, he didn't dare move. The creek ate away at the abutments, even tearing some of the largest boulders away. The bridge twisted and creaked and screamed. It threatened to abandon the rapidly eroding abutments. But J.B. wasn't leaving, he was trying his will and his skill against the intractable water. The crippled bridge stood like an old man on a cane.

By 7:00, the rain subsided. At 8:00, J.B. and the bridge were still barely standing. Finally, carefully, he crept off the bridge to what was left of the property-side abutment. He climbed the hill to the trailer and collapsed on the bed.

When he awoke, shivering, the sky was still dark. It was just before daybreak and still drizzling, but patches of morning were beginning to pull apart the gray clouds. He went outside to survey the damage. The flood was abating and most of the bridge was still there—creaking and rocking—hanging on weakly by one-eighth of one abutment, supported by one nearly intact trestle, its gabion fully exposed—the creek having eroded five or six feet of bottom away.

J.B. began to winch and drag the remaining materials with chains, levers, and come-alongs, out of the steadily subsiding creek and up onto higher land. He worked again for days attempting to save what he could. When he could get to a phone, he called Vasquez.

The creek had taken things away but it had also brought things . . . it always did. A big piece of corrugated culvert from somewhere upstream had managed to hang on there by embracing a huge rock on the road side of the property. The Roads Department didn't want to haul it back upstream, they said they'd rather bring a new one than mess with it. So J.B. and Vasquez placed it carefully in the stream and piled and packed and leveled the land up above it to make another temporary land bridge. Crews from the Roads Department had started re-grading and making preliminary measurements and plans to repair the main road that now lay here and there in double-yellow striped chunks—some twisted like taffy.

Elizabeth Cunneff

A few days later, J.B. and Robin sat close together in lawn chairs on the property above. They each cracked an ice-cold beer. They drank a toast to Armin Tucker whom they'd heard drowned trying to drive his truck over Bitter Creek at the height of the storm. Apparently his engine died. As he sat there helplessly, the water toppled the truck over and it began to tumble downstream. He and his truck parted company, nobody knows how or where, and parts of both were still being found days later. J.B. and Robin shook their heads.

"Must have been drunk," he said.

"Everybody thought he was a little crazy anyhow," she said.

J.B. looked away and down at the land bridge. He pictured a bigger bridge.

He missed his children.

A bunch of mountain bikers rode by in their colorful outfits. J.B. sneered at them as he always did. A pretty blonde woman cyclist said to her husband, "I wonder if that guy every gets tired of rebuilding."

"Yeah," said her husband, "I wonder."

The Hole in My Leg Completed the Hole in My Heart

A week before the state championships for swimming, I was gold panning at Hart Park with my father. My puppy, King, was along for the day. I suddenly noticed my puppy wasn't in the truck, where I had left him. Panicked, I threw down my gold pan and ran up stream, screaming out, "King, come here boy." Finally a quarter of a mile up stream, I saw King playing with a little toy fox terrier. I calmly picked up King, and began to walk back down stream. Suddenly I felt a sharp pain in my left calf, like two needles poking in my muscle. I looked down and saw the toy fox terrier gnawing on my leg. I pulled away, ripping the skin from the dog bite, and making the bite larger and more painful as his teeth got closer to the bone. Finally, pulling the dogs teeth out of my calf, I began to limp back to my truck. When King and I reached the truck, I wiped the blood off my calf and put a towel around the wound to stop the bleeding. My father came up to me and asked, "What was wrong?" "I just pulled off a scab on my leg that's all," I said.

I had lied to my dad because I was afraid he wouldn't let me compete in the State Swimming Championships in L.A. I wasn't going to let something so small stop me from accomplishing one of the most important goals of my life. So, why did I swim in the state championships with a hole in my leg? Oh, that's simple.

Since I was ten years old, I have been determined to accomplish two dreams. One, to reach the State Swimming Championships. The other, to beat my father's 30 year old record for the 100-yard butterfly with the time of 56.16. In my heart, I knew that it would be the last chance to fulfill my dreams because next year I would be 18 and too old to compete in the competition. I had accomplished half of my dream three weeks earlier in San Diego, qualifying for the State Swimming Championships. The other half of my dream was to beat my father's record in the 100-yard butterfly and give me the chance to shut my father up, once and for all.

Ever since I started swimming, at age five, I have listened to the same old stories over and over; stories about how my father won the state championship with his calves completely knotted up, stories about how he allowed a doctor to stick a six-inch needle in his calves to relax them, and still his team won the state meet. I was tired of him telling me that I didn't swim hard enough, that I should be out of breath, or should be throwing up at the end of a race. I was tired of him reminding me he was an All-American

Justin Shultz

Champion and I never would be because I didn't have enough heart. My father, for twelve years, had been a real pain in the butt with his stories. So, I was determined to win the State Swimming Championship and earn the pride and respect from my father that is rightfully mine.

Pride is such a powerful word in my heart. A little dog bite in my left calf from a toy fox terrier wasn't going to stop me from swimming. If I didn't swim, I didn't know if I would be able to look my father in the eye, or even look myself in the mirror. I would have been humiliated. After all the hard work and dedication that I had put into my efforts, to get to where I was, I could not just give up. I couldn't let my parents down, and, more importantly, I couldn't let myself down over something so small. I kept thinking positively about my pride using the old saying, "no pain, no gain."

No pain, no gain. These were very strong words that had inspired me every time I was hurt. Those words motivate me to accomplish whatever I start. Those simple words provided enough strength and enough courage to swim a week later in L.A. I already knew the swim meet wasn't going to be a pleasurable moment in my life.

The day of the State Swimming Championships arrived a week after I was bitten by the dog. I discovered that I couldn't put all my weight on my left leg. I wrapped up my leg with gauze wrap and water proofed tape tightly around the wound. My parents looked at me very strangely, and asked me if I was OK. I told them it was just a shin splint and that I would be fine. Like the parents I knew they were, they told me if I was in too much pain they didn't want me to swim. I said "I'll be fine, don't worry" while walking towards my racing block.

As I began to walk to my block for the start of my event, I already had tears in my eyes; I knew I had no chance of fulfilling the second half of my dream. Out of eight swimmers in the final event, I was seeded last, not including an injury, and in the worst lane a swimmer could receive—the lane right next to the side of the pool. The announcer came over the loud speaker, "swimmers up."

I got on my block in excruciating pain. I could feel my calf throbbing with every heartbeat. I took a deep breath, repeating to myself those encouraging words: no pain, no gain. Then the gun went off. With all I had, I pushed off the block with my one good leg, splashed in the water, and began kicking. I fought with all I had for the first 25 yards of the race; I made a flip, turned on the wall, put pressure on my left leg, and began gritting my teeth in pain.

Suddenly I felt a bit of a draft down my swimsuit. I realized that I had been so worried about my leg I had forgotten to tighten my swimsuit before the race. After the halfway mark, I usually look and see where my opponents are, but at this point my swimsuit was going down to my ankles. I knew I was losing ground to my opponents. So, when I turned and headed down the home stretch, I was no longer swimming in a bathing suit, but in my birthday suit. At this point in the race, I wasn't paying attention to my leg. I just wanted to finish the race, get my suit, and accept my loss. I hit the wall and finished the race. I looked down to my left, and no one was there. I figured all the other swimmers were already done with the race and out of the pool drying off. As I was swimming back towards my suit at the other end of the pool, I saw the scoreboard flashing with "NEW STATE RECORD!!" Big deal I thought, until my name flashed with the time of 54.99. I could hear the announcer saying, "A thirty-year old record has finally been beaten, and by the old record holder's son." That gave me goose bumps up and a chill down my body. I reached my suit, pulled it on as my father dove in the pool and hugged me, and then, with his help, got out of the pool.

As my father was pulling me out of the pool, I fell to the ground. I couldn't get up, and I began to cry again. I wasn't crying because I fulfilled my childhood dream, not because of the humiliation that losing my swimsuit caused me, but because the bandage around my calve was soaked with blood and had begun to throb. My father took off the bandage and looked at me with a disgusted look on his face. He asked me, "What really happened?" I responded in pain, "I got bit by a little mutt, gold panning last weekend." He just sat there stunned and asked, "why didn't you tell me and why did you swim?" Because, I wanted to be like my father. And to make sure the record stays in the family for another 30 years.

From that very day, my father has never told another swimming story to me. I fulfilled my childhood dream, and became a State Champion record holder in the 100-yard butterfly. The only bad thing about winning was being humiliated on National TV when interviewed about my little incident with the dog bite and my suit falling off in the pool, and how it felt about beating my fathers record after 30 years. "I was determined to accomplish something that I worked so hard for, and I wasn't going to let a little mutt stand in my way." I said, to the reporter.

Randall Calderon

Fast Food

Why not, Daniel thought as they pulled up to the In and Out. His wife had killed the engine of their brand new silver Nissan Cab Cruiser and they stepped down slowly with middle-class, middle-aged dignity. It had been a long, tiring day, and a cold night. Daniel had been going to college for six long years and was tired of doing all that was expected of him. He wondered if everyone's life was so stressful. He had high cholesterol but was going off his diet for a burger. They loved greasy burgers. Others, driven by their desires, also headed toward the entrance. The handle was cold, mechanical, and yielded to Daniel's will. His wife went in and Daniel smiled politely as he held the door open for the others, who trotted through as if they expected it of him.

Inside, the room was crowded and busy. They were sitting in the booths and at the tables relaxing, chewing the cud with their families, young and old. Others were standing by themselves waiting for their orders. Some were furtively glancing at others then looking away, as if not to intrude; some were condescendingly sizing-up others and turning away wearing smug smiles or showing prideful disdain. You could see it in their movements and especially in their eyes. The rest were gathered in one long line that began at the entrance. Workers, in bright colored red and white caps, shirts, and smiles, flitted about the colorful room wiping down tables or graciously removing trash and plastic trays from occupied tables. One worker's job was to go around and around, from table to table, smiling and asking if everything was all right, then turning to the next table, smiling and asking if everything was all right, then finally, after her shift was over, she was excused from the tables to go home. Other workers were behind the big red counter taking orders at the registers and punching the keyboards, while others were yelling out order numbers and bringing the orders from the back to the big red counter. In the back, the workers used the big stainless steel machines to churn the shakes, sizzle the fries, and barbecue the burgers. The factory was buzzing and the workers were frantically flipping, scooping, and bagging. The raw materials went in and the finished products came out.

It was kind of cold as Daniel and his wife waited in line for their turn at the register. Ahead of them, the long line was moving at a eager pace. Some of them were shooting the bull, others were just looking about. On the white walls throughout the room hung many displays of modern art, all

of which were interactions of color and movement designed to intrigue, placate, and distract all who looked upon them. But as Daniel looked, he suddenly became aware of his dark ghostly reflection in the glass. He saw the pudgy, little figure in the Dockers with the thinning silver hair, glasses and tired eyes--and then, it was gone.

The line was goaded forward. Daniel and his wife were next at the register. Daniel put his hands on the big red counter and looked at the simple menu designed to get the crowds in and out fast. "Good evening, can I take your order?" her young eye teeth gleamed in a carnivorous smile. Nervous, hungry, and growing impatient, Daniel was more outspoken tonight, so he gave the order this time.

"Yea, she'll have the #2 with cheese and I'll have the #2 Animal." The Animal was grilled and spicy and tonight that suited his mood.

"My Sweetie Pie," his wife's eyes sparkled at him in that silly way and she hugged his arm. It was like they were in some fancy restaurant. She was proud of him for being so assertive in his silver years. He had paid the price, and he looked for a place to sit.

There in the booth he recognized them. They used to go to the restaurant where he used to work, but he had forgotten their names. Spooked, his first instinct told him to run, but they were too close; he was trapped. He had always avoided people he hadn't seen in a long time, because they were like teachers, with their expectations. But now he was a teacher. He was not a busser. He knew about smiles and he could give them a better one this time. He shuffled over to their booth with his palm up above his shoulder, pretending to be bussing. "Can I take your tray?" he smiled. Mouthfuls of burger and recognition grew on their faces. They were both a little older than him, about sixty. The oriental man was a doctor and the white woman was his secretary and his wife.

"Haven't seen you Daniel in a couple years," her blotchy jowls jiggled as she chewed her words with a hungry voice. "We were just talking about you at the restaurant. Inez said you hadn't been over there in a long time. Now, on Saturdays, they have all you can eat buffet, and on Wednesday nights, the special is pork ribs." Her quiet-mouthed husband nodded and gave a toothy embarrassed look, his timid eyes momentarily venturing out through the tiny slits and the coke bottle lenses. She took another sloppy mouthful, without missing a lick. The blood-red catsup oozed and mixed with the cheesy burger grease. "Yea, Inez said you were teaching," her corpulent torso shifted in his direction as if the turgid sausage skin of her

Randall Calderon

neck was unable to twist. "Did you hear about the latest shooting at that school? A fifth-grader, can you imagine that, shot those kids. Good God, it was a slaughter house," she wiped the blood from her mouth and hands onto the crumpled napkin and tossed it aside. "People just don't have any respect for life anymore, what grade do you teach?"

"I subbed first-grade today. They were a little wild, I had to get the whip. Have to train 'em when they're young so they can go to college and get good jobs. Hell, look at me, I'm still going to school. They got me jumpin' through the hoops."

"He's in the credential program this quarter at Cal State," his wife didn't need an introduction, she just walked up to the table, and started chewing the fat. They could have been sisters. "It's been a real struggle for him teaching and going to school too. I pushed him this quarter to take twenty-one units, that's going time-and-a-half. But in a year, we'll be making the big bucks; and with me working too that will really beef up our income. We just bought a new truck and . . ." Her voice trailed off as Daniel walked over to get some catsup, plenty of napkins and wait for the order. Normally, his wife would get the order, but she'd rather socialize, even more than eat.

Daniel was feeling better. He had been reminded how much better off he was now than before. He had worked hard to get what he had. His wife was right. They deserved that new truck; they deserved to be riding high. Now he could smile like he hadn't in years. As he stood waiting for his order, he looked around at the workers and the others and could tell they came from all walks of life. He saw the young and the old, the beautiful and the ugly, the uneducated and the educated, the poor and the rich-- and he had an inescapable feeling of superiority-- he couldn't help thinking that he was at least better than most.

His order came up, he smiled and took it to his wife, sitting in the booth behind the old couple, who were finishing their burgers. "Daniel, I was just telling your wife, remember Bill and Margaret who used to always go to the restaurant? I think they were always there when we were there, well anyways, he had a heart attack and died last week," she washed down the burger as her lips pursed together on the straw. "Yea they found him dead in his office where he was working overtime."

"I used to talk with him," Daniel said softly as he sat down with the tray.

"You know he was only forty-five, good God, I thought he was older than that." Daniel dipped a fry in catsup and stared at the floor. "He had

heart disease but he just kept working overtime." Daniel had never noticed the little white tiles. "I told him to slow down but he just wouldn't listen." The little white tiles were all the same and laid out in rows and rows which seemed to point to the end of the room. "You know life is so short and then to die early like that, why it's a damned shame." *Tiles . . . like an army of workers . . . each one whimpering imperceptibly for recognition . . . before the end.* The straw sucked up the last of the drink. There was something about the tiles. It was unclear to Daniel-- and then it was gone. Daniel heard the couple say good-by and looked up to see the husband nod. He looked over to see his wife eating. Why not, he thought, and bit into the burger.

Lee McCarthy

Shade Combs Burton

The back and forth of trucks had packed down the dirt into an uneven road along the pond bank. Even his car could drive it, just as it was at that moment until he killed the motor. "Duck, you want me to bring you back a hamburger?" He shouted it toward the rowboat that held two boys.

"Yeah, two of 'um." It was the older boy with curly hair who answered.

Shade had already started the motor, which entailed the air-conditioner, and had rolled his window halfway up when he heard the boy shout something else. He rolled his window down, cut off the motor again, and listened with solicitude as the air-conditioner agonized in strangled tones to its death. He stuck the hatted part of his head out the window and yelled, "What is it?"

"And a quart of chocolate milk."

Switching the air-conditioner to off first, he turned the engine on. When the boy yelled again, the car lurched twice, due to some uncoordinated frustration inside, before the motor fell silent.

"He wants to know if you'll bring him a chocolate milk, too."

The roiling dust hid the car as it proceeded east on the pond bank and up the road to the house. Only when it pulled onto the highway did it become fully visible again. Two women fishing on one of the three small piers were laughing between themselves. The women belonged to the younger boy. In a flowered dress and stockings with her heels kicked off, the older woman was seated with her back leaning against one of the metal feeders. She wore a straw hat with a pink velvet band that she'd bought in Florida, one that a woman who didn't wear straw hats would buy for a day of deep-sea fishing. The fringe curled up in unexpected places from being flung carelessly into her closet. The older woman was the only one of the two really fishing; she was the only one of the two who knew anything about it. She had watched the entire car incident in silence, her mouth held open by the smile there. Then she laughed, saying, "Your Uncle Shade. It's so *hard* on him."

Sitting cross-legged and stoop-shouldered, as if the sun itself tired her, the younger woman laughed back easily without taking her eyes from their look across the pond. She had been her mother's daughter a long time. She was busy gathering up the intense glare of the sun as if it belonged to her. The humid, still air both supported her body and weighed it down, both

burdened and comforted her. Home only for a visit, she no longer minded the boredom of it. Her hair was knotted up, accenting the giraffe look of her small head and long neck. The sucking sounds that followed the water lapping against the pier posts was soothing.

* * *

On the way to dinner he thought about his father and the only time he had seen him angry.

"Where's my gun, Melissa?" his father had shouted even before he was through the doorway completely.

"And what is it you want it for?"

"That man has poisoned my dog."

"*What* man, Noah Burton?"

"That no-good Wesley Bostick."

"You mean to tell me, Noah, you would kill a Christian man over a dog? I'm not listening to it."

"That dog was worth two of him any day."

He watched the back of his wife as she returned to the kitchen and her churning.

"More character!" he shouted and then let the front screendoor slam as he left.

When his dad had been dying, Wesley didn't come for a long time. Then he did one day toward the end. Wesley never said a word. In the straight-backed chair Melissa brought from the kitchen for him, he just sat by the hospital bed in the living room for more than an hour.

In his weak, hoarse voice, Noah said, "I forgive you for killing my dog."

After that, Wesley came to sit for an hour every Saturday. "I was just on my way to town," he'd say. "Thought I'd stop in and see if you all needed anything." He left a ten-dollar bill on top of the victrola each time on his way out the door, as other visitors did. The cancer went on for three years. Noah wouldn't be a burden to his grown children. Maybe it was he wouldn't let them pay for the thing that was killing him. His children put their money on top of the victrola along with the other visitors. Noah had given to everyone all his life. Even the circus people slept at his house once a year--the children and women on pallets in the living room floor, the men in the barn. He had taken no pride in giving. He felt no shame in taking.

* * *

Shoving himself out of the maroon booth, Shade picked up the brown sack from the end of the table. At the cash register, he bought a paper and

Lee McCarthy

drove across the highway to the store where he paid for the quart carton with his change from the cafe.

Too careful in backing his car away from the storefront--just like an *old* man, Shade thought--but helpless to do anything about it, he knew he had to get away for a few days. He was going to get a bleeding ulcer. \$40,000 sunk in catfish. He couldn't even keep an eye on them. It made him ache to think about it. He would go to Mabel's in Tupelo. J. D. would fix him up. J. D. was always talking about fixing him up. There was a divorced woman lived next door who was always showing off her tan arms and streaked up blond hair. Even though she didn't have sense enough to sit on those rough hands of hers, she was a drinker which would keep her from being unbearable.

The worst was Duck's orders. Always two hamburgers and chocolate milk for supper. Two hamburgers and a Pepsi every noon. If Duck came the least bit early in the morning, he'd whine until you took him to breakfast. Kid ate eggs, pancakes, biscuits and gravy, french toast, everything at once. Four dollar steak if he came with Shade to supper. A grandson cost more in the long run than paid help. That mother of his quit those bridge clubs of hers, she could pack a lunch for him. Suddenly, he felt himself going over to Duck's side. She was the kind who'd pack carrot sticks and hard-boiled eggs.

"Dammit!" His fist came down on the steering wheel. He ran off the road onto the shoulder when he thought of it. *Two* quarts of chocolate milk. Not only did Duck not understand how adults forgot things, but the words *share* and *do without* were beyond him.

* * *

Carrying the ashtray from the table with her, she walked to the sofa and sat down before asking if he wanted another drink. He stayed at the table in the candlelight where she had left him along with their plates, glasses, and silverware. Without realizing that was his cue to offer to make her another drink, he picked up his coffee spoon and snuffed out the candles with plops hard enough to spatter hot wax across the tablecloth. She reached up to turn on the floor lamp which was next to where she sat as he walked over to sit by her. Her knee was as wide as his hand and his fingers weren't all that long. He said, "I'm going to tell you a story. It's a good story."

"About what?" she asked and moved her knee so that he had to find another place to put his hand.

"About a house. The house was a Yankee's idea of what a southern mansion ought to look like. Just to prove a Yankee could never be southern, someone talked her into painting it battleship gray. Probably gave her a good price on the paint."

"Dull gray?" She looked away. "Must have been a marvelous price. And you're making this difficult to follow. Who do you mean--her?"

"Mrs. Meyers, of course. I don't know her first name. I doubt if anyone other than her husband ever did. Maybe her children did. But that's only maybe."

He waited. She didn't say anything.

"By the time I was old enough to go in there with my mother--my mother traded eggs for material--she was known as Mrs. Meyers, Ben Block Meyers's mother. Even I understood that it was a rich, old lady who didn't just run but presided over that musty store, the only place in town that pretended to the name *department store*."

"You mean the house?"

"No, damnit, the store. The Blocks owned the bank and half the stores in town and, for all I knew, that was the reason the downtown was divided into blocks. Unless a street had some old magnolias on it, it wasn't a street but just where people lived, where Killough's Hill or Shaver's Field used to be. She liked my mother."

"Mrs. Meyers did?"

"Her house had magnolia trees. A huge one in each of the two ten-foot grass plots in front. Gave people something besides the house to look at. Took care of the short side walk that led up to her porch. House looked like a hotel but it wasn't. The town hotel's always been across from the railroad station. On the corner of Hamilton and Camille."

He studied the foam from the melted ice cube in his glass, the kind of thing that couldn't have happened if he had convinced her to put water instead of gingerale in his bourbon. She knew how to ruin good whiskey, that was for sure. She sat silent, killing the impulse to cross her legs. The movement might distract him and she wanted him to go on with the story.

"Only delusions fed by loneliness would have built a house that big in a town that small. Wood with a fakey plantation front. Attached to that was a two-story spine of rooms. Ran back for the whole length of the block with latticed second-story verandahs. Then it got wide again. Like a woman's hips. I've never asked about that house. To see what anyone else

Lee McCarthy

thought. I figured she knew she was going to live for ninety-five years and would need somewhere to store all the stuff living for a hundred years could entail. Especially if you decided to save everything of your dead mama's and your dead papa's and your dead husband's and your alive son's childhood. Every letter some second cousin wrote you. It'd be a pile. She'd done a good job getting ready for it. If that back part was a carriage house, then somebody had planned on ten carriages."

He shook his glass to see if there was enough ice left in there that he could get a rattle out of it. It might bring her back into the party mood. When nothing but water sloshed around in there, he said, "Forget catfish. Nobody can keep up with even ice cubes." Then he thought of something more he ought to tell her.

"The bank, her son's bank which had been her daddy's bank, bordered the house on one side. An alley in-between. On that side, she had a solid board fence. Ten feet high and more gray paint. But the other side of the house was protected by a high hurricane fence. Inside the fence was a garden. But you won't be able to get this part. Even if you can picture a hundred and fifty gallons of battleship gray. It looked like a vegetable garden in there but the rows were filled with rose bushes. They moved toward the house in the plodding, ordinary way of green beans until they were smack against the house. No beans but fifteen kinds of roses. A man took care of them most every day . . ." He looked over at her and wrinkled his forehead. "Well, I never saw anyone out there when it was sleeting. But the waxing and waning that took place there during the summer as those yellow, red, pink, white buds unfolded and then fell petal by petal to the ground was enough to flush out the moon." He wondered if her blouse might feel like an overblown rose, a hand full of soft petals.

He shoved his face up to hers suddenly, causing her eyes to cross slightly as she stared back at him, and then he asked, "Now, what do you think of that story?"

"Umm." She moved her head slightly, not enough to be rude but enough to escape.

"What would you say if I told you I was going back and buy that house and sit out on the fakey front porch in a wicker chair come all the way from Hong Kong? And have twenty beautiful women, lolling on the second-story verandahs, watch those roses shatter in the moonlight."

She felt attacked. "Why don't you just try New Orleans for a weekend? It might save you from doing something rash."

"I've done *rash* several dozen times. It's a habit by now. I married a crazy nag named Fay after my real wife Claire died. Claire and I had made these babies left and right. Sweet children. We planned on being happy. Then she died." He needed to leave that subject alone. "My latest *rash* is a catfish pond."

"Then why, hot on the heels of some catfish, do you want a house big as a pond? You plan to stock it with mermaids?"

He stood up. She didn't stand up but said to his back as he walked toward the door, "Were you making fun of me?" Then the look on her face changed and she laughed. "I liked the story. I didn't understand any of it. But I liked it."

He bowed himself out the door and went down the steps. He would call her. He knew he would. Because of her first name. Because he couldn't call her by that name. It was Claire's. He could still remember Claire as she was in the beginning. He broke two bones in his foot the third month of their marriage. He was on crutches for almost two months. Claire insisted on holding onto his arm walking down streets. With her own unique brand of agile clumsiness, she invariably tripped one of his crutches. What followed was exactly the same each time. He landed on the maimed foot and howled with pain. Claire stood there, white around the mouth and under the eyes, crying "Oh! Oh! Oh!" Those were the only times he had ever felt the desire to hit a woman in the mouth.

* * *

When he divorced Fay, he moved her into another house and then moved the furniture out of the living room and had two pool tables put in. He nailed up a rack for the cue sticks and placed some ashtrays on the mantelpiece for his cigars. He was at heart a fastidious man.

* * *

He turned off the highway onto the dirt road. With the car slowed, he could hear the crickets making the dark theirs. The scratchy sound of women's stockings as their legs crossed and uncrossed.

The cleaning table, made of two-by-fours, stood before the office. It caught the early hour moonlight and threw it a short distance back into the night. The wood smooth under his hand, he ran his palm back and forth, finding nothing. He got the spray hose and washed the table down, anyway, just to be sure. Sitting in the chair that shouldn't have been left outside, he could feel the dampness of the plastic cushion through his pants. He closed his eyes for a minute. They stung from the long drive back.

Lee McCarthy

Maybe he slept for a moment, he wasn't sure. But when he opened his eyes, there they were, the walking catfish, coming from Florida across Crowley's Ridge toward his pond. He had to warn the others.

Not having run in years, he went at an uneven trot down to the first pier. He could hear the feeder dropping pellets. Dazzled by the moonlit water, the fish were placidly bumping the wires below. He had seen people dive before but he had never tried it. It had always looked easy enough. The thing was to put power into it.

He was underwater in his own pond, but he thought he was wandering learning how to swim. In any case, it was so black inside he couldn't see. After all that fuss and bother--the damned truckload of paperwork that went with buying anything--maybe he'd forgotten to have the electricity turned on. But then he was in another house. A familiar one. Fay would fuss. He hadn't taken his field shoes off in the laundry room. He tried to shove them off now, but there wasn't a leg to balance himself on. He had forgotten to ask Duck what he wanted from the cafe. He was about to go back. The air-conditioner was freezing him, anyway. Good excuse to turn it off. Then he remembered the real thing, the walking catfish. He opened his mouth to yell "They're coming!" but the rain-soaked mud fell into the corpse's mouth.

They almost forgot to close his daddy's coffin that day. It had rained hard all morning and Melissa kicked the undertaker when he tried to get her to say goodbye to the corpse. With the same hands that had made custard out of duck eggs, she pushed against Kernodle's chest trying to move him away. "You're a bigger fool than I thought!" she yelled. "You heathen! You think that's *Noah* I'm letting you put in the ground?" Keeping her face toward the window and the passing countryside, she kept telling her children *and* the driver of the limousine, all the way to the cemetery, "They couldn't bury Noah if they had a ton of dirt to do it with."

In the South, which is all Shade had ever known of the world, anyone who failed to live a shallow life was likely to end up in a shallow grave. But if one had ever straightened up during the hot afternoon work in the fields and worked his tongue over the grit of poverty there on his teeth before lifting a dipper of water out of a pail, then the shallow life ran deeper and felt richer than most people would suspect.

The undertaker spent a year trying to get Melissa to pay for the funeral. Finally, she offered the dusty, black-suited man some eggs. In the end, she *insisted* he take the eggs. He came to Shade's that same afternoon. Shade

had written out a check as the eggs oozed through the weave of the man's upturned hat onto the car seat.

When he laughed, the water rushed down his throat. He was sputtering all over the place. Hadn't had such a good laugh in a long time. He had to stop, though, and catch his breath. He threw up his arms and found the moonlight. Then it was dark again. He didn't want the house, after all. The verandahs were okay. The rest of it would kill him. Taxes and all. He wanted Claire. He wanted to call her. Had he said anything about calling? He would have to get out of this house. A man didn't have lights, there wasn't going to be a phone. Then he saw them. Flat-headed and wide-lipped, the water aboil with their slick bodies. His mouth opened as he got ready to give the yell of his life.

Angela Armitage

Sweaty Armchairs

Mister Diggles whimpered when she pressed him close to her face. She thought it affection. He simply felt the chocolate heat from her heave-ho breath. As soon as Carla sat him down on the floor with a "There you go, Mister Diggles," he scampered away to his creviced hole underneath the trailer. Space forty-three was double-wide, a bright canary yellow with geraniums hanging from the front sliding window. The small lawn was immaculate, complete with miniature gnomes winking and smiling near the Secura-Trust chain link fence. Every so often Carlo would have to take the hose and give them a thorough cleaning—not from dog or bird greetings, but rather from the neighborhood kids who thought it funny to give yellow baths to the plastic icons, while giggling at their ten-year-old deviance.

Carla was rosy, in cheeks and gait. Today in particular was fantastic: she'd spent the earliest portion of the morning dusting and humming along with her Gloria Estefan's Greatest Hits tape. She'd taken a few breaks—one can't work without some reward, after all, and by the time she had finished spic-and-spanning her home, she had nearly eaten herself sick on Good Humor ice cream bars. Simon was due at two o'clock. Simon made her feel lovely, took her into a tiny high heel world where her scale was taunted, and spongy curlers gave way to glinting eye shadow. Simon was a bit older, forty-five perhaps, and he certainly had a royal aire about him. In his back pocket he carried a two-sided navy blue comb, which he used to style his thinning hair with grace normally achieved only by Princes (Charles or whomever). Simon was coming at two o'clock.

Carla sat, oomphing into her torn recliner, and wrapped her sausage fingers around the remote control. Her fingernails were cotton candy pink that day. The talk show host appeared on the rabbit-ear set, injecting fury into his raving audience. The cousins who were starring in the television lighting clutched one another, screaming *We Love* back at the minister who condemned them for it. Carla dropped peanut brittle onto her lap as she ate. She began to sweat with the late morning heat, and her eyes drooped as she entered her familiar mindshift. Mister Diggles dug deeper beneath the trailer, occasionally pausing to nip at his leg.

The walls were pristine plywood. There was a series of K-mart frames surrounding photographs hanging from one of them. One image, peeping out from the hallway, showed a thin Carla at eighteen years old. A tiara

Angela Armitage

rested upon her fiery head, and she stood embraced by a crowned boy against a backdrop reading *Homecoming Court, 1979*. Her sleeves were poofed and her arms silky, even through the smudged glass that the photograph rested behind. Her feet were dainty, as they are now. In the photograph she looked fragile. In the armchair, she looked toppish. Size four slippers, bunnies or no, seemed ill-fitting on her marshmallow frame. The second photograph was Mister Diggles, dressed in a doggy tuxedo. It was Halloween three years ago, and she smiled whenever she passed it. The third frame contained a newspaper clipping, a picture of Carla straight-faced and looking successful. The passage below it described her achievements in her local Neighborhood Watch program.

As she watched Television, Carla fell asleep and dreamed of blueberry boys leading her back to town with muskets and chariots. She waved to the crowds, smiled from her hourglass figure. Simon kissed her neck from inside her compartment. He didn't come to repair her leaking faucet in the dream.

A Collection of Photographs
by
Gary Graupman



Statue at greta Green, Scotland



Statue at greta Green, Scotland



The Animus



Lost Dreams
Bodie, California



Bear Falls Sequoia



Whispering Trolls



Hearst Castle
San Simeon, California

A Collection of Photographs
by
Margaret Nowling



Our Lady of Tight Places



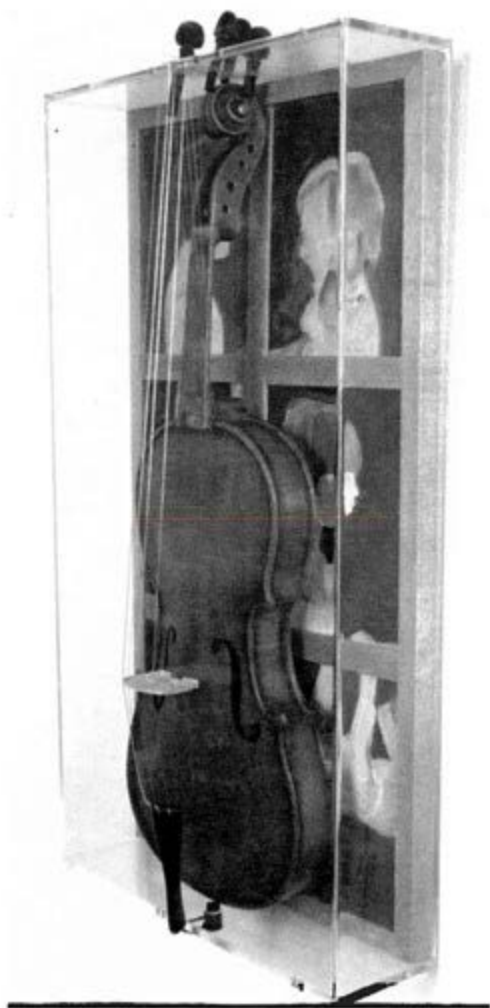
Our Lady of the Lost and Abandoned



What is it about boys and bullets?
Jumping Cowboy



Silenced



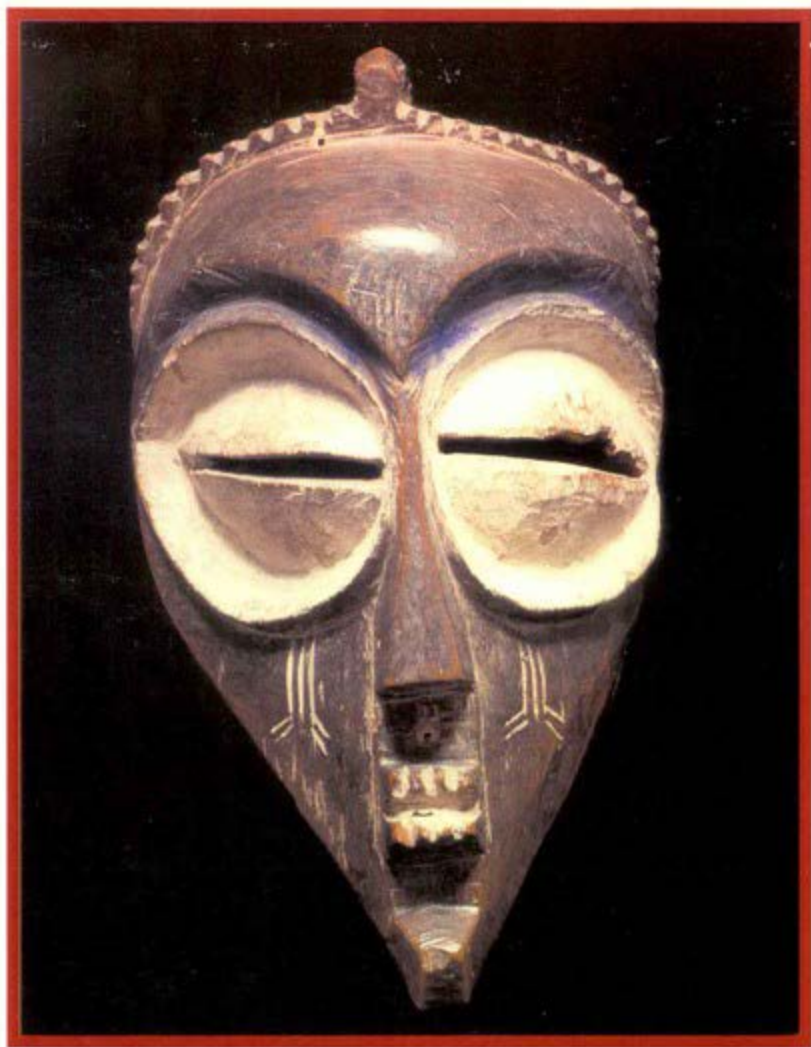
Silenced



This Fleeting World



Pendant Mask, before 1892
Unknown Akan Artist, Côte d'Ivoire



Mask, late 19th or early 20th century
Unknown Mbagani Artist, Zaire