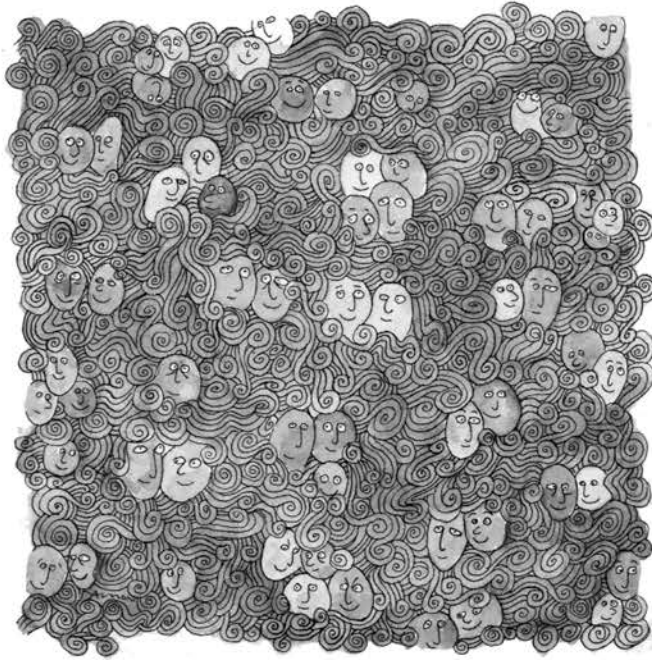


Branches

Volume Twelve



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Special Thanks to

The Caldwell Community College Foundation

Watauga Arts Council

North Carolina Humanities Council

Thomas Thielemann, Jessica Saxon, Ron Wilson,

Tom Hearron, Nancy Risch, Jane Harrison, and

*Jean Cauthen for their help last year in restarting
this project.*



This project is made possible in part by the North Carolina Humanities Council, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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Hal
Stanley Lord

This drawing was awarded first place by the
visual arts editors of *Branches*.

Life's Little Lessons

By: Carol McDade

This poem was awarded first place by the literary editors of *Branches*.

“Mardi Gras”

If you give me some beads

I'll show you my breasts.

If you give me the money

I'll show you the rest.

Sounds like entrapment,

Don't you agree?

But my darling remember

Nothing is free.



A Dog's Life
Allison Day

Black Dogs and Snow

By: Earl LeClaire

This story was awarded first place by the literary editors of *Branches*.

Lorenzo stood calf-deep in the first snow of the season. It had accumulated overnight in drifts like miniature moraines on the deck of the house of friends. He didn't mind the snow or cold; he had prepared for it. It was his mind-set he hadn't been ready for. He leaned on his cane and looked out over the lake. Dawn caught the far end, and while it looked like ice, he knew it wasn't. It was cold enough for snow but not cold enough for the lake to freeze over.

The dog moved off to his right and ate snow. He thought it peculiar the dog, a black Labrador, would not drink from the bowl in the house but ate snow. He noticed, before the snow, the dog drank only rainwater that collected in a depression in a granite slab next to the driveway or from the lake. Lorenzo shook his head then drew a yawning breath. He shuddered when the flames of winter flickered in his lungs like tongues of ice. He had expected to be hunkered down among the artists and potters in the mountains of Western North Carolina. Instead, he was in Rhode Island at the edge of a lake three miles from the Atlantic. As a boy Lorenzo had fished the lake. He'd known every spring-fed hole and every brook that flowed into or out of it. But he'd been away a lifetime and looked at it now as if seeing it for the first time. He felt as though he had never been young and because he did not want to start down that trail he chose not to remember and made his way to the steps at the end of the deck.

-Come, he called.

The dog leapt off the deck and rolled in the snow, plowing it with its back. Lorenzo brushed snow from the railing with his gloved hand, wrapped his right arm around it, tightened his grip and led down with his left foot, the weak one. He did not use his cane but held it loosely in his left hand.

He was sixty-three. His left leg had been severely burned four years prior. The injury left him feeling inefficacious and old. He was well aware he could easily succumb to believing himself immured by the disability. The reasoning discouraged him so he tried to push them aside as he had the snow on the railing. But an unexpected, ugly emotion caused his stomach to convulse, and he involuntarily threw his free arm into the air. The cane went flying. That unnerved him more than the emotion.

-Goddamn Black Dog, he cursed.

The dog looked up and came to him when he made the bottom step. Lorenzo rubbed its head.

-Not talking about you, he assured the dog.

He retrieved his cane and slogged his way down the path that led through laurel and rhododendron to the lake.

-Come, he called again.

The dog raised its leg, marked a white birch and followed.

Forty yards out Lorenzo found the tracks of three deer. They were traveling parallel to the lake. Shortly thereafter he found those of a rabbit. A pair of wintering cardinals chirped. Lorenzo located them perched in the barren branches of a fallen copper beech: a flannel colored male and a brown-buffed female with a splatter of red on her chest and wings. He thought them to be aesthetically pleasing, the red against the snow, except for their bills, that jutted from their heads like orange-colored, foreshortened pliers. When he moved, the birds flew off.

It took him half an hour to negotiate the hundred and fifty yards to the lake. Once there he stood in the snow in a clearing, and although he hadn't smoked for years, he longed for a cigarette.

The sun wasn't high enough to shed warmth on the clearing and a chilling pall of shadows closed in around him.

The dog, unmindful of Lorenzo, nosed the water, drank and waded in. Just out of the range, three coots, fast, dark crosses, braked with their wings and settled on the water. Hurriedly they padded to a stand of reeds and bulrushes that edged from the shore into the lake. Lorenzo and the dog watched until the birds disappeared behind the brake.

Lorenzo leaned the cane against his hip and cupped his ears with his gloved hands. Suddenly he was struck by the notion that he could simply walk into the lake and be done with it. The idea froze in his gut and constricted his lungs like a vise. He closed his eyes, breathed in forcing his belly out trying to fight it. He held his breath, attempted to clear his thoughts. He opened his eyes, released his breath.

-They say hypothermia is an easy way to go, he told the dog. -So what do you think?

The dog cocked its head, looked at him and trotted out of the water.

-Yeah, Lorenzo said. -I had a suspicion you wouldn't go for it.

He took up his cane and turned. His friends would be away for another month. He had the house and the dog until then. He was grateful. The dog was an easy companion, and for the time being, Lorenzo had only his disability checks to live on. It wasn't as though he hadn't planned, or not given thought to the future, it was simply that the unknown in the equation of circumstance constantly thwarted him.

He looked toward the house. A wisp of ash-gray smoke coiled from the chimney. The sun was above the roof now and full. To the North, flat, white clouds hung like torn sheets of ragged rice paper in the stratosphere. He studied them. It would not snow again for at least two days. He cast a glance back at the lake. The dog turned as if questioning.

-Okay, let's go, Lorenzo said, slicing the air with his cane. -I'll figure something out. It can't all be a Bergman film.

Then, hobbling along, he followed the black dog up through the snow to unfold in the warm, promising cavalries of the sun.

Music in My Mind

By: Jordan Robbins

The notes run vivid
in my mind
like paint trickling
off Pollack's brush
polished by
whisky
enriched by
time.



Pink Flowers
Amanda Crump



Self Portrait
Rachel Tucker

After the Pow Wow at Radford University

By: Cheryl Moretz Miller

Dreams woke me.
After a bit of listening to them,
I began to feel that beat and to listen. . .
that beat that is down in my center.
I see myself
in the color turquoise
walking that circle.....dancing that circle
outside under morning sun
and I am holding furs and colorful blankets
trimmed in fringe and beads
that are swaying in perfect time to that beat
and I am hearing the voices. . .
I am part of the voices
that are calling me.
What does it matter what others think?
They are not inside me
You are. . .

Here I am, Grandfather.
I like calling You that
more and more.
Grandfather
flows so smoothly out of my head
and feels so much warmer
than God;
short God sounds cold and uncaring
compared to Grandfather. . .
anyway I know You love me
no matter what I call You.
I need to have been asleep a long time ago
why do I get my feelings hurt
so easily?
And how do I keep from it?
Or do I just bear with it,
until I get to the other side of the pain. . .
I want to pour out all my hurts
to You, dear Grandfather.
Lead me to walk in Your ways
and put that "heart beat" of the mother
down in my center, real loud where I can hear it clearly
and be comforted by it.
Thank You for letting me feel Your love
in the absence of love from others.

Let the spirit of self-seeking sorrow
rise up out of me
like smoke
and pass on
and fill the space left inside
with the Spirit of You.



Untitled Landscape
Joseph Bowman

Note from Nepal

By: Earl LeClaire

These are dangerous days
Men with guns
Gather in close fields
New hawks fly
Where no hawks have flown
And the sun may well become
Something closer to earth.

Yet,
These are the very days
We need to remember
That light enters
Even boarded windows
Bends
And sweeps around the room

A bright, warm river
And that we also live
In that space
Between heartbeats
Where the formless center
Of all things is everywhere
At once, and forever.



Linn Cove Viaduct
Harry Parsons

Remembering January for a Day in July

By: Meredith Foster

Dawn doesn't break until 7 am here
and when it does it barely warms the morning.
Coffee on my lips feels good to me
and oatmeal brings a spot of warmth inside.
The first breath of the morning
frosty as the midnight air and ice that
coats the trees and windows.
I don't think my toes ever get warm.
Tracked in dead, brown grass again.
Sunny days bring blinding brightness
of sun off snow and the drip, drip, drip
of ice melting off roofs.
I'll remember:
the way I look forward to doing dishes in
hot water that warms my hands,
piling extra blankets on the bed and
still not moving my feet to the icy sides of the bed,
wishing the cat was bigger so that curled up beside me
she gave off more heat.
It's a long way till summer
and vine-ripened tomatoes that
trail tangy sweet juice down my chin.
And I know come time for the gladiolas
to reach the windowsill
and the scorching sun to melt the sweat from my body
I'll long for these days of
toe-numbing
lip-cracking
nose-running
car-barely-starting
feet-slipping-on-ice
bright winter sunlight
blues.



Untitled
Heather Moore



Untitled
Damon Hood

Yosemite

By: Mary Agnes Shelton

3 thousand feet of solid granite
Soaring into the brilliant blue sky
Carved from the upturned crust of the Earth
By creeping rivers of ice

300 million years—eons ago
Stretching back incomprehensible ages
The place where I sit was formed by the Earth
During millions of years of change

6 billion tiny humans
Ravaging our home through rampant greed
Our demise will hardly be felt by the Earth
We are but a flicker in time

Transition

By: L.M. Lonon

Fog rain brook pond
condensation seepage
bath saltsea
blood sap tears saliva
dew fog ice
springs falls
oceans glaciers
runnels creeks floods rivers runoff.
Fog.
I self persona ego
rainwater.



Untitled
Joseph Bowman

Carlotta

By: Mary Agnes Shelton

She was tall
With blazing blue eyes—
Like Paul Newman
She had a wide smile
That was mostly present
And she loved me

She was a year younger
Lived down the street
And we rode our horses
Together

We used to hide in her bedroom
And sing songs from Oklahoma
Loud
Along with the stereo
I identified with
The Girl Who Cain't Say No

Late in high school
She got a boyfriend
Named Harry
He used to come to her house
On weekends
I liked him

I was more devious
Meaner
With a wiggle of hips
And a jiggle of breasts
He was mine—
In ten seconds

With breasts larger than average
For my age
I learned young
The power of dangerous
Fatal attraction
How manipulated men could be

It took me decades
To realize it was
Even more deadly for me

But Carlotta
Never stopped loving me
Later, after Harry
I didn't even need
To ask for forgiveness
She knew me
And forgave me
Even before I sinned

I never loved her
Like I wish I had
I didn't know how
Then
I could do it now
Four decades
Too late

A Rural Sunday

By: Forrest Yerman

For nearly two insufferable hours the minister had gone on about this and that, and about God knows what. But they were compelled to sit here every Sunday, hour after hour, not really listening, not even thinking.

Well, Jim was thinking; he was thinking about the new dirt bike he had bought his son Jim Jr., also known as June. It was a 650cc Yamaha race bike, the bike June had wanted for years. It was red and black, June and Jim's favorite colors, aside from red, white, and blue. It was a true beauty, and this would help mend the split between June and Jim.

About two months ago Jim and June had gone fishing together as they often would do on Saturdays. Well...June was a changing man, he was only eighteen, still only eighteen, and he had decided that instead of going to Iraq to fight those damned sand niggers, as his pawpaw and father called them, he wanted to go to college. June would be the first of his family to have gone to college, ever, and the first American of his family to not have served our country, and God. Jim immediately snapped his fishing pole in half and threw it in the pond, then commanded June, "You gon serve boy, and you gon like it. When you done you can think 'bout educatin' yeself." From there Jim and June got in a horrible fistfight and neither have spoken to each other since.

But today is June's birthday, and he's in for a big surprise.

"If you do what's right, won't you be accepted? But if you don't do what's right, sin's crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it," shouted the minister, as the sound of a loud truck suddenly came screeching into the chapel. "Na' what in the devil was 'at," said the minister. That sounded like June's truck thought Jim, then he heard the creaky driver's side door open and a few men get out of the truck, then the door slammed. It had to be June's truck because his passenger side door was broken and wouldn't open, and at least three men got out on the driver's side. Jim had excellent hearing, something he tuned in during Vietnam and never lost. But Jim didn't hear June's voice, or any other voice he recognized. Then came the sound of the men loading weapons. Jim looked around; he was the only one who heard it. This wasn't the first time Jim had heard things like this since the war, so he got up and told his wife, Jess, he was going to the bathroom. He actually crept out the back door. If he saw anything out of the ordinary his revolver and his twelve-gauge were in his truck about a mile down the road.

He saw something out of the ordinary all right. There was June's truck, sure enough, and no sign of June anywhere, but he did recognize something. Four men stood near the truck, and another he couldn't see behind the truck, well at least he thought they were men, because he'd never seen a woman in one of those uniforms, at least not for an affair such as this. He knew why these men were here.

About a year ago a new family moved into town, actually this particular family had lived here for over a hundred years, and moved away, just after the Civil War, up north. Well this new family was not your typical Clarksville family. In the words of the town, they were a nigger family, and one of the very few to live in Clarksville. At first everyone in the town was upset at this, they were not used to change, nothing in Clarksville had changed very much in a hundred years, save for the movie theatre and the Hardees downtown. This family had some kids as well, and these were the first and only blacks to ever attend Clarksville High School. After a few months everyone just kind of got used to the new family in town and left them alone, and they left the town alone. Soon after, they showed up at the

Clarksville Southern Baptist church out on Pritchett's Branch one Sunday and have been ever since. Nobody liked that a nigger family was going to their church. Why couldn't they go to the nigger church that was about an hour away? But nobody said anything to the family about this; instead they said nothing to the family, nothing at all. Why most of the people just walked away when confronted by one of the family members. Though they rarely attempted to socialize, just walked to church, then walked home.

So here Jim was watching these men load their guns and don their hoods, getting ready for something Clarksville would never forget, something Clarksville hadn't seen in a long time. So why was he so hesitant? Jim's grandpa raised him to love his people, and niggers weren't his people. But the world has changed so much since then, even Jim's wife scowled when he and June said nigger. Jim decided he had to do something as his wife, and half his family, were in there, in the house of God. Jim only hoped that he could get to his truck, unseen, in time to sort all this out.

Jim stooped down and ran out behind the church where he could have some good cover, and ran to his truck. Time had never gone so slow for Jim; it seemed as if everything was going in slow motion. It felt as if his legs were made of jello, heavy jello. When Jim got to his truck he was covered in sweat. It was the middle of summer and Jim was sweating like a whore in church. Jim checked his weapons and loaded them and stuffed a bunch of extra shells in his pockets.

Now Jim was thinking of what he was going to do, and how he was going to do it. He still wasn't sure whether or not he would try and stop anything from happening to the family, but his family he was willing to die to protect. Now Jim realized just how nervous he was; his son's truck had been used by these men to get here, but no Jim; his wife and many other family members were in the church. "Shit I haven't felt like this since Nam," Jim said aloud. He tried calming himself down, but it didn't work, so Jim did what he always did, and what he used to do in Nam, when he was overly nervous. In the glove compartment of his truck was where he kept his stash. He always kept it rolled into joints and stored them in an old Lucky Strike pack. He pulled one out and lit it, then began the walk back to the church.

As soon as he began walking he heard the sound of a gun, off near the church. Calm down, Jim, calm down, was all Jim could think. If he showed up all in a fluster like he was he would be of no help. Also he still wasn't sure how he felt. It had been a long time since these men at the church had been active, in Clarksville, and all over the south. And part of Jim said that it was about damn time they showed themselves. Then another part of Jim said that the house of God was not the right place to do this, and that the world was changing, like it or not. There were no more men like Jim's grandfather, nor his father for that matter. Now there were men saying that racism was bad, that it was evil. But that's not what Jim learned when he was growing up, oh no, and that's not what he had taught June. Hell, in Clarksville there was two gas stations, Ed's Gas and then the BP that the old Asian owned. The whites went to Ed's, and the blacks and Mexicans went to the BP. That's how everyone liked it, or at least that's how it was, and had been for a long time. Jim also knew that these men were not going to hurt any of the white people, or at least not before they got through with the real problem.

So Jim finished his joint and finished calming himself down, then went into the woods to creep up on the church. Since the first shot Jim hadn't heard anymore, but as he got closer he could smell smoke and hear a struggle. Jim was not prepared at all for what he was about to see.

The smoke Jim smelled was coming from the church, which was by now wholly consumed by flames. The entire congregation was sitting down outside

with their hands tied behind their backs, and all tied together in a circle. All but one family was in this posture. The father was on his knees with a noose around his neck being held by one of the men; his face looked like they had already beaten him senseless once. Beside him was a pool of blood and what must have been his wife, lying on her back; there was nothing where her head had once been. There were also three young children tied together by their necks and crying very quietly; they too had been beaten. No one else seemed to be the least bit hurt, uncomfortable, but not hurt. This was a huge relief to Jim.

That relief was quickly washed away when Jim noticed that one of the men was wearing the exact same boots that June always wore, diamond back rattlesnake cowboy boots. He was also of the same build as June. Could this be his son thought Jim, or just a coincidence? Then he turned to face where Jim was crouched behind some juniper bushes and Jim noticed the old Wyatt Earp style peacemaker held by the man; it had to be June. This changed everything. Before seeing this Jim was revolted at what he saw, though now he started to feel pride for his son. Though he was not sure why; aside from Nam, Jim was always a relatively peaceful man. He may have told a few racist jokes down at Ed's, and one time he fought a black man from out of town for stopping at Ed's, but that was ten years ago, in Jim's drinking days. Jim may not have liked blacks, but he sure never wanted to kill any of them. But now that he saw June standing in this scene he thought maybe his grandpa had been right, and they were all demons deserving nothing more than death and the eternal hell that awaits them. Besides what's so damned good about a bunch of guys who rap about their women being bitches and hoes, and killing people, or the ones who make more money than most people for playing a game? It's a bunch of bull thought Jim. But he also thought of the woman lying on the ground, head blown off, and her children sitting there, watching the whole thing, just for being a little different. He also realized that these people sure weren't rap stars or sports stars, they were just like him, well not just like him, but they were poor, hard working people.

But the sight of June was so commanding, it reminded him of Nam. One time in particular when Jim's regiment was checking small villages on a river they came upon a village that gave Jim a bad feeling. Everyone acted like they were against the enemy, but Jim could sense they were lying so he shot what seemed to be the most influential of the villagers. This was a common occurrence in Jim's experience in Nam, though many felt very strongly against actions such as Jim's. After they settled everyone down they searched the old man and found a revolver tucked into the back of his pants; from here they found all the necessary signs of the enemy. Some of the men in Jim's regiment wanted to radio in what they had found, the rest wanted to kill everyone. Wasn't that why they were here, to kill the enemy so he couldn't kill you? So Jim got it started by spraying his M-16 across the path of the villagers; this turned into an all-out bloodbath where none were left alive. To this day Jim still had no regrets about what he did; if he hadn't they would have gladly killed him and his whole regiment.

Seeing June in his position, for by now he could tell June was definitely in charge, gave Jim a new feeling of pride for his son, fortifying Jim's wish of June joining the Army. So why did he feel apprehensive about this pride in June? By God, because this just wasn't right, this wasn't the way he wanted June to be. These people weren't trying to kill anyone; they were just trying to make an honest living and praise the Lord.

While Jim was thinking this one of the men got a gas can out of the back of June's truck, and the other two started preparing to string the father up. Jim was not going to let these men lynch this man, especially in front of the entire congregation. But he also wasn't about to do anything rash; these men were all armed, and they all looked drunk. With drunk men and guns you have to be careful, Jim

knew this the hard way. His brother had been shot by his best friend and killed over a woman and a mean drunk. Jim also knew that these men weren't easily going to give their prey away. And for no more blood to be shed than was necessary, he would have to disarm four men, one of them being June.

Jim had to act and he had to act fast, as the noose was ready and they had backed the truck up to the tree, this was how he would be hanged. Then they soaked the father in gasoline before they made him get into the truck. Jim was almost sick, half the congregation was sick, and the children were frantic. Jim could not let this happen; what these men were doing was sick, even June. Jim was going to be the hand of God today.

They got him standing in the truck and started it up. Jim jumped from his cover and ran to the church for more cover, shooting two of the men dead in the process; Jim was an exceptionally good shot with his revolver. June was driving the truck and he sped up, dropping the father; the other man threw his lighter igniting the poor man. Jim ran out and shot the one who threw the fire twice in the head, then shot the burning man in the head to end his suffering. One of the men tried to run for it but Jim shot him right in the chest with his last shell. At the sight of all his men dead, June turned around and was driving straight at Jim, then he realized it was his father and slammed on the brakes. Before June could get out of the truck, Jim dropped his pistol and ran to the driver's side aiming his twelve-gauge at his son.

Jim knew what he had to do, what God would want him to do, but how could he? "Damn June you coulda been doin' this for God and country, fightin' fer yer freedom, not fightin' against the freedom." Good Lord the bike. "Sorry June boy, but you dun' wrong, and iss' judgment time," Jim said to his son as he unloaded a twelve-gauge slug into his son's head. Jim dropped the shotgun on the ground where he stood and began to untie the congregation, starting with the children of the family.



Cades Cove Sparks Lane
Brandi Barnes

Roots

By: Shayne Robert Nelson

Burrowing deep inside myself.
Seeking what I will never find.
That on the shining sliver of hope,
To grant me peace of mind.
I extend my roots deeper,
To the very core of my heart,
Where the reflections of my soul,
Tear my mind apart.
Chaos reigns within me.
Will I ever have a chance?
Or am I asking too much,
When I beg for a second glance?
Is it my fate to live forever alone,
Taunted by what others possess?
I wish I'd lived another life,
I wish I had a purpose.
The roots of this tree, my life.
So cracked and dry,
Useless to me now
Nothing else to live by,
The tree stands hollow,
Waiting for the stroke of lightning,
To end its decaying existence,
This lonely life, oh so frightening.
Ash and blood, smoke and tears,
Lying in the middle of the forest floor,
Do not mourn, it is my own fault,
I planted these roots where the soil is poor.



Be Good Tanyas
Rebecca Wright



Daffodil
Paula Bumgarner

Each Night Is Clockwork

By: Dustan Holland

Each night is clockwork,
warmed by the fire
from wood she hauled in
grumblings of my stomach
send her to the kitchen
a plate pushed aside sends her back
there are no thank you's
when one's work is
expected, there are no
you're welcome's when
there are no thank you's.
Couldn't realize how
lucky I was.
Thank you, mama.

To What?

By: Elizabeth Stabler

Tip toeing
Dark drops of lukewarm water
And shrouds of memory, bits of thought,
Scattered forlorn along the backdrop
Forget you saw me here
And sing your sailor's songs
Without my supple sadness
My frantic psalms
"I left something in child's play"
I search long and still I stray
Into thundering silent disarray
To what?
I wonder
To what?



City
Toni Chester

metal

By: Maggie Sheffield

remember...
scurried thoughts escalated our motions
my tears bled down the sink
hair and fingers tangled with my superman
you cut your hand that day on the rusted faucet
my picasso, seeing me through eyes only a few dare to open
blushing from heaven to hell, salty flesh caressed my spine
you alone ravage all that is left of my conscience
roused to your icy gaze, my heart fluttered
calm down...breathe
fumbling through a mass of alphabetized distress
cotton candy whispers and tortuous touch
velveteen lips wrap cinnamon kisses
dreams decay in such sweet remnants of passion
from the sun rising high to the stars dancing madly
my blood still pumps to the beat of your name
my one stable emotion
i was made a fool of ignorant bliss
a portrait of untouched memories
remember...



aut pax 3
Matthew Balfrey

The Streets Are a Chessboard

By: Dustan Holland

The streets are a chessboard
littered with pawns.
Pawns of environment, pawns of history,
the pieces move themselves
pawn to d3

cascading roses of death
cover the board.
There is no victory, there is no checkmate
when one king reigns
whose name is hate

sirens echo throughout,
this world is at war.
Tears are showered, tears are wept
such is the way
when king's law is kept.



Better Than Insurance
Sheila Pritchard

Lost Souls

By: Susan Miller

It all began when someone left the window open.

The wind was never calm that year, as though all of the world had exhaled in relief at the quieting of the guns, the rain of the bombs finally ending.

Mostly the old seaside house prevailed, the wind sighing past the weathered boards, shutters rattling in the occasional gusts. Tucked into a dune, we felt the house bracing against the advance of storms. Wind driven tide brought sea water past the doorsill, but receded before taking possession of the house.

Mother decided we should go there after the war. We needed to get our legs back, scrub the taste of sorrow from our mouths. Our brother's life was lost in a desperate battle in the Pacific, and our father died less than a year later, heartsick and bewildered.

So we went to the old house, leaving behind the empty rooms, the table with half its chairs unfilled at mealtimes, vases dry for want of roses.

We sought relief in the crying of the birds, the sighing waves. We walked up and down the beach, our eyes darting out to sea, searching the horizon, listening to the empty sky. We watched the dune grass emerge in the spring; grow taller under the summer sun. Seedhead mops tossed themselves carelessly, bending to the will of the wind.

One of us was always pacing the shoreline; often all three of us tended the shore, wearing the wind, drawing it as a cloak around our war-torn shoulders.

The house was only minimally outfitted with creature comforts. The kitchen had electricity, but only one socket had been installed in the sitting room. Our shadows danced in the night in the light of kerosene lamps which we carried room to room.

Mona shared the room across the hall with mother, facing the dunes, away from the persistence of the wind. My window faced the sea. Nights when sleep eluded me, I lay watching the moonlit clouds racing ahead, listening to the sighing, hissing water coming ashore. In my half-slumber, I overheard startled greetings, voices colliding, cries of recognition after the great conflagration across the oceans. Sometimes it was a great moaning, the shedding of the burden of grief, lost lives, families, possessions flung to the heavens in dust.

Low clouds, thick as oatmeal, all but concealed that dawn, a day quickly overcome by night. Our voices seemed muffled in the dark house. Mother's head bent over her knitting, her hair flashed, a bird's silver wing under the lamp light. Mona moved quietly from the stove to the table. Her arms and legs moved restlessly through the fog of the evening, carrying bowls and plates as though in a dream. I set the table, now and then watching the gray-green waves pushing at the shore line. There was no rain, only the clouds obscuring the advance of the surf, erasing the horizon. The world out our window was a gray cocoon.

Mother's fingers fluttered with the yarn, a bright hot white against the tabletop. As I glanced up from my book, I saw tears coursing down her cheek, her mouth working to suppress a sob. I sat rooted to my chair, stricken with the stubbornness of her grief. Transfixed at her sorrow, Mona and I stared at our mother, witnesses to the injustice of suffering.

That night, tossing on my pillow, I again heard the voices, woven into the breathing of the surf through the open window, muttering, sighing, cries of delight. Ragged bits of sentences, breath expelled, even laughter as reunions were consummated in the dark. Waves of sorrowful mewings were drowned by hearty laughter, the retelling of adventure while overwhelming danger. Imperceptibly, the whisper of wings in flight persisted over the babble of excited whispers. Feathers beat against the confines of the walls, finding settlement on the sill. After a momentary pause, scratching at the dresser, swooping against the night, frustrated by the white ceiling.

I listened, confused suddenly by the overlapping sounds. I found my feet and fought to the door through the waves of dozens of white birds, the wings surrounded my flight, crashing into the hallway and searching for the next opening.

Mother sat up, throwing off the blanket. Mona's eyes were wide and her mouth formed a perfect "O." The whiteness of the birds filled the room.

So much whiteness in such a dark place! The noise of the beating life filled the small room. None of us made a sound. We no longer moved. The wings soared, arcing and gliding around our heads as in a dance. I turned in a circle, following their movement with my body, lifting my arms to their sweetness.

When we remembered that night, it was with choked off sentences and averted eyes. We understood that something had been revealed to us, something magical about living and dying. By the time we counted it as a memory, we had accepted our places in the retelling.

Bottle Blonde

By: Ian Pratt

She naturally walks
to the heavy metal band.
Hips swaying as riffs collide.
Bottle blonde testosterone injections.
Good thing my heart slows
and creaks to a normal rate.
Heart attacks
should never happen
listening to metal music
watching a girl walk away.



me with skateboard
Keaton Pearson



Window to the World
Briana Boone

A Cricket, Some Dental Floss, and a Few Tomatoes

By: Julie Wright

I never thought it would happen to me. I know; that is a truly cheesy cliché, but I really did not think it would happen to me. What sane person actually does? It, of course, involved crazed Martians (which is weird because most Martians are so peaceful, Vegans you know). Anyway I was walking to my job at the deli where I slice cheese, when a small Martian ran up to me with a tomato in his hand. He took one look at me, hurled the red projectile at my head, shrieked, and ran down an alley. I was taken aback. To my knowledge I hadn't done anything that deserved being hit in the head with an overripe tomato. But being a normal sensible person, I didn't think too much about it. Instead I swore and turned to go home and change my clothes. Walking by the store fronts and grass, I heard a cricket, easily the most annoying cricket in existence. It had a high trilling chirp that rose and then cracked like a boy's voice in puberty. There was something about it that made me want to floss my teeth, clean my ear, and maltreat old ladies. As I walked, the urge grew stronger and stronger until I was sprinting to my house and my new dental floss. I frantically tore up my drive and I noticed something peculiar. There were at least 110 Martians surrounding my home, each with a tomato. I halted: what was I going to do? These Martians were obviously going to pelt me with tomatoes if I came any closer, but it was imperative that I get my dental floss. We stood then, at a standstill, them with their tomatoes and me with a need to floss.

The need was overwhelming now and the damn cricket wouldn't shut up. I had to floss or die. I noted that around my neighbors' homes the same drama was unfolding. Through my cricket-fuddled haze, I saw some neighbors attempting to get inside their homes, flailing their arms as they fought off tomato wielding Martians. Others fell to the ground weeping in despair or tried to floss their teeth with grass blades. I was contemplating a desperate attempt into my own house, when I saw it. The cricket: it was perched on my garden gnome a mere three feet away. With a frenzied cry I leapt for it and in one fierce swoop stopped its incessant chatter once and for all. The cricket crunched strangely in my hand. What? It was made of metal? As the cricket stupor lifted I noticed the Martians were putting down their tomatoes. My neighbors were plucking grass out of their teeth and apologizing to the Martians they had trampled. But best of all, I no longer needed to floss. My teeth felt fine.

It turned out that a group of irate Vesuvians, from Venus, were behind it all. The Vesuvians had been royally ticked off with the Martians. Apparently the Martians insulted their preferred brand of dental floss. So the Vesuvians decided that the perfect revenge would be to have them beaten by a group of crazed beings who needed to floss. And when you want easily-crazed, gullible beings, apparently the best place to look is Earth. Go figure. So the Vesuvians planted a bunch of metal crickets that would "sing" a frequency that made humans want to floss and any Martians around not to let them. The mother cricket was on my gnome, and when I smashed it, I smashed the frequency too. But yeah, that's how I saved the world.



Waterfall
Brandi Barnes

The Trophy

By: David Thompson

My pulse increases as I step in the stream
The mist is rising to meet morn's gleam

I know you're lurking, somewhere near
Oft, I have seen your silvery side here

I cast out the bait, as I have in the past
It drifts slowly by the stream-edge's grass

Nestled under bank, your keen eyes rejoice
A thousand times, you've measured the choice

Yet in this day, the lure makes true
And in a splash, the moment's hue,

You've felt the sting, discovered the lie
My crafty-conveyed, cunning sly

Nearly lifeless, exhausted, ends the dance
Left of your future, my utter perchance

I lift you up high and gaze in your eyes
And find myself startled, and then realize

My den wall cannot ever story
The spirit of your purest glory

A false domination, 'twas never real
I had only played your hunger-zeal

I gently lower you into the stream
And in a tail's splash, I'm left to dream...

Your future unraveled, now made secure
And my lately-won wisdom...Let long endure



Man
Charlie Frye



Stephen
Justin Ward

Melancholy Baby

By: Carol McDade

Finding pleasure only in remembered miseries,
She seeks out the dark grievous places in her mind.
Trying to recall the exquisite pain
That accompanies loss.
The pleasure and the pain intermingle
And become as one, inseparable,
So that she cannot feel
One without the other.
Finding worthiness only in suffering and losing it again
In the sloth of self-pity
She robs herself, stealing time and hope
From her own mind and selfish soul.



Fourtet
Bryan Suggs

Yesterday's Comfort

By: Elizabeth Stabler

i found beauty in despair
born with sentiment like blood flowing through tangled heartbeats
tearswept dirges
like a sound that touches thoughts and comforts yesterday
fearsomely pure, rigidly whole
in forever's fearless caress
immortal
imperfect
for the fullness of feeling
in the darkness of fever
in a world
throttled to complexity
beneath a furtive moon,
i found beauty in despair

Epitaph

By: Carol McDade

He was not the man he was said to be
That is written in blood, you can take it from me.
It's indelibly etched in my heart and my mind
Each blow and each bruise is carefully signed.



Saint Nicholas
Nathaniel Brickman

Beauty

By: Jordan Robbins

I have seen
the face
of beauty
in the flesh

she wears
locks of strawberry
fields

and eyes
of Scottish
pastures

so comforting
yet
so far away.



Mary D
Patrick Fitzpatrick



Flight of Stairs
Kelsie Darcy

Childhood Trauma

By: Carol McDade

It was just a cheap red scarf. The type bobby sockers used to tie around their necks in the 50's. But to me it was a banner I waved to my friends from the ship's deck as I set sail across the sea to Paris or somewhere. Then Daddy rolled down the car window to toss his beer can, and the wind took it.

The only waves I saw out of the rear window as I watched the scarf dip and dive away were the heat waves rising off the blacktop as Daddy sped away.



A New Beginning
Charlie Frye

Daybreak

By: Elizabeth Stabler

Morning's woke and Daybreak's spoke
A softly textured melody
Upon padded feet I tread
To get up and wake my cloudy head
Immersed immediately
In memories of what you gave to me
A fresh rose
Froze like dew
In an empty can of Genesee
Years later I still consider
Your heart, and how it touched mine, bitter
And how you press pause
During soul's winter
When life and strife
And candlelight
Has all begun to burn
Then you were there
Seasons turn
And all I see is but a blur
I blink and most things disappear
I think you must have put this here
This thought that tickles my ear when it whispers
Beauty, dear, is always near
Beauty, dear, is always near



Ink Bottle
Karen Yost



Clamp
Justin Ward

Do You Brush Your Teeth?

By: Ian Pratt

God, God, God,
God, God!
Can you fly?
Are you scared of water?
Any allergies we
need to know about?
How many toes do you have?
Do you brush your teeth?
When did you lose
your virginity?
Are you a virgin?
Ever eaten a watermelon,
or baby?
God, God, God,
God, God.
Am I annoying you?

Grown and Gone

By: L.M. Lonon

Your mother may never see you again
after you leave for those wild places;
she is afraid you will be hurt, or disappear.
She is afraid of your audacity, your ignorance,
but she knows you have to go.
Your mother is afraid you won't come back, as
indeed you won't
for you will never be the same. My god, you'll
start to learn things! (Up to now
all that schooling was a brake, a barricade, a delaying tactic.)
But now you're grown. And we
will all never see you again.
Your mother is quite worried.



Friends
Tim Nelson

Machines

By: Shayne Robert Nelson

Money.
Sex.
God.
The Devil.
Fuel in our mouths.
The bitter taste of gasoline.
Christ machines.
The gears they turn.
Rusty and filthy.
A broken down faith.
An engine on the edge.
Cash apparatus.
Spit out our life.
We need an upgrade.
Humanity 4.0.
Spread your legs,
For every piston,
And download the seed,
Deep into your sputtering wombs.
The incomplete assembly lines,
Of the next generation.



World Trade Center
Lee Watson



Panoramic
Matthew Balfrey



Alice's Girl
Amber Watts

Below the Mayonnaise Factory

By: Earl LeClaire

Below the mayonnaise factory,
Where my mother worked,
Heavy hearts to streets
The hills dropped to streets
That cut their way
To the river that lay
A dead and rotting snake.
Mean streets that sliced
Through tenement houses
Where tattered flags of wash
Hung from every window
And angry mothers shouted
From open doorways
For their fugitive sons.
Down through to the maiming mills
That squatted like fat,
panatela-smoking bosses
On the river's black banks.
No quaint cobblestones here;
Murderous asphalt,
Prehistoric tar,
Crowded and cluttered
With junked cars and trash
And the abandoned bodies of wet winos,
My precious clowns,
Who pissed their pants in the alleys
And whimpered like beaten puppies
Over a broken bottle of Tokay,
Losing that last poor pit of dignity,
Licking the glass and dirt and spilled wine,
Lapping that dread of life
That cripples as quick as polio
Off the polluted river.
Unholy streets
Packed with hoods and hung-over heroes:
Batman, Bundog, and Bennie-the-Book.
Heavy hitters with million-dollar dreams
And nickel brains,
Who thought with their fists
And loved with their cocks.
Fathers, uncles, and older sons,
Their misplaced manhood a sham, a charlatan,
A sucker-punch delivered by a green-toothed whore.
And now, twenty-five years later, writing this poem,
They are with me again, as they have always been
My constant shadow, my drunk-day self,
My fearsome other, my scars, those streets,
Carved into my being as permanent
As the tattoos etched into my skin.



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