



BRANCHES

VOLUME 13



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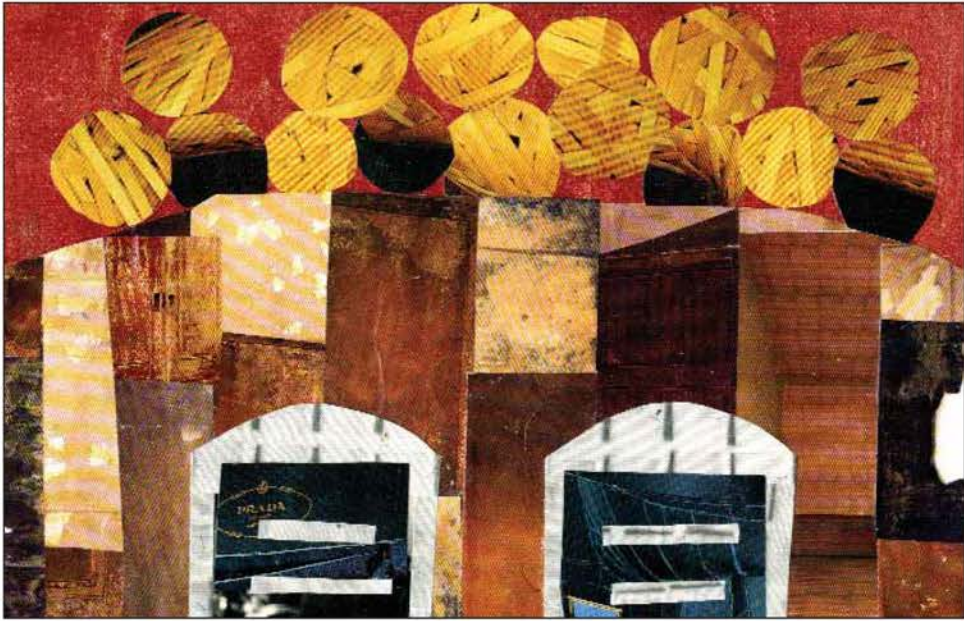
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The Audience, The Stage is my Greatest Fear and Greatest Rush in Life,
I'm Addicted to Acting and Being on Stage
Lauren Tucker

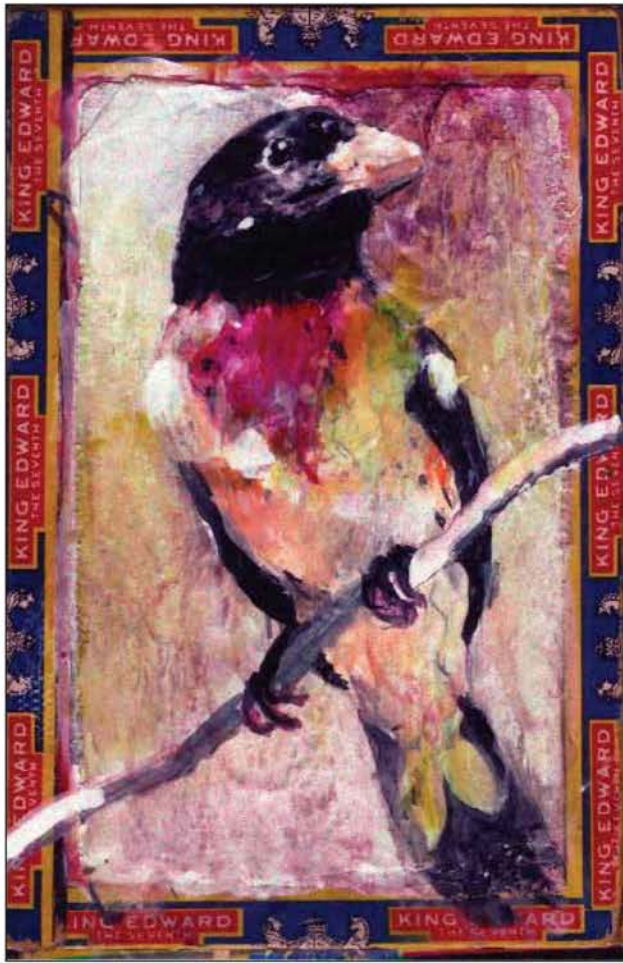
Awarded first place by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.

Life

By: Forrest Gray Yerman

The fathers of the High Country
Congregate in the morning
At their local Hardee's
To sit and talk of life.
Their worn and callused hands
Bring a cup of coffee
To their weather-beaten faces.
They take long draughts;
It's getting harder to wake up in the morning.
They watch, in confusion, the
Youths, especially the girls, coming and going,
Unaware that life won't wait for them;
They know about life, but sometimes they forget
When they were young and restless,
And watched their fathers querulously,
Aggravated at Time, and all its constraints.

Will I congregate like them someday,
With the next line of fathers?
Will we too forget our youth?
Will my hands become shrunken and shriveled,
No longer able to do
All the things they have done in youth?
Will I have to find something new
For them to do, in my grizzled old age,
To keep my mind preoccupied,
And off what awaits me?
Or, will I accept life's only guarantee?
I cannot say, and shouldn't even think about it.
So, I will continue watching my fathers,
As I go through the drive-thru,
Morning after morning,
Until they reserve a seat for me.



Bird
Vae Hammiton

The Glorious Mundane

By: Elizabeth G. Ammerman

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

I stand on this spot, filled with excitement and trepidation. It looks innocent enough...even beautiful in a mysterious way, hiding beneath the shadows of tree and scrub, cool, dark, and challenging.

We are explorers. Some of us have been here before, but for me what lies beneath the rock-encrusted hillside is a mystery.

"Take this, you'll need it."

I am handed an old, garishly-colored bicycle helmet, the front of which is scuffed and dented.

Is this a joke?

"Why," I ask, "would I ever want to wear this?"

With a small, knowing smile my friend taps his own helmet and replies, "Just trust me."

Still doubtful, I strap it on. I guess we can all look stupid together. Glancing down at our destination, my helmet, no matter how ridiculous, is forgotten. It is time to go in. As I pick up my backpack, a small knot forms in my gut.

Everything inside is damp and thinly coated with slick mud. I take the first step and immediately realize that my sturdy hiking boots, although they seemed like a good idea, might not have been the best choice. They are waterproof, and well suited for wandering through the countryside above, but the hard soles are almost useless on the slick surfaces within the cave. I reach the far side of a shallow stream, and immediately begin grabbing at hands, arms, clothing, anything to keep me from falling. It feels like I'm skating...badly. Unlike ice skating, this is not an activity where points are awarded for grace, a good thing for me, since I've never been particularly graceful.

Not far from the entrance we make a sharp turn and are plunged into inky, palpable, suffocating blackness. Seven clicks give birth to the pale beams of seven flashlights. They dimly illuminate the passage we are in, revealing a strange world, glistening in monochrome. Moving forward, I gaze upon this surreal landscape. My ears detect the slow, rhythmic sound of water drops echoing through the cave, as if to mark the passage of time. Like the stream running past me, they are incessant. The air is frigid and heavy with moisture, quickly seeping through my clothing.

Suddenly, I hear an alarming sound---"THUNK!" Tiny lights swim before my eyes and a dull pain begins to throb inside my head. Did I hear someone snicker? As understanding dawns on me, I mutter, "Thanks for the helmet."

I have just learned my second lesson about caving. The first one, wear the right shoes. The second, a cave's ceiling does not remain at the same level throughout. In my almost futile attempt at staying on my feet, I have failed to notice that the ceiling in front of me is at eye level.

Only now do I see with wonderment the walls, floor, and ceiling of the cave's system. They flow seamlessly one into another with no definition between, no change in color or texture. There is no up and no down, only forward. Yet, forward is both. I reach out my hand to touch the rough, unyielding rock. It feels cold and ancient. For a moment I am lost, traveling backward along time's misty road. How many others must have paused here, gazing around themselves, running their fingertips across the very place where mine now rest?

In spite of my fears, I begin to see value in this endeavor. So far it hasn't been too bad. I might even have fun...if I am not horribly, tragically killed...

---"THUNK" A voice behind me mumbles, "Thanks for the helmet." A sudden snort of laughter escapes me. At least I'm not the only newbie here.

We wriggle through tunnels, climb up and over and around attempting to discover all that we can of this secretive place. We find tiny animals and sparkling waterfalls. In one room, off to our left, we spy an opening in the wall about chest high. Because no one can

remember seeing it before, we decide to investigate what surprises it may hide. Peering through, we find that on the other side is a chasm, the bottom too far for our lights to touch. I shudder and silently thank the powers that be for our lack of rope.

After a few hours, the thrill of adventure is gradually replaced by fatigue. I find myself plodding along like an aged pack mule. My body is stiff and I am frozen to the bone. I start to believe that I will never again be warm or clean. Caked with eons-old earth, I find myself fantasizing about a nice hot bubble bath and a steamy cup of tea. Unfortunately, the exit and my ride home are still many painful steps away.

A little while, or maybe a few days later, someone ahead of me calls out that we are getting close to the cave mouth, but to reach it we will have to climb. That's just great. For me, it's like clambering up a steep slide covered in gritty Crisco. There are handholds and footholds, but I just can't seem to find purchase. It takes several of my fellow adventurers, hoisting from above and shoving from below, to liberate me. In spite of exhaustion, I manage to find enough energy for celebration upon reaching the top, but my joyful cries of triumph are abruptly silenced. The passage that we have climbed into is so narrow that I can feel the walls brush against my shoulders. There is no way out ahead, but as I look up I see a small opening in the rock face. Again, we must ascend.

My mind starts spinning furiously. If I couldn't climb before, I can't possibly climb now. There can't be enough room in here for them to help me. I'm going to die. I knew this would happen. How could I let them talk me into this?

Time slows. What was a small knot in my belly becomes panic threatening to consume me. All I can hear is the sound of blood pounding in my ears, like the footfalls of some behemoth intent upon cursing me. I gulp air in, one gasping lungful after another. Self-control begins to splinter, causing my hands to clutch uncontrollably at the person in front of me. Every detail around me becomes excruciatingly clear. In my mind, I can feel the walls closing in on me...

Just as the images of my agonizingly slow death begin to overwhelm what is left of my fragile sanity, I feel comforting hands lift me up and steady me. Relief and gratitude wash over me. I look into the compassionate eyes of my friends, thankful that I am not alone.

As I walk on, drained and still a little shaken, I can't help silently wondering what terrors still await me in this frozen tomb. From the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of something that stirs me from my brooding reverie. Lifting my weary head, I realize that it is light. Not the dirty yellow light of our lamps, but a clean light filtering down from the world above. It sifts in like a long forgotten dream, faint and amazingly beautiful. I am immediately infused with new energy. My steps quicken as I turn toward my freedom. Although I am still within its walls, I can no longer feel the arctic cave air, nor hear the water rushing past my feet. I fly across the stream, no thought of falling, and burst from the alien underground into the world I know.

The challenges met and the fears fading into dim memories, again I stand on this spot. I inhale deeply, reveling in the woody scent of crushed leaves, the sweet smell of summer grasses. I hear a small animal, startled by my appearance, scuttle through the bushes to hide. A childlike smile blooms across my dirty face as the sun envelopes me in a warm embrace. The fresh breeze catches my hair and flings it back into my eyes. Brushing it away, I realize that I don't know this world at all. I have never before been conscious of the immenseness of the sky, or how very tall and proud the trees grow. Stretching out my arms, I become the soft grass, the swaying trees, the infinite sky. The openness here is as tangible as the closeness of the dark caverns behind me. I slowly turn, trying to take it all in, my spirit at once humbled and exalted. I find that my heart is again pounding, yet this time it is not from fear, but with boundless joy. At one with all of creation, I feel truly alive.

After a short hike to the vehicles and a ride home filled with playful teasing and much laughter, I am finally up to my neck in bubbles, slowly savoring a cup of tea. As the grime soaks away, I find myself reliving the day and musing on the many lessons learned.

It was an exciting adventure; one that I will not soon forget and will probably never repeat. More than a glimpse into the magnificent and terrifying world that exists beneath my feet, more than deeper friendships forged in common struggle, more even than a better understanding of my own fears, the journey brought with it for me, a rebirth...into the glorious mundane.

Gender Difference

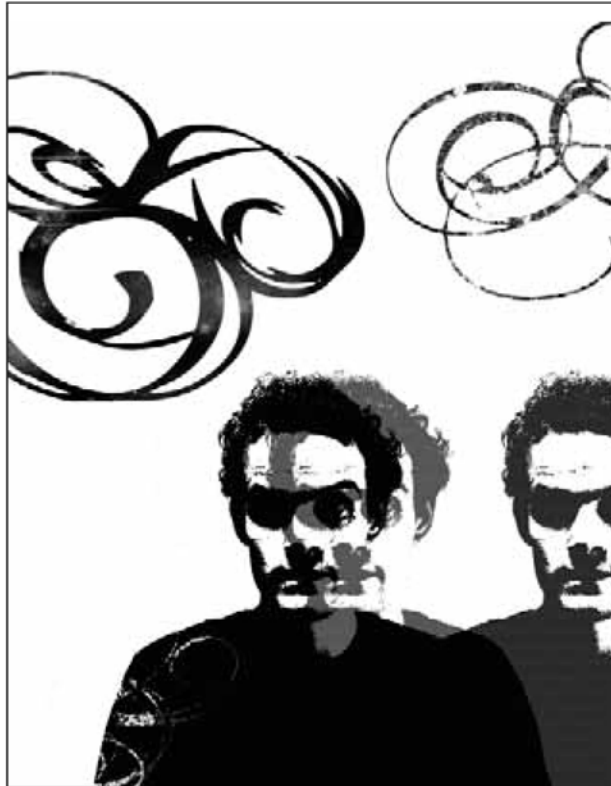
By: Frankie Kelly

His head
Bursting with newly-conceived
Ideas;
Subsequently swirling
Embryonically
In his stomach
He tried
In vain to give birth
Lacking a canal

Untitled

By: Jasa Woods

Some haikus are
Dramatic and quite abstract
Mine are not, really



Portrait of a Classmate
Jasa Woods



Blind Contour Drawing
Lauren Tucker



Still Life
Carlisle Stoup

The Campus Diner

By: Meredith Foster

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

It was a slow evening at the Campus Diner. Larry, the janitor, and Betty, the cook, were the only ones in the restaurant. Gently resting her white Comfort-sole shoes on the legs of her stool, Betty watched Larry drain his Pepsi from the glass. She wiped her hands on her dingy gray apron and checked the cow clock on the wall. Larry groomed his mustache in the reflection of the dinner window. Above the coffee counter, a TV blared the news of the recent death of a rock star, no one Larry had heard of.

“Want a slice of lemon?” said Betty.

“Got any blueberry?” he asked.

“Ran out yesterday and of the cherry, too.”

“That’s okay,” he said. Suddenly the door opened and eight cosmetology students bustled in. Larry watched as black purses with long straps swayed from shoulders and bounced off hips. With their pressed white uniforms and polished white shoes, the girls were as fresh as the scent of the hairspray coating their locks. They drew chairs up around a single table, something Betty hated.

Larry knew what he wanted then. He really knew what he wanted. He could taste the tangy lemon topped with fluffy meringue already.

Betty smoothed back a wisp of hair, glanced over Larry’s head and gathered a handful of menus.

“We don’t need any, all we’re having is French fries,” said a girl with black hair.

Each girl listed her drink choice. “She’ll have a Pepsi,” said the girl with black hair, pointing to a girl on a cell phone.

The cell phone girl smiled and mouthed “Thank you” to Betty.

“Ketchup?” inquired Betty.

“Yes, please.”

Larry wanted more Pepsi but instead decided to drain melted ice water from his cup again. The watery flavor of soda made him thirstier and he shifted uncomfortably, thinking of his missed pie opportunity.

One of the girls got up to go to the restroom, saw the “Caution Wet Floor” sign, then decided to sit back down. Her blond hair bobbed as she scooted back up to the table.

Sizzling came from the kitchen, and Betty leaned against the kitchen door watching the TV as it blared on.

Larry tried to signal to Betty that he wanted pie now but she seemed not to notice him.

“Do we get our own drinks here?” asked the black-haired girl.

“No, honey, the drink machine’s back here,” said Betty. She hurried to serve eight drinks. “Larry, can you watch the fryer?”

Larry glanced nervously across the room, stood up, took five steps then fell backwards. Later he remembered white shoes running toward him and the feeling of his cheek against the cool wet floor.

Polished white Comfort-Sole shoes with frayed laces padded down the hospital hallway. Betty, eyes rimmed with smeared mascara, gripped a camouflage jacket and her purse tightly as medical personnel hurried around her.

Larry was studying the dusty TV screen from his hospital bed when Betty came in.

“First you did like this,” she sniffed, showing how he had pin-wheeled his arms desperately trying to grasp a nearby table. “Then you just came down hard and fell on the floor, Larry,” she warbled, “The little girls screamed when they saw the blood, I thought I’d fall out myself, but the doctor says you’ll be okay. You might need some time off and some headache medicine.”

Larry rubbed the bandage around his head and picked up to read once again the get-well card that read,

We “hair” you had a scare

But “polish up” soon

And make an “appointment” for

A speedy recovery!

The Girls



Barn
Briana Boone



Serenity
Briana Boone

Washing Dishes

By: Jennifer Williams

Caldwell Library Contest Winner – First Place in Poetry

Washing dishes,
 My heart set to wait.
A voice behind me,
 It was yours, dearest Kate.
Hands full of suds,
 My heart full too.
Something was coming,
 Part of me knew.
Didn't want to turn,
 Still facing the sky.
Tomatoes on the window sill,
 Clouds whizzing by.
"Mama," you said again,
 Scared and unsure.
Turning, hands dripping,
 Shaken to the core.
The look of an angel,
 Partly hidden from light.
My child and a woman,
 Love burning bright.
Words halting at first,
 Then fast spilling out.
Two hearts pounding,
 Like shallow-creek trout.
Didn't want to hear,
 But your words wouldn't stop.
My mouth shut tight,
 Oh, how our tears did drop.
"Pregnant," you said,
 "Do you still love me?"
Mouth still wouldn't work,
 All quiet and lonely.
Turned away,
 Back to the sink.
Tomatoes on the window sill,
 Beginning to stink.
Washing dishes,
 My heart set to wait.
Wanting to say it right,
 Knowing it was too late.



Bunch of Stuff
Matt Craig

Socks

By: Michael Sutton

I have borrowed
Your socks
That were in
Your dresser

The ones
You wear to hike
On your
Favorite trail

I'm sorry
But I needed them
In the desert
I am deploying.



Live in Fear
Keaton Pearson



Before the Dawn Heals Us
Jasa Woods

My Viet Nam Experience, Summer 1967

By: Barbara Sears

Thoughts of you came and lingered
As I thought of you in a diseased swamp with a gun in your hands,
Dirt and grizzle on your face, a helmet on your head
 And death on your mind.
I wretched inside when radios blasted news of American deaths and
 Newspaper headlines announced that peace was years away.

Then my thoughts turned to warm summer evenings,
Long walks and trees and beaches and wonderful times.
Then I remembered how you yelled that you'd get a few of those
 Bastards before they got you
And I wondered if things would ever be the same again.

Memories

By: Al Dunavan

Caldwell Library Contest Winner – Norma Suddreth Award

The church was a modest white frame building with a cupola on top to hold a small bell.

Six steps led up to a narrow covered stoop where double doors gave access to the narthex. Just inside to the right an open arch revealed a steep stairway. To the left was the closed door to the pastor's study. The bell rope hung loosely down the right wall between the balcony stairs and the right side door to the nave. Although it was obviously a bell rope, it was not so obviously tied firmly to a rafter just visible through a small hole in the ceiling.

A small boy entered a few steps behind his mother and was immediately drawn to the rope. He looked around, checked his mother, gave the rope a yank and hurried after her. He was halfway down the aisle before he realized there was no sound. As they took their seats on the right hand side near the front, they were followed by an older man, a nine-year-old girl, and her mother. They filed into the center section. The little girl leaned forward to look at the boy, who promptly stuck his tongue out at her. She started to say something to her mother, who just patted her arm and nodded at the front where the musical program was about to start.

The old man gathered his sweater around him. It was obviously an old favorite and was comfortable with no thought of fashion statement. "Damn and blast that racket," the old man grumbled. "I was lured here with a promise that this gospel group would remind me of the Blackwood Brothers. Now that was music. We used to go hear them at little country churches anytime they were within fifty miles. No microphones—no amplifiers—just good music. Boy, how they would blend. But this bunch. About the only thing you could say about them is that they drown out the ringing in my ears. That tenor sounds like a chicken being strangled," he grumped.

The granddaughter leaned forward and picked at a sliver of wood on the hymnal rack. Her mother touched her arm and smiled. The girl turned to her grampa and then whispered to her mother, "Grampa's talking to himself and now he's sleeping."

"No, dear," she replied. "He's just remembering things."

The old man listened a minute and decided he'd rather have the ringing in his ears. Again he subsided into himself and thought how this reminded him of grampa and grandma's fiftieth wedding anniversary. The singin' group there was pretty bad, too. There was a bald-headed man singing bass (until the notes got too low so he just left those out), a woman playing guitar who sang through her nose, and a thirteen-year-old girl singing harmony but not with the other two. Of course, they weren't a "name" group. They were about as well known as that other guy that plays trumpet with Herb Alpert.

Even with the bad music, that was a time to remember. It was like one of those Thanksgiving dinners where everyone would bring something delicious to eat and grandma, who had cooked for days ahead, had filled the house with mouth-watering smells. Grandma had been known to bring the field hands in early just by baking bread. On those days everyone just kept putting dishes on the table: great heaping mounds of mashed potatoes; at least two kinds of gravy; crisp fried chicken; pork chops; roast beef; melt-in-your-mouth ham; and those round-

brown-yeast smellin' hot rolls that made you reach for the butter and jelly. About this time Aunt Hazel and her helpers would come in with the iced tea, coffee, and creamy milk kept cool in the spring house. As Aunt Hazel poured she reminded everyone not to fill up because there was more to come. And you knew that meant not just corn-on-the-cob, tomatoes, green beans, squash, okra, and more casseroles than you could count, but button-poppin', belt-stretchin' deserts: tart-tasting cherry pie, chocolate pie, apple pie, peach cobbler, three kinds of cake and two or three flavors of homemade ice cream churned earlier and packed with ice and rock salt to keep it cold.

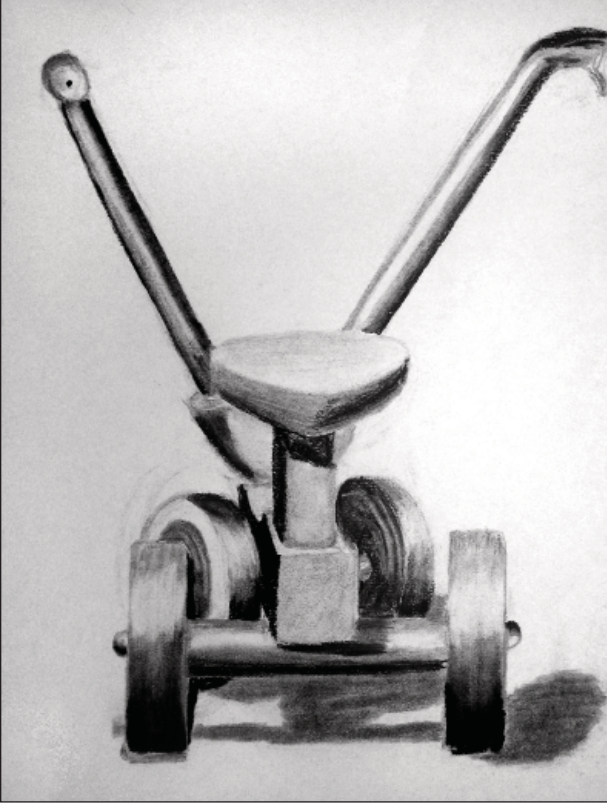
And there was none of this 8 or 9 at night eating. Dinner was at 1:00 p.m. and usually went on until about 2:30.

The piano player began an up-tempo introduction, and the group began to sing "Give the World a Smile Each Day." Now there was a real gospel song. That was the signature tune of the Blackwood Brothers. They started every program with that song. Unfortunately, this group couldn't produce the thrilling sound of the Blackwood Brothers, but then a lot of things would never be the same, like the memory of that Sunday meal that had his stomach rumbling.

After dinner the men would gather under that big old chestnut tree out in the yard while the women cleaned up and did the dishes (just like that foolish Baptist convention said they should). Boy, I would like to hear grandma sound off on that. Actually, she wouldn't say much—she'd just turn her head and look and it would get real quiet in the room.

Out under the tree some of the men would loosen their belts, lean back, and just give it up for a while. Mostly though it was story tellin' time, and the yarns they would tell! Uncle Jessie had a droll sense of humor. He liked to tell stories on other people. Uncle Jack was a favorite target. Uncle Jessie said one time he heard Aunt Ida talking to a group of ladies at a church social. Someone asked her what Jack got her for their anniversary. She said he bought her a new farm truck. She had all the shotguns she could use. The stories went on and on. Many were told year after year. They didn't change much but just seemed to get better as the years went on.

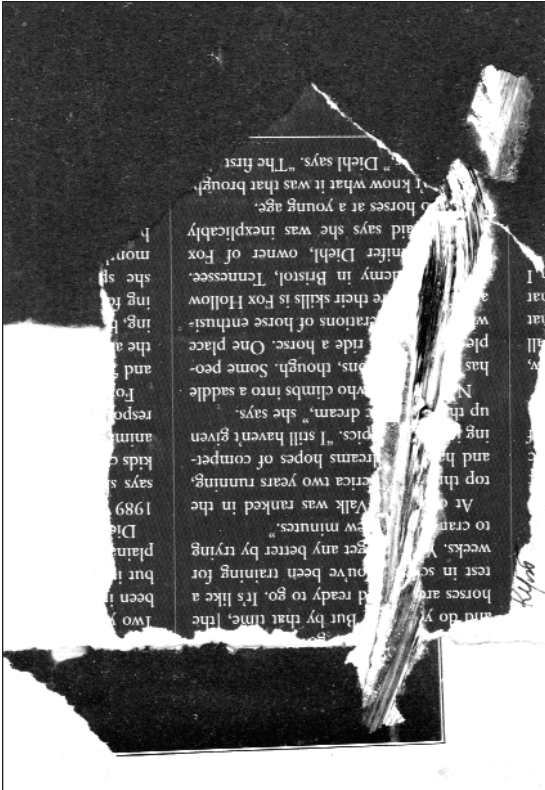
The little girl reached out to feel the smooth back of the pew ahead worn to a glossy finish by countless hands over the years. Idly she began to pick at the sliver on the hymnal rack. Her mother reached out and put her hand on the girl's hand and smiled at her. As the music ended and the applause died down, the mother gathered her purse and sweater and stepped into the aisle. "You wake up gram-pa," she said. "Be gentle. I want to speak to Mrs. Applegate for a minute." A moment later the little girl pulled at her mother's arm once and then again. "Mommie," she said. "Grampa won't wake up."



Scooter
Abby Brown



Racers Take Your Mark
Jonathan W. Tucker



Two Years Running
Karen Yost



Little Red Riding Hood
Karen Yost

Just This Once

By: Jasa Woods

“This is ridiculous,” he said, “Look at the size of the rack! We’ve got to keep it.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she replied. “This is completely uncalled for. I can’t even believe you would consider this.”

“You’ve got to learn to take advantage of the wonderful, surprising opportunities that happen in life. This kind of thing does not happen every day!”

“No. Death does not happen every day, and is horrifically sad, and should therefore be handled with some solemn respect and not looked at as an opportunity to show off to your sick-minded friends!”

“Babe, it’s a sad fact of life that this sort of thing will happen. And yes, it is a pity. But what are the chances we’d score one this big? I mean. What I meant was. What are the chances we’d sadly hit one with a rack this size?”

“You’re heartless! We just killed a deer, and all you can think of is its rack as a trophy to hang on our wall! You’re sick. Now, we are going to find some rope, pull it to the side of the road and cover it with some fallen branches. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Come on, babe. Have I ever asked you to do this for me before? No. And will I ever again? I swear I will not. Just let me take this one home. Just this once.”

“I will not allow a dead, bleeding, mangled animal to be put in the back of our car.”

“I’ll go get a truck.”

“No! you will not go find a truck to pick up this sad road kill and stuff it to put on our flaming wall!”

“You have a soft spot for taxidermy—I know you do.”

“Do not even start with me, mister. Stuffed animals can be a beautiful thing, but not when the animal was killed by your own car, on accident.”

He walked to the back of the car and rummaged through the trunk. “Aha! A tarp!”

“Oh, this is hopeless,” she cried as she climbed into the passenger seat of the car to sulk. He can’t really go through with this...she thought.

But he did.

And all his friends talked for weeks at the rack he had scored and had mounted onto his wall.

She never forgave him.



Making Do
Karen Yost

Clover Gathering

By: Jennifer Williams

Caldwell Library Contest Winner – Second Place in Prose

Scarlet sat in a rocking chair on her porch, head back and eyes closed, but she wasn't actually rocking. Her hands were propped on top of her round belly. She had been rocking, but then her stomach had gotten queasy again. Who knew why? Maybe it was the back and forth movement of the chair or maybe the swishing sound of her night gown on the floor or maybe the boiled egg she'd just eaten for breakfast. The chaos in her stomach was subsiding. At times, she was still sure she would throw up, but then at other times, she thought that she might simply be hungry again.

Scarlet's daughter, Kelly, was sitting in the grass in front of Scarlet, picking those little white flowers that always grew in the yard. Scarlet's mother had told her that they were clovers, but Scarlet felt sure that wasn't right. Clovers were a puffy, purple-red flower. Scarlet had seen one in her Pokey Little Puppy book when she was little, but she'd long ago learned not to contradict her mother. It was easier just to agree. Plus, her mother was usually right anyway, and Scarlet would feel stupid for not knowing something as simple as what a clover looked like.

When Kelly stood up, the seat of her shorts and her legs were glistening from the dew, and her hands were filled with white flowers. Kelly carried them to Scarlet with a huge grin on her face.

"I picked some flowers for you, Mommy," she said as she gave them over to Scarlet. Scarlet opened her eyes and smiled wanly. "Those are beautiful. Thank you so much," Scarlet said as she took the flowers and put them in her fist with the last batch Kelly had brought. Kelly grinned even bigger and skipped to another patch of flowers. It was still pretty early. Scarlet could see the sun resting above the tree line to her left as if saving up strength for its day's work. There was a cool breeze blowing, but Scarlet could already feel the heat mounting. She was tired a lot, and the heat made it worse. Most days, she would take a nap in the afternoon and let Kelly watch television.

Scarlet was embarrassed to admit how much television she was letting Kelly watch lately. Kelly had never been one of those kids that watched TV all day, and Scarlet was proud of that. It made her feel like a good mom. The last few days, though, they had watched several hours each day, and now Kelly was starting to expect it. If Scarlet turned it off or refused to turn it on, Kelly would throw a tantrum.

That was something else. Kelly had always been so easygoing, but now she was hard to manage, especially in public. Tears began to sting Scarlet's eyes, and she clamped her jaw and willed herself not to cry. Scarlet added that to her mental list of the ways she was failing as a mother. She'd cried so many times in front of Kelly, but she couldn't seem to stop the flow. At the beginning of the pregnancy, Kelly had been a little upset to see Scarlet cry, but she seemed to be getting used to all the tears. Scarlet wasn't sure which was worse: Kelly being upset or being resigned to it. Now Kelly would run and get Kleenex for her and then just go back to playing.

Scarlet watched as Kelly sprinted to another patch of flowers. Her blond hair flew behind her, catching rays of sun and reflecting them outward. Over the past couple months, her arms and legs had tanned as brown as a gingercake. Her face flushed easily, her cheeks pink against the tan background.

"Kelly, I'm going to go in and put some clothes on. Okay?" Scarlet said and then pushed herself up out of the chair. Her stomach lurched, and her head swam. For a moment, she thought she might vomit or pass out, but then the feeling passed.

"Okay, Mommy," Kelly replied without looking up.

Scarlet walked to her bedroom and began to dress. She was lonely for Brandon. He was at his mother's house. Brandon's brother had called yesterday and said that their mother had taken a fall in her bedroom. They were lucky, they had all agreed, that she hadn't broken something. She just had a few bruises, but Scarlet didn't feel so lucky. Brandon had gotten home last night, she hadn't slept well, and now Brandon was gone again.

As Scarlet slipped on a sleeveless top, she reprimanded herself. She was acting like a child, no better than Kelly and her tantrums. It was strange, but pregnancy made her feel

childish and irrational, always on edge. She was so lonesome for Brandon that she could pull her hair out, but she knew that when he came home, she would probably yell at him for something stupid. Now, what kind of sense did that make?

Tears stung her eyes, and she shook her head. "No!" she said through clinched teeth.

She walked back down the hall fully dressed except for shoes. Her feet looked like sausages from the swelling, and even her loosest sandals cut into her flesh. Dr. Martin told her that she wasn't getting enough exercise. Walking would help her circulation, but how could she walk when exhaustion stalked her every move? Men just didn't understand. If only she'd gone to Dr. Lansing. She would understand Scarlet thought bitterly and immediately felt like a traitor. Dr. Martin had delivered Kelly perfectly and had always been good to her.

The screen door creaked as she pushed it open and stepped back onto the porch. A wave of heat slapped her in the face. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

When she opened her eyes, Kelly was nowhere.

"Kelly? Where are you?" Scarlett called out casually. There was no answer. Kelly was probably just around the corner. No need to worry, but panic was already stealing into Scarlet's heart. Her mind's eye immediately conjured up a futile, hours-long search ending with a telephone call to the police.

"Kelly! Talk to Mommy, so I can find you!" she shouted as she stepped off the porch, her bare foot sinking into the cool grass. She was blinded for a second as she left the shade of the porch, and the sun hit her in the eyes.

"Kelly!" She jogged around the corner of the house, awkward and large. Each foot pounding step jarred her body and bounced her belly painfully. Her heart was pounding from the exertion and panic.

When she cleared the house, she stopped because there was Kelly. She was squatting in a large patch of clover flowers, the grass covering her small feet. There was a rock on her flat palm held just inches from her nose, and she was staring at it. Her golden hair shone in the sun creating a halo. Had it been any other time, Scarlet may have seen the exquisite beauty of the moment.

"Kelly!" Scarlet shouted again, and Kelly jumped, dropping the rock. Kelly turned toward her mother, her lips pursed, her eyes round. "Didn't you hear me call you?" Scarlet snarled. Kelly shook her head quickly. Her mouth quivered and her face fell apart in wailing and tears. Guilt rushed on Scarlet and quickly beat down the anger and fear she'd been feeling. The anger and fear were still there, but the guilt was a much bigger bully. Scarlet let out a sigh and began to walk to Kelly.

"Listen, don't cry," Scarlet cooed as she lifted Kelly up into her arms and rested her on her belly as if it were a shelf. Kelly's legs wrapped around Scarlet's body, and Kelly buried her face into the crook of Scarlet's neck. "Don't cry, Baby. Listen, I'm sorry I yelled."

"I'm sorry too, Mommy," Kelly wailed in a sniffling voice.

"Mommy was scared. Haven't I told you to answer me when I call for you?"

"I'm sorry," Kelly sniffled. Scarlet waddled back to the porch with Kelly in her arms. They were both out of breath by the time they sat down on the step.

After a few minutes, Kelly climbed down from Scarlet's lap and resumed her flower picking chore. Kelly had recovered fully, but Scarlet watched from her cloud of misery. Her back ached and her legs trembled, and she knew she was the world's worst mother. It was hard for her to believe that a few short months ago she has felt like the best mother and had the best child.

The sun was well over the tree line now and sweat beaded up on Scarlet's forehead.

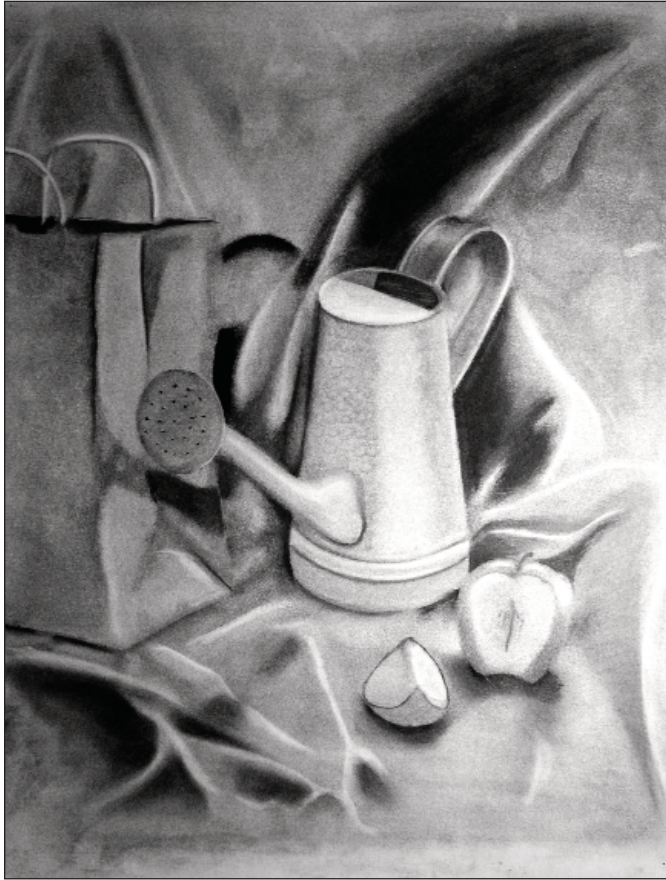
"Let's go on in, Shug. It's getting hot," Scarlet said to Kelly as she hoisted herself up from the step.

"Can we watch Dora, Mama?" Kelly asked looking up from the flowers.

"Sure."



Morning After
Damon Hood



Green Thumb
Jonathan Gilmore

For Cora and Lara

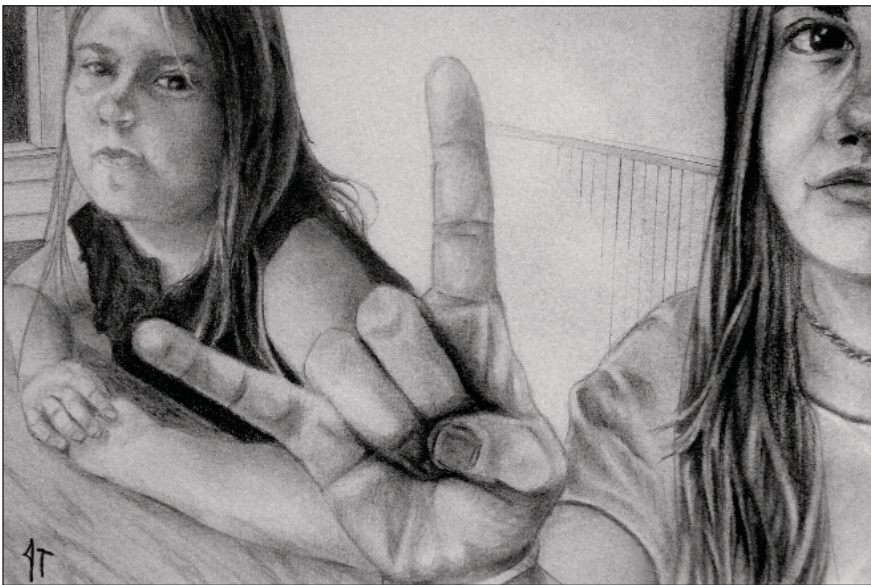
By: Linda M. Lonon

Dot-eye snake, wriggle in the grass,
Can you see my feelings as I pass?

Wall-eyed dog, leaper at my feet,
Do you feel my worry when we meet?

Gentle-footed cat, sleeper on my bed,
You don't give a hoot what goes on in my head!

Sky-away bird, noisy though you are,
Take my mind to a quiet place afar.



Summer Days
Jonathan W. Tucker

Our Dance

By: Barbara Sears

*“Have you ever seen them together?” she asked.
“After 62 years of marriage they move together as if in a dance.
It’s a beautiful thing.”*

We had a dance after two years of marriage,
More like one of those hip-hop dances...

Popping,
Snapping,
Ducking,
Dodging,
Snatching

To agitating music and angry lyrics.

Turn up the volume;

Shut the kid up;

Get me my dinner;

Give me some money.

When did we get so “ghetto”?

Guess that’s why they call it “break’ dancing.



Belinda Ballew-Schrag
Innocent Collagoration

The Gift

By: Vivian Satterwhite

Caldwell Library Contest Winner – Second Place in Prose

The small gift-wrapped package found beneath musty blankets in the trunk was a surprise. What could it be that had been put away, unopened, in the attic?

Gingerly, Kenya raised the thin package into dust-dancing light, realizing there was something vaguely familiar about the yellowed lilac paper, the brownish curls of purple ribbon.

Settling back in the low velvet chair, she placed the package on her lap, gazing at it, wondering.

Slowly, the past began to unfold, and there was that day when Grandmom moved back to the city. The day Daddy brought his new bride home ...

When her stepmother (tall, beige, with burgundy rouge smoldering the hollows of her cheeks) leaned forward to greet her, Kenya recoiled from the black cascade of curly hair, the dazzling smile, and vanilla cologne.

She turned and ran through the hall, out the back door, down the hill--the beads on her braids clacking against each other.

At the bottom of the hill, she stretched out on thick summer grass, letting memories of her mother flow through her mind: the sweet voice singing old hymns that had lulled her to sleep at night, the gentle touch, soft plump lap; things she would never know again.

Then, the hard memory: Mommie moaning with pain and clutching her swollen tummy, her brown skin shiny with sweat; Daddy bringing Mrs. Brock, from next door, to babysit; Mommie and Daddy leaving for the hospital.

Later, Grandmom rushing in, having driven all the way down from the city, nervous and strange with worry; Mrs. Brock saying, "I hope everything will be all right," then going out, with anxious-looking eyes.

Much, much later, Daddy coming home along with tears sliding down his ebony face—telling horrible news that fell like cold rain: Mommie was dead. The new baby brother was stillborn.

Kenya had looked over at her favorite doll, happy-faced in its little peacock chair, and she wanted to scream and throw things and make Mommie come back home; but she just sat there while those icy words---Dead. Stillborn---seemed to wither the room; drain it of color, of sound.

After the funeral, where Mommie lay beautiful in the casket, with the tiny baby tucked in the crook of her arm, and other sweet voices sang old hymns, Grandmom moved in and stayed almost a year, cooking, cleaning, giving love.

But everything changed again because Daddy had fallen in love with that bony woman who bragged that she had performed with the Alvin Ailey Dancers.

A knot of grief formed in Kenya's chest as she lay on the fragrant grass. She turned over, drew her knees up toward her chin, and cried---as hard as she used to cry when she was only two or three---and when it was over, she was weak. Cool breezes caressed her skin, and for a few minutes, she dozed.

When she woke up, she saw a butterfly floating on blue satin wings. It landed on a golden flower swaying in the sun. To Kenya, that was a moment of perfect beauty---to be compared to nothing except the memory of her mother. She watched while the butterfly and flower held some splendid communion; then the butterfly spiraled away, and Kenya heard her father calling her home. As she got up to leave, she knew that she would come back as soon as she could.

So the spot at the foot of the grassy hill became her Place, the butterfly and the flower became her friends. Every day she went there and waited with the golden flower for the gossamer butterfly; and the three of them shared silence, and sunbeams, and time.

Her stepmother presented her with offerings of friendship: exotic sweets and fantastic toys. Once, she put on a thin, foggy-looking dress, and danced around the room like a grey moth chasing light, but Kenya ignored it all.

Sometimes when she glanced up from her Place, she saw her stepmother, hands on skinny hips, spying.

At supper one night, after a few mouthfuls of green peas and mashed potatoes, Kenya's

father cleared his throat several times, then asked if she'd like to live with Grandmom for a while; go to school in the city.

Kenya shrugged. What would it matter? By then her butterfly would be dead, because someone on TV said butterflies only live for two weeks, and she already knew that flowers didn't last long.

The heat-shimmered days came, went, one blurring into another, and Kenya felt life as a slow dream.

One day, she waited with the golden flower far into the afternoon, but the butterfly didn't come. The next day, her flower was gone. The broken stem remained.

After that, she didn't go there anymore, but spent most of the time in her room, accepting without interest the silly dolls in ruffled dresses that her stepmother gave.

When the time came for her to go to her grandmother's, Kenya assured her father that she'd be all right making the trip by bus, alone.

At the station, her stepmother handed her a narrow, square package wrapped in lilac paper and tied with purple ribbon. Her father hugged and kissed her before she stepped up into the bus.

Soon, familiar scenery was gliding backward, and the steady hum of the Greyhound was a song of something gone. Halfway to Chicago, Kenya remembered the fancy package beside her and picked it up, wondering what crazy toy it could be. Listlessly, she set it down again and watched her new world looming toward her.

When she put her things away in Grandmom's guest room, she pushed the package to the back of the closet and forgot about it...

The "while" at Grandmom's stretched into years, and after her grandmother died, when Kenya was away at college, her father and stepmother removed the furnishings from the house and rented it to strangers.

Now settled in her own life, Kenya was back at her father's home to sort through things, search for important papers.

The impact of the logging truck that careened out of control and struck his Cadillac had killed him instantly and left his wife in a coma which the doctor said might be permanent.

Kenya ran her fingers slowly across the package. So this was the little going-away gift from that long-ago day. Feeling drained, she glanced at her watch and realized visiting hours would soon be over, so she stuck the package inside her tote bag and went down the steps.

The hospital scene was the same: her stepmother lay locked into herself, lifeless-looking.

Kenya sat beside the bed and took the package out; untying brittle ribbon, unfolding fragile paper, and her breath caught in her throat as joy and sorrow surged as one into her heart. There, under glass, paused in blue-winged flight, was her butterfly; next to it, her flower, displayed in spun-gold bloom.

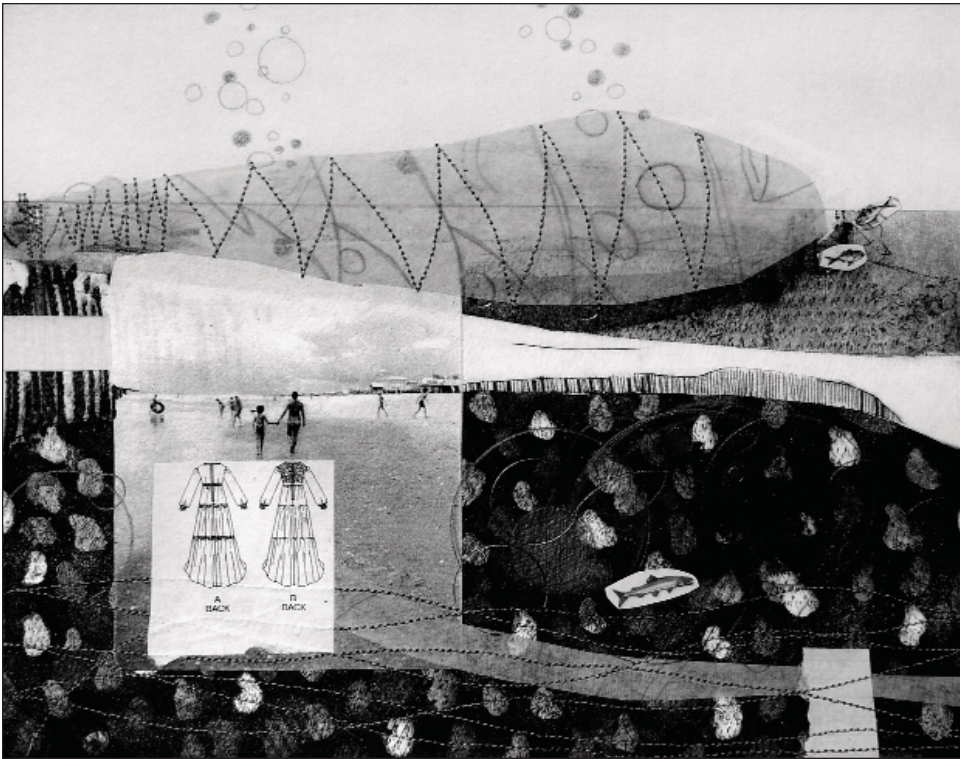
Kenya looked at the woman who had shown nothing but kindness since day one, and tears brimmed in her eyes. She took her stepmother's small, limp hand. "Olivia," she said, her voice breaking, "Olivia, I'm sorry."

Intermittent sounds dotted the hospital's quietness; female voice paging a doctor, elevator bell chiming, rustle of a cart passing the door.

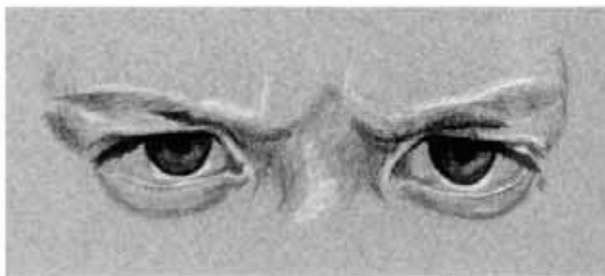
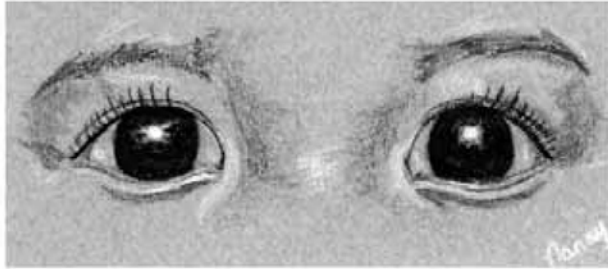
In the room where Kenya sat no sounds were made; and the only movement was a slight, tremulous squeeze from a thin, delicate hand.



Ann Trotter
Mirage



Lynda Lea Bonkemeyer
Back A, Back B



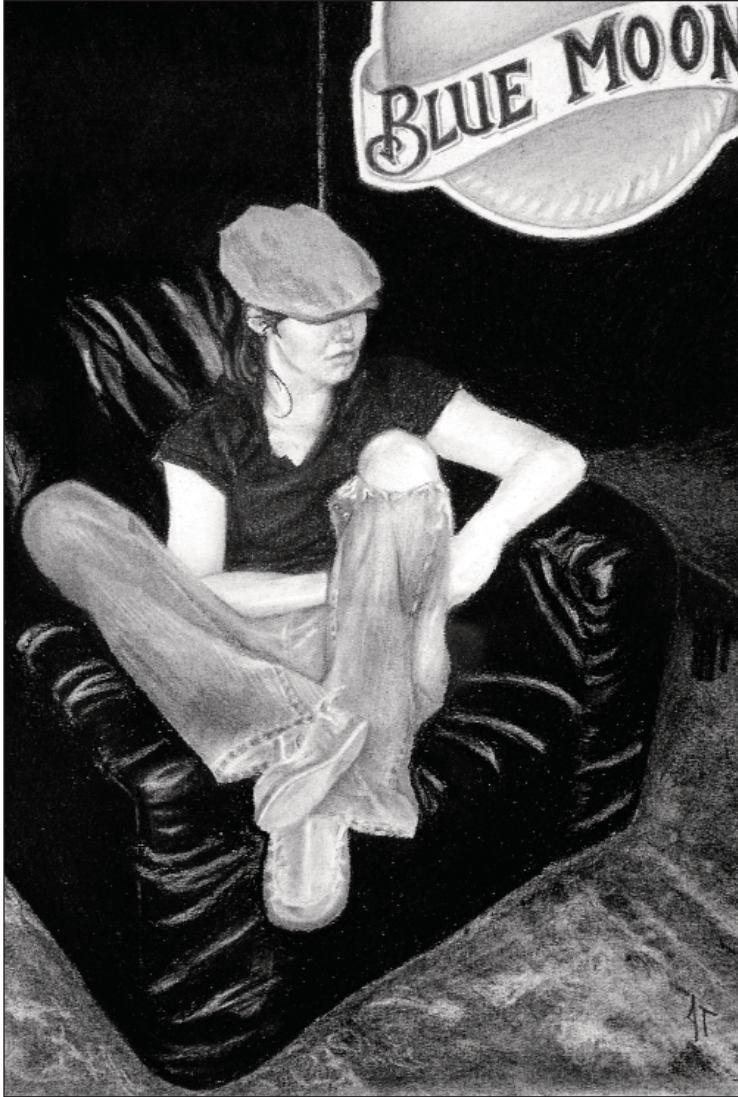
Through the Eyes of a Child
Nancy Crawford

Night Ride

By: Arlene Neal

Caldwell Library Contest Winner – Second Place in Poetry

I ride my bike
On a whippoorwill night
Fast along the fence road.
Cool rushing creek air parts my hair
I breathe deep sweet honeysuckle
And new-mown hay,
Black trees loom beside me
Hazy stars hang in new moon darkness above.
Pedaling harder I pass unseen snakes
Quickly before they think of me.
Frogs croak down around the pond
Cicadas chirp and clatter all together
Telling me faster, faster.
My tires sizzle on the road
I squint my eyes against the gnat cloud
And hold my breath 'till they're behind me.
An owl's dark body swoops overhead
Disappearing in tree shapes without shadows.
Kitchen light streams across the front yard
Where I leap down and bound two steps at a time
Dodging porch light moths.
My front wheel still spins
When I sit down to supper.



Colleeta Under a Blue Moon
Jonathan Tucker

Balance

By: Laura Sedlacek

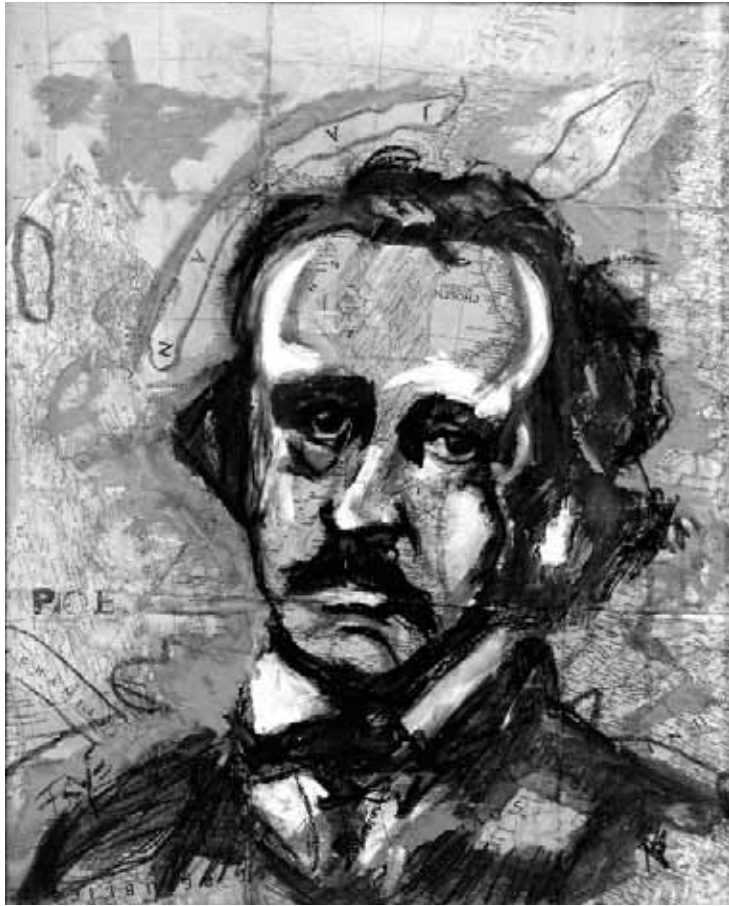
Caldwell Library Contest Winner – Third Place in Poetry

The envy of kite surfers fuses with fog
the color of rainbows champs at the wind,
whistling a haughty tune of seduction,
the lure of live bait
ransomed for number scraps and lost names
and disappearing faces.
My feet slip on the wax
balance
interrupted.
A hiatus unsolved by wetsuits,
flippers, or
inflatable surfboards.

Harmony between the waves whispers melodies to fishes
the lyrics bathed with
words of “what’s wrong with your feet, your toes?” and “why
can’t you stand up straight?”
I am like seaweed and wither under the salt’s burden.
Soon we are swept into the current
becoming a motorcade of measures.

4:4 time. It all sounds the same. The alarm clock, the ocean floor,
a seashell’s false echo.
A shipwreck lost at sea.
The waves leer at my legs
unstable
interference.
A channel without water.

I leave no footprints in the sand.



Poe
Charlie Frye

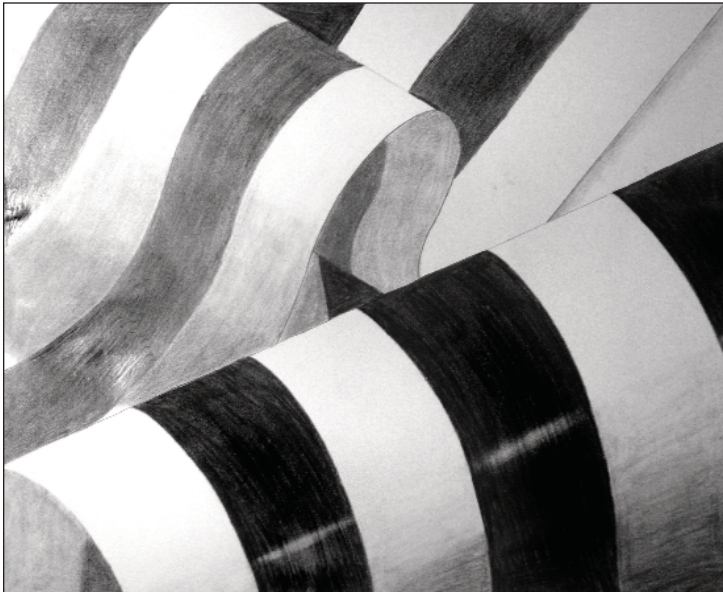
Masquerade

By: Lynne Slasor

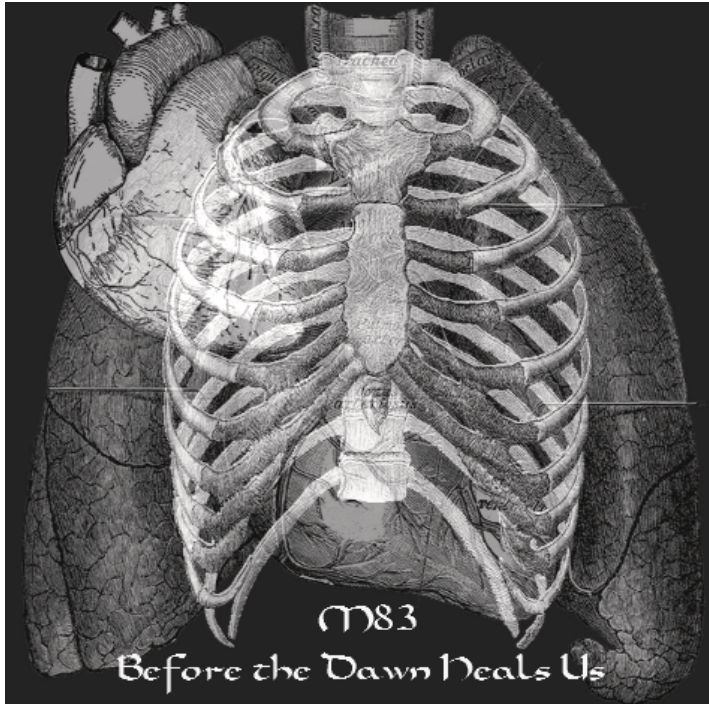
I buy two cut-velvet scarves,
One black on black with swirls of gray,
Like my aging hair;
Silvery, ancient,
Caught in time.

The other's green, a color
Deeper than the forest floor,
More lucent, with burnished copper reindeer,
Some with antlers,
Some just waiting fawn
Among the burnt-gold leaves,
Like my aging heart:
Coppery, ancient,
Caught in time.

I wrap those scarves around my neck,
Drape my shoulders,
Cover up the wisps of hair,
And further cover up my heart.
The waiting, being caught in time,
Takes courage, requires warmth and
Velvet softness,
And the feel of silk.



Stripes
Bobby Lunceford



Before the Dawn Heals Us (Lung)
Jasa Woods



Milkweed with Beaker
Tom Normand

The Loup-Garou Ball

By: Jordan Michael Isaacs

The sun sank behind the hills
the moon rose from the sea
in the woods a lone flute trills
a fiddle plays hauntingly.

The guests arrived with lantern light
which they hung between the trees
they dressed the food to look just right
and ignored the muffled pleas.

They drank and dined
on meat and wine
and laughed at days gone past
when from the crowd, their humble host
showed himself at last.

Age bore marks across his skin
time had bent his back
but his eyes still had a steely glare
and his hair was raven black.

He strode upon the soggy earth
he wore naught but his skin
though his voice was quiet thunder
his words cut through the din.

“My friends,” said he, “we gather here,
and mingle on this night
to feast, and drink, enjoy the times,
and dance in sacred light.

Thus loose your forms, let music play!”
and in the night their figures swayed
to and fro on graceful paws
silver moonlight on their claws.



Faith Lyons
Stepping Out of the Shadows



Steph
Damon Hood

Two for the Road

By: Matt McGuire

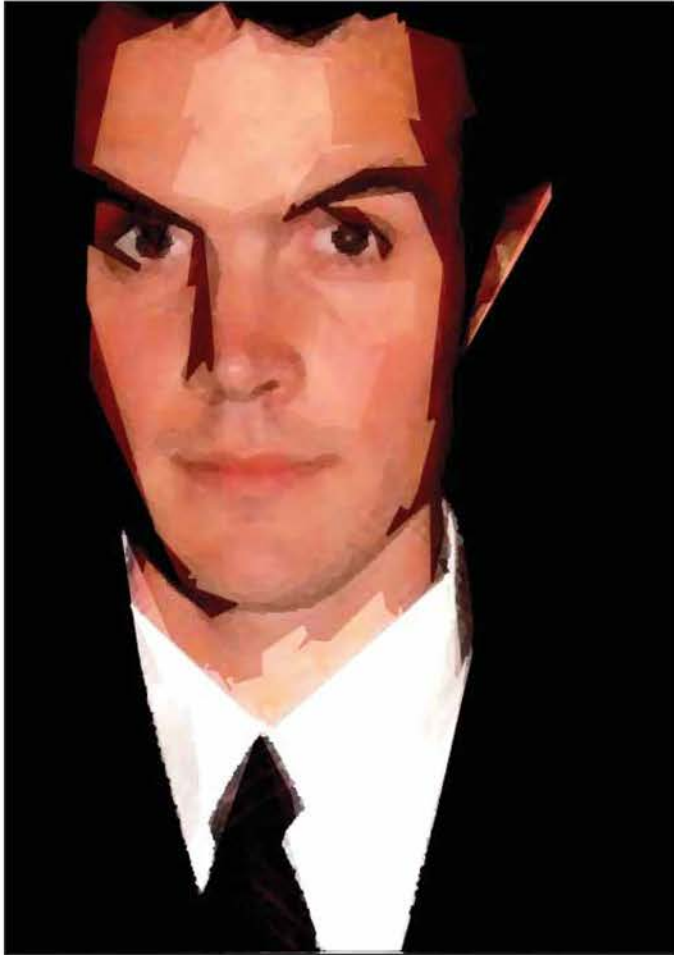
We took off that summer, two latter-day saints hell bent for leather bars on bad trucker speed for the end of the road that ran cross-country to the left coast and through nothing but brush, bastards, and beltways. We were getting away from our deadpan lives and our dead end jobs at the Circle K. Wherever we went, there we were, but where we were was getting us nowhere, so somewhere else sounded better than there. I was popping two pearly white gravestones an hour and you were hanging out the window, howling at the moon and trying to levitate my rust-worn, red little Toyota truck above the road and the rats—redemption loomed on the horizon and the wind was in your hair. The demons in your breast called for a reckoning, a vision quest unlike any experienced since Eisenhower built the means of getting from Shithole to the City of Angels in less than 48 hours.

We took a wrong turn in Memphis and ended up piss down in Mississippi, sucking up coffee and counting pennies in between rattles of the pill-box and the tink, tink of rain drops on the windshield. We got out somewhere in Rankin county and asked for directions—some redneck, half gypsy, gray matter-starved gas station attendant told you L.A. was a long way from hee-haw-hillbilly-next-to-nowhere-fuck-your-sister- town and we screeched off leaving a black mark from the edge of the down trodden Delta to Houston by God Texas.

Interstate Ten was a long ribbon of nothing and no one. Blazing hot pavement and scrub trees, dry mouthedness and dusty, raw reflections were the denizens of the dust bowl poured out before us. Salvation slaved behind a fruit stand at the roadside in the form of a half-schizophrenic Mexican Lolita named Pico De Gallo and her fifty dollars worth of unspent money orders. She jumped in back with a bag full of soybeans after a quick courtship and started taking off her poncho, flashing her titties and waving a bottle of Mescal at the wannabe cowboys, drifters, and drug salesmen. We fed her a handful of pharmaceutical go-getters, and she bought us a couple of fish tacos and enough go juice to get past the parvenue midlands. I made her come twice behind a bent-backed Indian billboard and cut her loose somewhere near El Paso, where we almost ran out of gas. I told three Chicano cutthroats through chattering teeth that I was St. Thomas the Unbeliever, risen from the dead and looking for the stigmatized faithful descendants of Signor De Leon. They gazed morbidly into my wild interstate eyes; my short-long greasy hair and tattered jeans weren't reassuring, but the shortest one cracked a snake-oil medicine man kind of smile and whispered something to his compadres. Turning back to me on the heel of his boa-skinned boot, he gave me five bucks and a look that said, "turn your face to the setting sun, hombre, you're full gone loco and your cojones need resizing." I counted my blessings and the beads of my Benzadrine rosary to the tune of a half a tank of gas and a pack of Tahoes, sucking their butts till the cherries bloomed red, ripe and long in the cool, star-blown Texas night.

When we hit Arizona you lost the other half of your mind and ran around a rest stop, tearing your clothes off and flashing your tits to the illegal and the illegitimate—we scooped up handfuls of bone dry Phoenix dust and flung them to the wind, savoring the flavor of freedom and sensing the impending border of our destination just over the next flat stretch of road that seemed to run on forever but, like every other road, was destined for the sea. We busted California wide open, literally, when I ran through the border check at 35 mph and got my tires shot out by the CHiP on duty.

I went to jail. You went to detox. I tried to look you up on Yahoo people search at the library a couple of weeks ago—I found two addresses and the phone number of your Dad's ex. Curiosity killed the confusion when I called your stepmother in Roanoke; she said you had been sober six months and you never wanted to speak to me again. She tried the old Baptist hellfire, "you need to get saved" stuff on me, but when the line hung silent she hung up with a sniff. "Fuck you, Marko." I stood awhile longer in the pay telephone booth, listening to the rain rattle on the roof and counted out my last dollar and twenty-seven cents. Exiting the booth, I ran raggedly across the street to the self-styled "American Owned" Citgo station, slapped my life's savings down on the counter in front of the de-turbaned Iraqi attendant and faded off into the downpour with a locked and loaded bottle of Colt .45, headed down the road that ran to the sea.



Self Portrait
Ryan Breeden

And You, My Dear, Are My Last Taboo

By: Alyce P. Nadeau

Small town society rules drilled into my curly head:
Be good. Be nice. Behave.
Mind your manners.
Remember who you are.
Stand tall. Walk with your toes pointed straight ahead.

“A good name is rather to be chosen
Than great riches
And loving favor
Rather than silver or gold.”

Okay. I got it!

Then
Don't do it. (Do what?)
No sex with your father (What? He's dead.)
Or your siblings (They're girls, for God's sake.
How? No! Not that! Yuck!!!)

And from grandma Butchee:
Only marry a man from the right neighborhood,
Somebody we know.
(Yeah. That would be #1. He committed suicide.)
Better not marry somebody from out of town
(That would be #2 and #3).
Don't even consider a Yankee (#3)
Or a Catholic (#3).

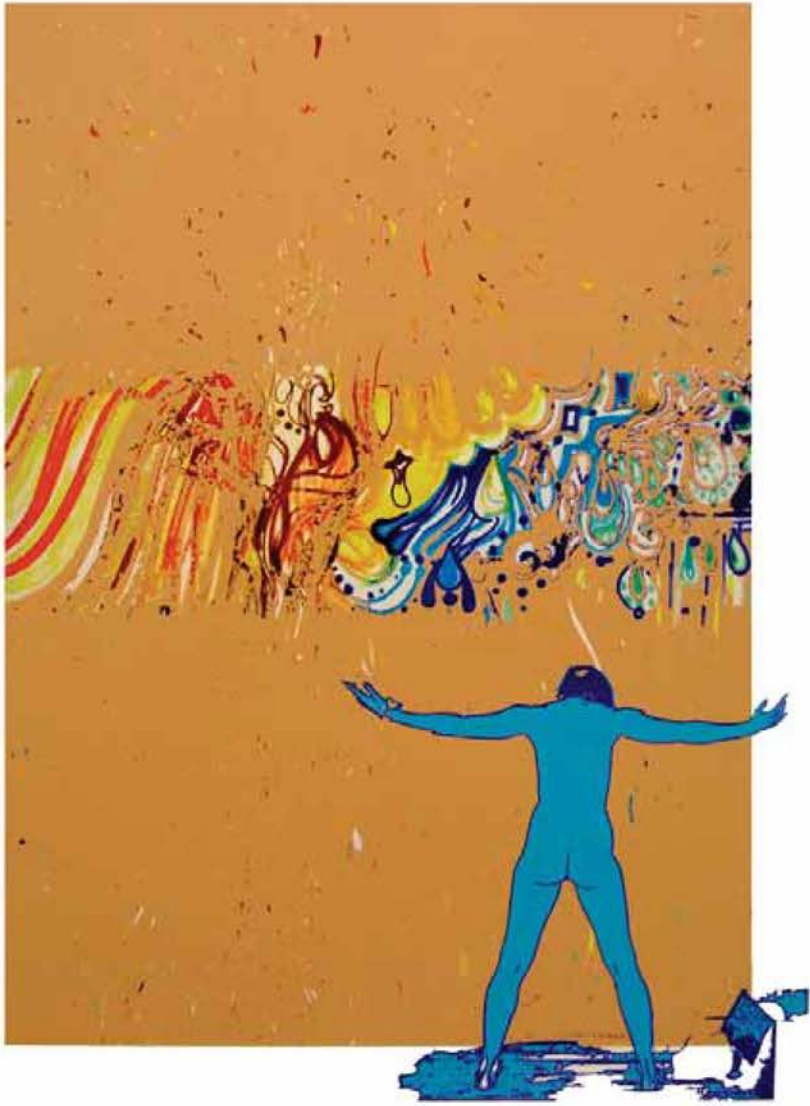
All of this kept me pretty much in line
Until shortly after a seventy-plus birthday
When I met, finally,
And fell hopelessly in love with
The man for whom my search had extended
Since doing research in the stacks
Of my college library, freshman year.

And now
You are my last taboo
Because
Grandma, born in Virginia
One generation

Following the Civil War,
Mandated
Strictly
No recourse

NEVER, EVER FALL IN LOVE WITH A REPUBLICAN!
And I think I have

And while I am suffering with satisfaction
She is turning in her grave.
Bless her heart.



Untitled
Stephanie Pyne



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