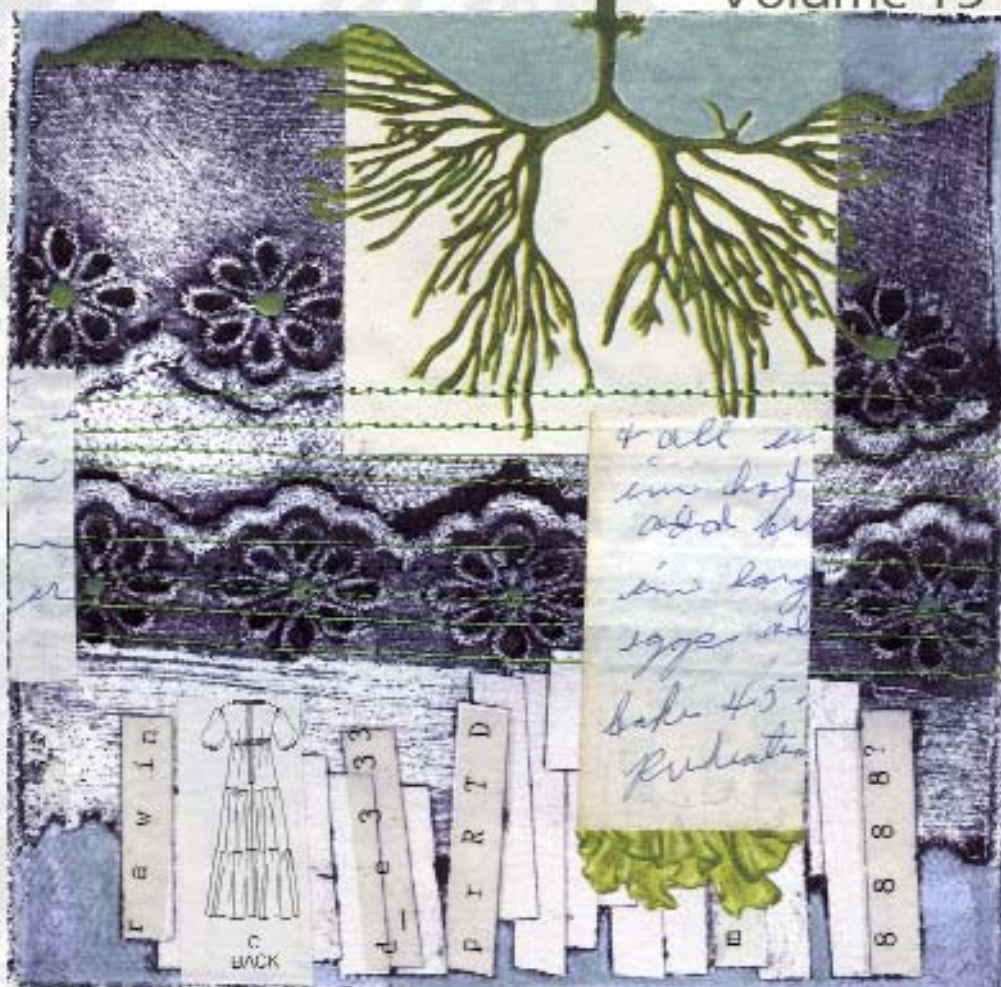


# Branches

Volume 15





Lung  
Lynda Lea Bonkemeyer



# Acknowledgements

Art Editor

*Thomas Thielemann*

Literary Editors

*Jessica Chapman Faucette*

*Heather Chapman*

Production Director

*Ron Wilson*

Editorial Board:

*Jane Harrison*

*Laura Aultman*

*Eliza Bishop*

*Laura Benton*

*Anthony Alderman*

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Trimotion  
Zac Jones

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



# The Vigil

By Stephanie Estep

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

“Ira ... wake up,” Blanch prodded impatiently, pronouncing his name Ahree. Gently she fluffed the flat hospital pillow behind his head, and rearranged the blankets around his still figure. “If yer hungry, ya gotta open your eyes!”

The hospital room was sterile and sparse, the standard it seemed for all hospitals she could remember being in. The smell of stale air and disinfectant permeated her nose. Well intentioned family and friends had sent half a dozen bouquets, yet the hospital scent still overrode any feeble efforts the hothouse flowers might have made to make the room more fragrant.

Ira or *Ahree*, at seventy six, lay along the bed, eyes closed, occasionally muttering or murmuring at some inconsequential dream. His thinning brown hair hung haphazardly over his forehead, and his tobacco stained fingers twitched and trembled at some hidden worry. His length was barely contained by the scrawny cot, yet his frame was so lean that he was no more than a bump under the bedclothes.

This was the main subject of Blanch’s worry at the moment. All of her time at home was spent in getting this stubborn man to eat more food. Since his health had declined in the last few years, and his appetite had waned, she had seen him shrink to a fraction of his previous weight. *And the dang doctors didn’t let him eat a bit before his surgery.* In Blanch’s mind, the only way to keep him alive was to push food into him at every opportunity.

Their two daughters walked in and tiptoed to the bed. “Did he wake up yet Mama?” Mitzie, the eldest by four years, whispered.

“Not yet,” her mother replied in a too loud voice, “But he’s talkin in his sleep a bit. That’s a good sign.” Intentionally, she kept her voice just this side of a shout. *See the stubborn fool sleep through that.*

On either side, dwarfing her petite figure, the two middle aged women drew a hand and stood vigil with their mother. One could assume that if Ira (Ahree) Trivette had opened his eyes at that moment, he might have wondered if he had died and no one had thought to mention it.

The main concern for him sprung from the fact that the doctors had emphasized the very real possibility that Ira might not wake up from his hip surgery. So now, those closest to him waited. Quite a few sat or paced in the waiting room, checking the clock and reminiscing about he who was sometimes called ‘Pa.’

In the inner sanctum, also known as room 114, three women stood hunched around a cot, and waited. Looking at her husband, Blanch did not see the frail countenance that time had worn like wind on a rock wall. Like is the case with many loved ones, she saw memories that colored her picture of him in her mind, each one subtly changing his form, until she saw, instead of the physical human, her love for the actual *person* reflected back at her. If she ever noticed the wrinkles and thinning hair, it was only to lament what they meant, that he was becoming older, and sooner or later, unless she beat him to it, he would be gone, leaving her here until she could follow.

The mark across the top of his head had only begun to reveal itself in the last few years with the loss of hair. This mark she acknowledged as a badge of honor. It signified the only time he’d ever laid a hand on her. It was seven months into marriage when he’d slapped her across the face for ‘lettin’ him break his baby cup’. With clarity, she remembered spying the brass pot sitting innocently on the stove and without giving herself a chance to think, held it aloft with both hands, took careful aim, and slammed it down onto the head of the man reading the paper at her breakfast table. The line had been drawn in the sand on that day; she would never be one of those wives.

His eyes the paper thin lids lay upon were blue. A blue she could get lost in over and over. She remembered gazing into those eyes on one summer night long ago after



they had agreed to wed and then staggering into her tiny home as if drunk. She remembered her mother's eyes that night as well, so shrewd and sad for her daughter. And the comment her mother had made on seeing her lovestruck child. "Don't git stuck on him, honey. Married life ain't no kinda life fer a woman." The stooped shoulders and chapped hands had been enough testament that maybe her Mama knew a thing or two about a married woman's hard life in nineteen-fifties Appalachia, the constant gardening and canning, endlessly washing and mending, cooking and comforting and diapering, then repeating, over and over.

Glimpsing his hands, so weather worn and wrinkled, reminded her of their courting days. Ira had been sitting with her in her family's small living room when her father had mentioned going out to chop some wood. Seizing the opportunity, she took one of her beau's cigarettes and lit it. Feeling very grown up and modern, she had sat there with Ira by the wood stove, flicking her ashes into the fire until they heard her father come in early. Seeing the panic on her face, Ira had gallantly snatched her cigarette and carefully held the two between his fingers. Her father had faltered a bit when he saw the young man who had come to court, calmly smoking two cigarettes at the same time. She knew her daddy was on to the why when he calmly sat in the chair and watched Ira puff on both until they were gone. His eyes had watered, and he had coughed something awful in between puffs. But he had been determined not to get her found out.

And now her love of so many decades lay in a hospital bed, while those he loved waited with bated breath or him to simply flutter his eyes. An entire life's history of frowns and smiles lay quietly before the three women, standing so solemn before the bed. Tammy, the youngest, roused herself as if from a dream. "I think I'll go tell everyone what's goin' on." Blanch looked up and smiled wearily as Tammy quietly slipped out the door.

Suddenly, all she wanted was to be alone with her sweetheart. "Mitzie, couldja get me some coffee?"

Grateful for some small chore, Mitzie rushed for the door to do her mother's bidding. At the knob she hesitated, "Maybe I should wait till Tammy comes back ... "

Blanch's tension showed in her smiling response, "I'll be fine, get me two cups wouldja?" Nodding, Mitzie quietly left, waylaying her sister in the hallway to give her mother the privacy she suddenly seemed to crave.

In the sudden emptiness of the room, Blanch studied her husband for the umpteenth time in as many minutes. "Ahree, ya gotta wake up now. It's been long enough and ya gotta get some food in ya." She paused half expecting a reply. "Yev gotta be thirsty by now, it's been hours!" Finding inspiration, she grabbed the mug of ice chips by the bed. The nurse had said they could feed him some if they wanted to. Carefully Blanch pinched several slippery shards between her fingers and slid them between Ira's parched lips. Faintly she thought she heard a barely discernable sigh leave his throat. Somewhat encouraged (even if it *had* only been her imagination), Blanch repeated the process several more times until all that was left in the mug was chilled water.

Tammy had left her some crackers in case she became hungry during the vigil. *Peanut butter, good.* It is his favorite anyway. Spurred on by the idea of progress made, Blanch ripped open the bag. First she waved one under his nose thinking maybe his stomach would rouse him. Did his nostrils flare ... just a little? Next she attempted wedging one between his lips. Unsurprisingly, this did not work. *Okay, nothing ventured ...* Next, she carefully broke off a corner of one. With the delicacy of a surgeon, she pried his lips apart and gently closed them around the tiny morsel. Taking a straw full of water, Blanch dribbled it into his mouth and then anxiously watched his throat. *He swallowed!* Her triumph was a palpable presence in the silent room.

In her mind, this was no longer about getting sustenance into his body. It had now become a quest for his very survival. If she could only get him to eat this entire pack of crackers, somehow she knew that he would make it. Twenty minutes later, the entire first cracker was gone, down the gullet of the man innocently sleeping through

his forced meal. Blanch neither wavered nor grew weary. Now, it was about fighting the clock. The girls (as she still thought of them) would be back soon now.

Her hands almost unconsciously smoothed over the stooped shoulders of her husband. Her own back had given out years ago, and Ira had seen her pain and taken over the upkeep of everything in the house below waist level. Once a week, she watched him unhesitatingly shuffle around the rooms with broom and mop, stooping to empty the water bucket, moving small items of furniture for better access to the floor. She'd never asked for this gesture of understanding. Somehow he had seen, and known, and acted.

The water had disappeared and she'd had to stop to refill it at the sink. The second cracker was almost entirely gone. Resuming her position, she picked up the crackers and continued her work. It was five minutes later that Tammy and Mitzie walked in.

"Mama, what are you doin'? You're gonna choke 'im!" Tammy grabbed the almost half empty pack out of her mother's hand.

Blearily, Ira opened his eyes to watch the tug of war going on at the foot of the bed.

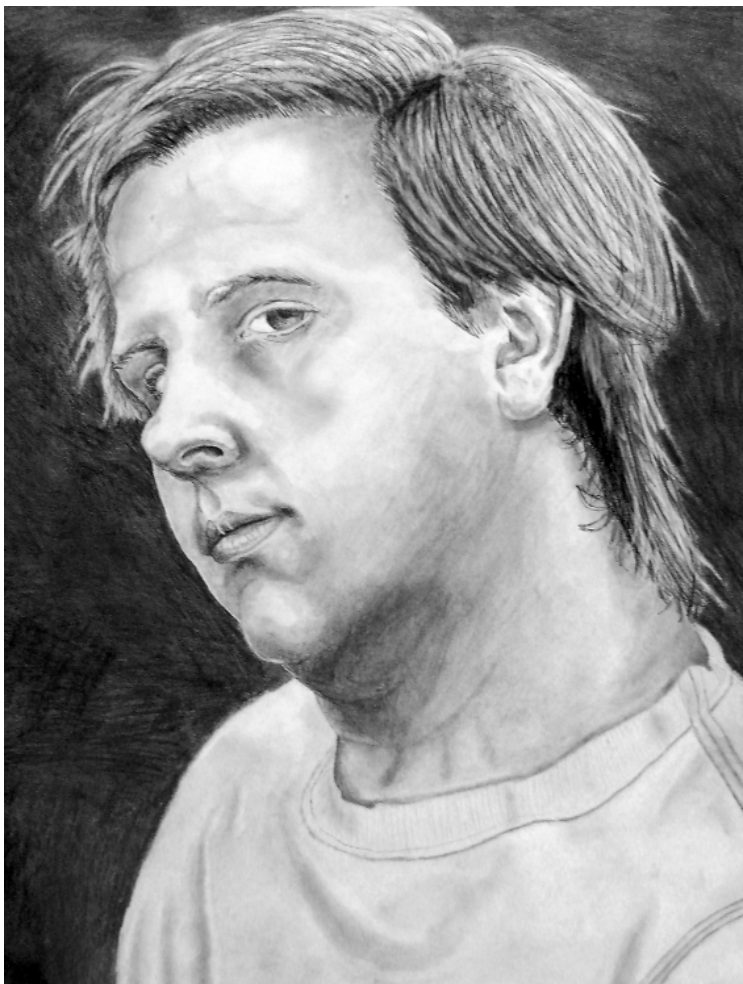
The crackers were beginning to crumble over the harsh treatment and crumbs were falling to the floor. "Don't worry about it honey, your mama's been tryin ta kill me fer years, she's just never been caught before."

"Stop chatterin' and finish yer snack now Ahree. Tammy honey, page the nurse wouldja and let her know he's ready fer lunch now." With one last wrench, Blanch confiscated the crumbled mess from her daughter and calmly moved her slight frame back to the head of the bed.

Tammy stood, mouth agape, speechless.

Blanch's tiny shoulders squared against the sealed lips of the substantial man in the bed.

"Now open up, old man."



Self Portrait Feb. Oh 10  
Chris Lovins

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

# Social Consciousness

By Nathan Anderson

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

social consciousness is a funny thing  
precariously aware of my home on the bottom  
ring far from certain that we even got that spot,  
a quarter century ago, we were still getting  
shot now it's simply in the books, treat us  
like cattle my ancestors spread from  
appalachia to seattle no refuge for any man,  
branded with the label savages, crystal  
clearly unstable

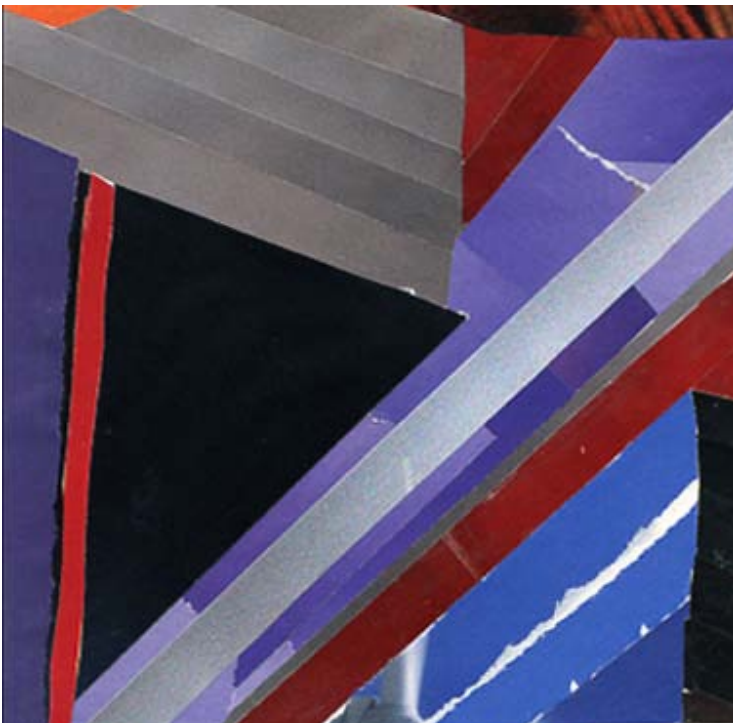
Unable to see truth in the light, in the  
white cannon fodder for cowboy serials  
too stupid to know wrong and right  
beat the shit out of my dumb ass with  
bibles never a matter of survival, rather be dead  
than work my hands raw and let you see that my bloods  
red you might get confused, and think i'm human too  
leave an ego bruise, and warrant further abuse

so all you gotta do, move us on out of  
here let us deal with our anxiety and fear  
when I go see my family on the  
reservation I see poison destroy whats  
left of our nation I see my love turn to  
dust in translation  
I see the trail of tears continuation  
now its a trail of beers, cocaine and frustration

no Cherokee candidate for president  
born here years too soon to be  
resident



Collage #7  
Virginia Hendricks



Lines  
Kyle Wilkinson

# A Common Sense of Insensitivity, A Sense of Humor

From the Desk of Chase Benedict

Oh lovely, the flow of light visibility  
leaned around the corners of every bell changed ring, sightless perhaps.  
Never knowing, knowing cheap  
obfuscation paralleled with love  
connotations imply above that this pipe dream is best left right  
unplugged.  
Plight ignored poorly stored might have potential to ramble.  
But as selfish you are “ur” is not actually a word but text  
a contraction at a stretch  
that is all we are, together.  
Mistake, use other door instead  
like a vacuum or the monster under the bed  
waiting.  
Jiggle the handle a few more times try through confusion, the artist  
rather consistent to be liberal.  
Deja vu?  
Regardless we laugh.  
In a common sense of insensitivity, a sense of humor  
between us an apple record in place of an apple in the i  
of the alphabet in ones hands is nothing more than a lie  
erase, erase, erase.  
A single candle of which we set fire  
to the false idols  
to all truths absolute enclosed  
within their rheum.  
Hands never lose chill but hearts warm with our arson  
turn our face to the wall, save for me facing the mirror  
smoking to fall, standing  
naked no matter the sweaters  
you read eyes but no other letters  
of love, that writing is better  
left to the Beatles or Dylan  
successfully drink, your glass without even spilling  
But I just keep on keeping on  
like a stone you just keep on rolling on  
through the Arctic through the attic  
if we ever even had it  
find faults find quakes one can give all which one takes  
Expletive.  
Watch as walls turn to water, washing and falter to an aural desert  
to see through the sea of the naked I  
I object, I object to drifting  
instead falling, falling, falling like a narcissist  
who has just seen his reflection for the very first time my  
mind comes at the point, it's a high.



Dream or Not  
Alex Soots

# A Note to a Hero

By Jan Jackman

If I wrote you a song would you listen?  
I've heard that your radio is on  
Or would you quietly turn it off  
When I write will you be gone

You always wrote songs about heroes  
I thought maybe I could try  
You said you wrote three minute stories  
I'm afraid I write three minute lies

Sometimes I write you letters  
In prose but usually verse  
But I always seem to get tongue-tied  
Bad words come out worse

I'm trying to say you're a hero  
Up in the ranks of your own  
If the best way to say it is to say it  
Then wherever you are is home

# Anywhere

By Kevin Friley

I found my inspiration  
At the end of the interstate  
Just like my destination  
It wouldn't matter anyway

Focus but no horizon  
I just can't see it yet  
Familiar and reminding  
Get as far away as I can get

I fight off sleep  
The sounds of the pavement  
Trying to figure out  
Just where our love went

And how did I get here  
Mapless and broke  
Contemplating the things  
That I don't know

I swear I'll outrun your memory  
If I can just drive fast enough  
I won't let you get the best of me  
Anywhere but here or bust

The radio makes a fool of me  
And I can't help but turn it up  
Carolina's seen the last of me  
I'm running and I've had enough





Iris Bud  
Michelle Bingham

# Because I Could Not Forget

By Kevin Hagan

Yet the flower sat alone  
her beauty clear to all,  
and wondered through the winter days at  
the wind's chill call.  
"What might have been, what might he  
say?" gazing through the pane,  
the flower pondered biding  
time as snow gave way to rain.

Winter nights grew short and  
warm as spring days hastened to,  
as grass and bud and planted  
field basked in gentle dew.

She couched the yearning  
wonder of the long-gone winter wind  
as window lifted in the day  
to let the breezes in.  
And as she sat in glowing  
morn with the daylight  
coming on, she felt the  
gentle summer wind lifting  
up her song.

It rustled through her reaching  
leaves, caressed her yellowed head,  
swayed her gently to and fro  
within her flowered bed.

"I wondered at your winter  
life," she whispered to her breeze,  
"and if with summer you'd  
return to play amongst the trees."

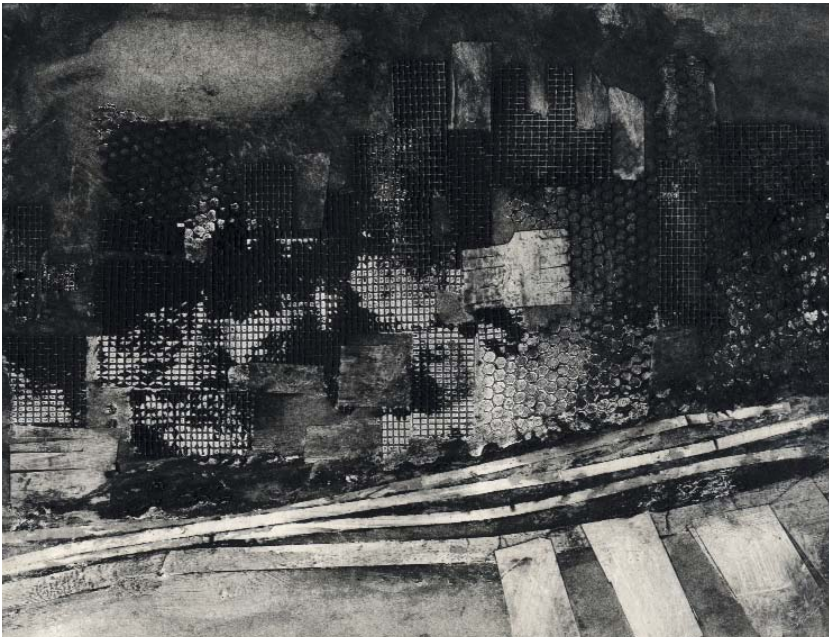
"The sight of you that winter  
night so bright upon your sill,  
giving warmth and growing  
life lends strength unto me still.

Through the world I'm free to  
roam no boundaries I know  
I fill the hovel and the  
Hall in freezing rain  
and snow.

But seeing you that winter  
night opened deep within  
some wondrous fount of warmest  
light and calmed the tempest wind."



Wire Lamp  
Stephanie Roark



City  
Nancy Posey

# Blue Notes

By Shasta Gragg

Thick, obscuring haze.  
A 1950's jazz club.  
Spotlights in blue wrap a shimmer around me.  
Smoke wafts from a hundred cigarettes  
In my hair and clothes.  
Blue notes.  
Dangerous, delicious scent takes me back to when I was a little girl  
held tight in Daddy's arms  
A blue flannel shirt comforts me, still.  
Blue notes.  
Crazy chaotic notes flow from the tenor sax-- Coltrane's refrain.  
I grow dizzy, intoxicated from the lack of melody.  
Stars burst behind my eyes  
Blue notes.  
In college jazz band  
Open the case and lift the tenor from the velvet lining.  
Smoke pours out, feathers out, like cirrus clouds  
I don't feel bad for staying up late to play all those  
Blue notes.

# Bright

By Kevin Hagan

Bright  
Autumnal molting  
Earth's downy fluff drops and is dull  
crispy brown earth smell  
I see you peek up. Long lashes  
poking through a mound of sylvan  
feathers. Breathy giggles of wind stir  
colorful flakes like  
rainbow snows.  
I pretend  
you aren't there but you know.  
I draw you near and capture the scent  
you smell  
your own breath, the leaf mold around  
you, the humus beneath. I grab  
you squeal  
and together we collapse in a peal of  
laughter  
in a pile of leaves  
I kiss your head and fetch again the rake.



Self Portrait Print  
Jeffrey Landers



Self Portrait  
Charles Grimes



Self Happiness  
Jamila Simmons

# Etheree

By Mary Taylor

Thought:  
It is  
A wonder  
How everyone  
Is always thinking  
All over the whole world  
Constantly imagining  
What if we could hear all these thoughts?  
Every mind is humming with constant  
Chaotic, yet orderly racing thought.

# Conversation with the Moon

By Kevin Friley

I want to taste the night  
The flavor of the summer air  
And run with my eyes closed  
Certain that I don't care

Then I swear I won't be back  
Until I'm out of cash or too old  
Forgetting everything we lack  
And forging what we don't know

I'm a poor excuse for this love  
I'll smile if it makes you happy  
You want me?  
You have me

I want to dream in black and white  
Our backs on the grass we lie there  
Conversation with the moon  
And feel a thousand miles from nowhere

Pretend that this ground is untouched  
No one has been here before us  
Pioneers of the world and then some  
And walk in the path of no one

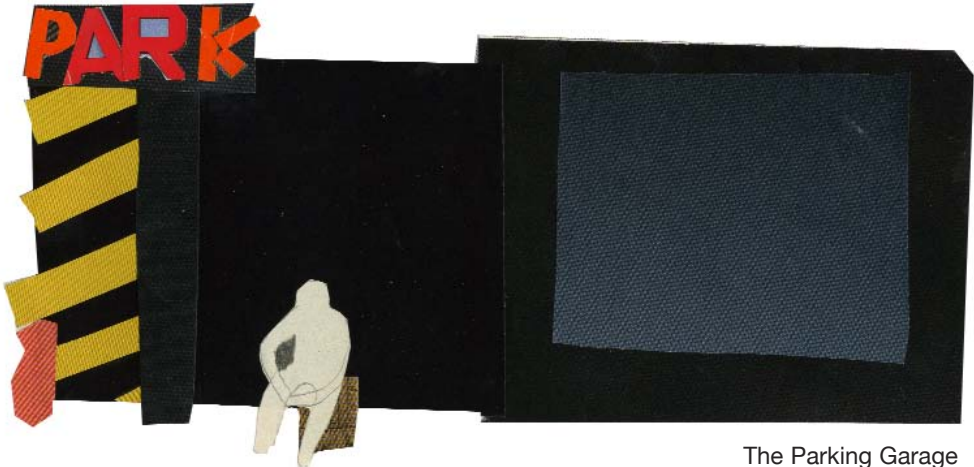
# Haiku

By Nathan Anderson

I think that I'm me  
But I'm you, I'm terrified  
I don't like this view.



Fisherman's Cottage on the Cliffs at Varengeville  
Connie Ramsey



The Parking Garage  
Dillon Henry

# Don Juan Quixote

By Dustin Bass

Sancho Panza said to his grace, "Let us stop at this Tavern."  
To which his master replied, "Such is the grounds of a villain."  
Sancho dropped from his mule and stated, "Your grace, I thirst."  
"Better to drown," the master paused, "To choke on the heat first."

Regardless of the wants in the master's head Sancho went in alone.  
He returned only a moment later pale as a ghost without a word.  
"Squire," said the master, "You look as if you will die of fright."  
"Indeed," said Sancho quickly, "Let us leave or I will this night."

The master, not one to stand for such an event, dropped from Rocinante.  
With protests from his well meaning squire he entered the dreadful place.  
There at the bar laughed a stocky man surrounded by listeners of all ages.  
This person was recounting his latest fling just last week with a Dulcinea.

"She," stated the story teller, "Was as lovely as the sweetest milk."  
"She," he continued, "Is from La Mancha and you would want her yourself."  
"She," he began, "Went with me to a barn by a creek with a pail."  
"She," he ended, "was the most tender woman I have ever known so well."

The master raised his rusted sword and aimed it at the entertainer.  
"Liar," he wailed, "I will ruin your name as you have Dulcinea's!"  
"Tell me the name of my villain," roared the ancient master unveiled.  
The stocky man unsheathed his sword. "Don Juan" at once he revealed.

Sancho Panza entered the Tavern and happened upon the scene.  
It was the very thing he hadn't wished that he had watched in a dream.  
He begged and pleaded and stood in the way, but the master moved him with a shout.  
The old man readied his blade before him, determined to have it out.

All through the day the fight had lasted from noon past mid day.  
The battle had left the tavern early and they fought into a valley.  
Sancho chased them the best he could while forcing along Rocinante.  
At last after many hours passed they entered a gothic gate.

"Surrender!" called the old man Quixote, brandishing his beamish blade.  
"Never!" called back the lover Don Juan, defending Quixote's disgrace.  
Alas Don Juan was much younger than Quixote and the old man felt the fatigue.  
He had missed his final slash just now, exhaled, and fell to his knee.

Don Juan laughed, making jests at the futility of Quixote's cause.  
Sancho ran to his dearest master and suggested they flee the loss.  
Quixote refused, and Don Juan, annoyed, raised his victory blade.  
Then all of a sudden a horror began and it struck from a towering grave.

The grave had been to Don Juan's back since Quixote paused and fell.  
Now as the old man looked up to his death he saw the flames of hell.  
The earth and the grave had opened up and the door was the devil's own.  
Sancho moved his master in a flash and Don Juan was pulled in the hole.

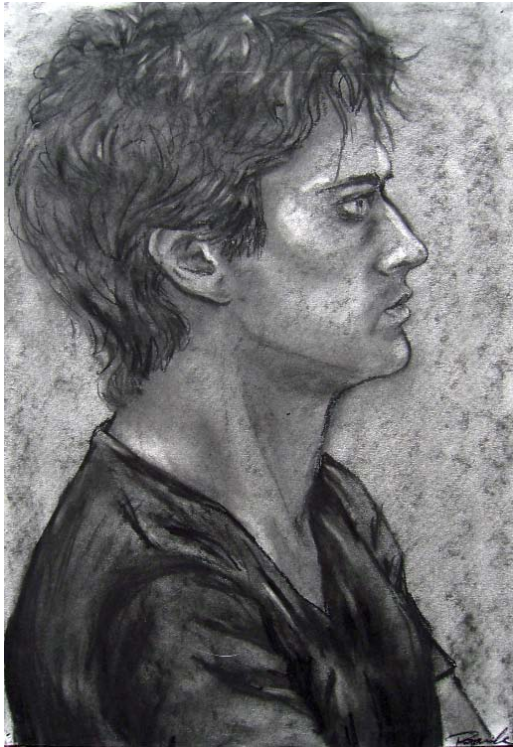
A moment later, in confusion, Quixote looked to his relaxed squire.  
"What force brought this?" asked the master quite lost in the moment and tired.  
"Look at the name, your grace" pointed Sancho. "See the grave, the ghost?"  
"That is Dulcinea's father" said Quixote. "Don Juan should not have boast."

Sancho, a man of proverbs and things, looked out searching the sky.  
He could feel his master's worry near and could feel his asking why.  
Sancho looked then further still into the falling night  
"You can be good when you are bad if you want to in spite."





Self Portrait  
Lindsay Barrick



Ross  
Lindsay Barrick

# Evette's Poem

By Kevin Hagan

The gift within this box  
is one I cannot make  
yet one that only I can give  
and only you can take.

A treasure freely shared  
when grasped 'tween lovers' hands,  
A promise to my love  
bespoke by silvered bands.

The greatest thing I have to give  
Is fleeting and untrue.  
This gift of time I only share with  
you, my love, with you.

# I Exist

By Katie Worthington

I Exist  
In the warmth of the spring sun  
In the petals that carpet my lawn  
In the breeze that caresses my face  
In the memory of our embrace

I Exist  
Despite the ache in my heart  
Despite always being apart  
Despite the ripping of my soul  
Despite no hand to hold

I Exist  
Through the storms of my mind  
Through the sands of time  
Through the pain in my chest  
Through the bittersweet mess

I Exist  
In you  
In everything you do  
In your heart, in your mind  
In your spirit, you will find

I Exist



After Ingres  
Andrea Smith



Tri Collage  
Jordan Lapo

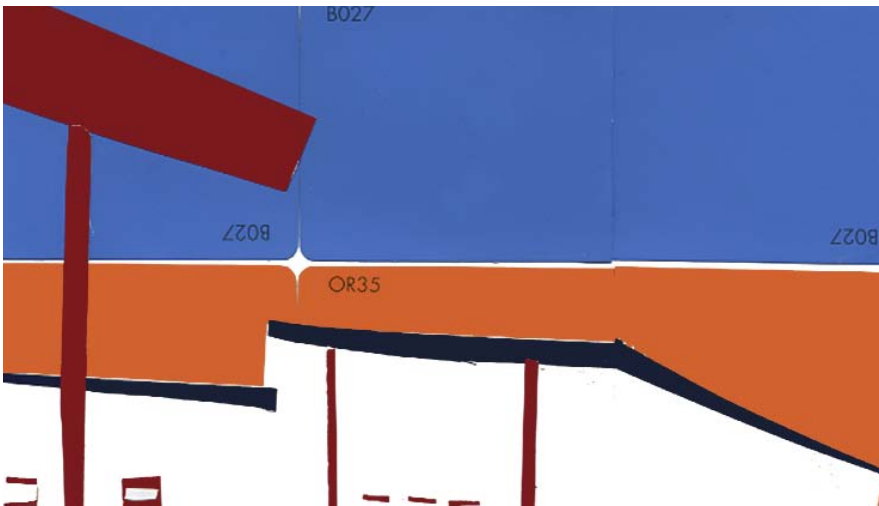
# Just a Name

By Virginia Hendricks

The writings on the wall  
you may think of them as names  
But these writings all tell stories  
not a one of them the same  
    Stories of pain, stories of fear  
    that go much deeper than you or I could know  
    Stories of a place and of a people  
    a land where nightmares grow  
Taken far from their land  
they paid the ultimate price  
Their loyalty to their country  
ultimately took their lives  
    They fought side by side  
    watching each other die  
    Living in muddy waters  
    watching each other cry  
You meekly call them names  
written on a cold stone wall  
Never have I heard a more naive recognition  
never such an idle call  
    Try and understand these names  
    understand those who live  
    Listen to the stories they volunteer  
    realize all they give  
If you can pass idly by  
their honor left unknown  
Ask a stranger crying by this slab  
if their heart they could loan  
    For the writings on this wall  
    you may think of them as names  
    But these writings all tell stories  
    and not a one of them the same



Hannie Watercolors  
Hanna Teague



Gas Station  
Matt Hice

# Morning Buzz

By Karen Bolick

Out of the fog a shrill mechanical sound throbs in my head.  
The sound drones on until finally my hand reaches out,  
braving the cold still air of the bedroom,  
groping for the source...Blindly stretching,  
feeling for the small bumpy plate that, when pressed,  
will give blessed relief from the unwelcome intrusion. Ahhh...bliss.

There it is again; that annoying burr.  
This time, my body screaming in protest,  
I fling back the covers with one hand while silencing the noise with the other.  
Can it possibly be over already?  
The nights are too short; my mind races ahead, my body on autopilot.  
Shuffling across the carpet,  
my bare feet suddenly pressed against the cold of the hardwood...  
My body recoils but is drawn forward of its own volition.

The peace of the darkened rooms envelops me;  
my mind drifts back into the fog  
even as my body continues along its designated path.  
From the darkness comes another sound...  
one – two – three –  
This time my subconscious responds with joy.  
It is time!

The curve of the handle becomes a part of my hand.  
My eyes begin to focus just as the rich brown liquid  
spills from the carafe into my mug.  
My hand automatically reaches for the shaker – three times... that's it.  
The clink of the spoon against the sides of the cup signal the wait is almost over.  
The steam tickles my nose as I lift the cup and sip. Ahhh....  
The welcome nectar begins its magic,  
warming my throat, my chest, my toes – my eyes open  
and I breathe deeply the aroma of morning.

The kids' alarms begin sounding, daylight beginning to peek through the tree line...  
I am ready for it. bzzzzzz



Ethan Portrait  
Denise Kincaid



Self Portrait  
Lorena Cowart

# Social Conscience

By Ross McCachren

War-Zone  
Peace treaties  
Bad men  
Lies to women  
Burnt earth  
Children know best  
Old folk's homes  
Teens in jail  
Wal-Mart clothes  
Unprotected sex  
Poor Americans  
Rich Tribes  
Poison in UPS boxes  
Action without thought  
Revenge  
Stagnant Dreams  
Homeless homeowners  
Floating  
Eyes useless  
Happy in the shadows  
What I know isn't what you know  
Things that matter, take action  
Things that don't, ignore

## The Fifth Day of June

By Jan Jackman

I walk through the garden alone in my thoughts  
Not a care in the world for uncast lots  
I watch the fine roses climb up the wall  
And wonder, do they shatter or break when they fall?

In a bed of roses on the fifth day of June  
With a heart so young given away too soon,  
But it wouldn't matter for I'd give it again  
For all these fine roses and the brief thrill of sin.

Sacred and haunting are the songs in my mind,  
A rocky beginning grown sweeter with time.  
Daydreams and real life get tangled so tight  
I'll go to my garden; do you love me tonight?

Pretend and forget is what I do best.  
Happily gaining and losing my rest.  
I dance in the silence to a make believe tune  
Among the roses on the fifth day of June.





# The Most

By Dustin Bass

I love jazz.  
There isn't much more to it.  
From the roll of a minor chord  
To a saxophone chorus.

It must be a sad world  
If one hasn't heard swing  
Kansas City, Chicago,  
Mecca for hungry brains

Music is a story  
With people and tales.  
Jazz is the Roman Empire  
Of perfect sound.

Satchmo and Bix  
Who is the most dog?  
Duke and the Count  
Bring the girls on.

# What Happens to Me?

By Katie Worthington

What happens to me?  
When I was you  
And you were me  
And we were one  
But now you're gone.  
What becomes of me?  
When I was free  
And you were free  
And we believed  
But now we cease.  
What happened to you?  
When I thought we were strong  
Were you already gone?  
Had we ceased to exist?  
Taste the bittersweet mist.  
Where do we go from here?  
No longer side by side  
No longer mesmerized  
No longer intertwined  
No longer yours and mine.  
What am I supposed to do?  
When morning comes  
And you're still gone.  
When I gave you all  
And now possess none.



Ollies Plum  
Richard Aultman



Rosasharn's Promise Land  
Nancy Posey

# Untitled

By Billy Kenworthy

There is a road,

Between the Dark  
And the Dawn I know.

**A**nd if you go, no one may follow

“That path is for your feet alone.”  
And you’ll see it’s no simple pathway, but if you go

**It  
Will**

## Take You Home.

And if you should walk  
Then you will see  
through the doorway

**That WE are all one** you can’t go back. You’ve seen the Beauty.

**WE ARE EVERYTHING AND NOTHING ALL AT ONCE,**

There is no duality, only what we wish to be.

**We** CREATE our experience, and that is all there is.

So please give love, it’s all a circle, Bask in the Beauty that is your soul.



One  
Andrea Smith



Ne Kurit'  
Miranda Treat Beard

# Under the Rug

By Nathan Anderson

The first time I saw it, I thought I was crazy,  
And I felt kind of awkward all day.  
I looked over my shoulder a lot, and squinted at carpet patterns.  
The second time was more frightening  
Because it moved so slowly.  
I think it was taunting me; if I can catch it is it real?  
The third time ruined me for a day.  
I walked around work as a man desperate for certainty,  
beginning questions and never finishing them.  
The fourth time I screamed at it for answers.  
By now I am fired;  
I only walk on the hard floors in my home.  
The fifth time I wanted to kill it,  
And I dove from the linoleum in my bathroom  
into the hallway, naked with my machete.  
The sixth time it wanted to kill me.  
My wounds were worse than expected,  
and I lay now on a blood stained carpet.  
The last time I ever saw the monster,  
He spoke;  
he said that I was right the first time.

I think that's hilarious.



Bubbly Cube  
Rebekah Gibson Mace



Fading Away  
Charity Hudspeth

# Rocks

By M. Brent Tomberlin, II

Building one side – I stopped to take a breath  
Noticing the beads of water dropping off my face  
As a rain shower slowly soaks the ground

I am halfway through – half way to completion  
It seems that I have always been building one of these walls

Covering these rocks layer by layer with a mixture of sand and clay  
I'm wondering how long this will take  
For, these rocks are a work in progress

Building these walls – one side, and then, another  
Fills me with memories of my own spirit  
With each heave – I cast more of myself into different stages – different orders

The biggest rock – I place in the middle of the north wall  
It reminds me of my father – holding up and bearing from the center  
Close by, a smaller stone joins it – but no less significant  
They seem to work together to add strength to the wall  
That stone reminds me of my mother's guiding hand

If I stack these pieces too quickly – I may be done too soon  
No one, including me – wants this  
Life, in memory, always marches too soon  
Forward and then, backward

Once back to work – I couple the north and west walls  
These rocks must be placed carefully to provide symmetry and balance  
Much like a sister's love

I put my energies into stacking these stones – making sure to get the thick ones  
On the bottom  
The varied layers in these stones reminds me that brothers and sisters can all  
Be different while contributing so much to the whole

In the heat of the glaring sun – I turn southward square  
I notice a stone that looks sweet and soft – there is a special sheen to it  
Like grandmother's polished jewelry – it is just as beautiful as she was  
I had not seen this shine before – but now it adds so much

Underneath this wall – I have placed grandfather rocks  
Sixteen inches apart on the southeast side – for support  
I know this part of the wall will never bend or fill with water  
Only to freeze and expand in the winter

All these stones are solid rocks in the wall – accompanied by lesser stones  
But no less important – they just do not stand out as much

Finishing this side, I corner west and south  
The sunset that crosses the stones almost sets them afire  
There is a luster here all its own



Here, I put the stones in that my wife picked out over the last weeks

In the last days, I have noticed that these stones have been baked as yeast rolls  
In a hot oven – they are almost golden  
There is an energy at this spot that is deeper than the laws of physics and as old as  
time

Years from now, I will come back to look at the stones in this courtyard  
And have memories to tell them - memories I am anticipating, but still waiting for

I have yet to place several rocks for my son  
Like additions to the south and east walls – he will be here in months  
Maybe I will be done with these finishing walls by then

Here, in this place, is the mortar of my life  
In the years ahead, most of the mortar and the sand will outlive me  
Because I am made of dirt and clay

And someone else must come along to tend and keep it upright  
To trim the cherry tree that I will plant in the fall along the edge of a corner  
And to love the parts of the wall that will crumble slowly

I am wondering who that will be?

I hope they find a good place to remember.

# Roses on the Motel Bed

By Matt McGuire

You worked hard to make sure that no one ever knew who you really were.  
Six days a week and six cold blue ribbons a night  
kept the demons away  
and the jackals off the front lawn.  
Mother's bone thin red dishpan hands,  
nimble from secretarial work  
and milk money embroidery,  
ran rough through your strawberry hair.  
You sat in grim repose,  
sucking on your solution  
and us two round your ankles,  
chaps and stirrups  
in wide-eyed anticipation of a thunderbolt  
or an affirmation from your Olympian refuge.

But those six days turned into four,  
then three,  
and instead of a half-dozen Pabst's  
and The Troggs in your drag machine,  
it became eighteen wheels, Fortune Brand,  
California fast gak  
and a hungering  
for any road that ran away from a life of responsibility  
and the eye teeth of boredom.

Poverty of every shade,  
other women, extra time,  
and double nickels on the dime  
put the bullet in a doomed marriage.

And I remember clearly, Daddy,  
as you walked away from us  
in your torn Levis and your immeasurable boots,  
and my hot baby tears ran down my cheeks  
as I clutched the dingy, fly-beaten screen door  
and pleaded with you not to go,  
to stay, forever,  
to take me with you wherever it was you were going that was more important than me,  
what you said.

Son, someday you'll understand, and you can come with me.

I didn't understand then, but I sure as hell do now.  
I'm still a cowboy.  
I've been all the places you went  
except for Vietnam and Chicago  
and drank the dust of the road  
and seen more tears fall on my behalf  
than the savior.  
What I don't understand  
is why being a cowboy is a life sentence,  
and how to silence the entreaties of that faceless whore  
who waits on every tattered barstool  
from Wilmington to Barstow,  
because I still can't measure up,  
and I'm bone tired  
of chasing Willie Nelson's refrain,  
your fading exhaust  
and your futile, hammer down gunslinger,  
and roses on the motel bed dynasty.



Untitled  
Lorena Cowart



Alvacado Nut  
Jamila Simmons

# Sergei's Day

By Nathan Anderson

Sergei forced himself awake for the third time. He was not going to have that dream again. Sitting upright in the devil's darkness, he spoke softly to himself the words that he had so carefully crafted. As he lowered himself back into his tomb, he choked back what would produce diluvian results unmitigated. Sergei always thought about them in the silence. There was never any silence.

The alarm clock was old, and not any more pleasant than a fire alarm. He got up, as always, with his heart encumbered by disdain for the clock, and anxiety for the day. There were no mirrors in the apartment, but Sergei didn't shave anyway. When his beard became too long, he simply grabbed it under his chin and cut off what was below his hand with shears. He moved with no sound as you might expect from a man of no obvious substance, and no perceivable mass. Change your clothes Sergei, brush your teeth, drink your coffee, eat your puny recompense of chicken eggs with pork fat, leave your home Sergei, it's time to work your hands and feet again.

He always walks to work; it's the perpetual consequence for one's lack of vehicular transport, and Sergei has not tried the bus since the incident. As he walked in his uncomfortable boots over frozen and brittle earth the consistency of asphalt, he noticed the bus pass him in the opposite direction. Sergei spat. His thick saliva, tinged with cheap coffee and thick with grease, began to freeze when it contacted the landscape. Sergei wiped his mouth and tripped with his left toe over a loose piece of rock. He looked around with a wild look in his eyes for a moment. Nobody laughing at him. Nobody notices. The closer he comes to the job site, the more he yearns for his warm bedding and his straw mattress. Those pillows so threadbare, and their promise of headache, beckoned to him. If the time to sleep were morning to afternoon, I should have no problems in this world. Sergei hadn't slept without dreaming since his mother was alive. Now Sergei has stopped walking, and he is momentarily distracted by a pigeon, resting on the pinnacle of a towering spruce. Is it their supposed freedom that attracts such a gaze? Sergei spends a lifetime peering at the bird; and then it flies away.

The rest of the walk marks the first time in several months that Sergei has taken the quick way to the job site. Perhaps he spent too long enjoying the luxury of his breakfast, or could he have watched the pigeon for this long? At any rate, he needed to hurry, or the foreman would confront him. He made his way through a crowded market street before ducking down a concealed alleyway of cobblestone and cobwebs; he couldn't bear to see her this morning. Ah yes, there is a woman that occupies Sergei's thoughts; when he is not careful, she dances right up to his nose and then disappears. A lot of good it would do me anyway. No, I should get to work on time.

He finally arrives at the site and punches the clock. Exactly 7am. He nearly forgets himself and is proud of his ability to arrive in such a timely fashion. Scowling facially and beaming inside, he slips away through the cracks in the workforce to his post and starts to mix mortar. He had been working this site for almost a year now, and every day that he arrived it looked the same. Bigger, yes, and closer to a finished library, but the same in Sergei's cloudy eyes. He worked without a sound for half of the day, mixing, spreading, stacking and repeating; then it was lunchtime. He took the slice of bread out of his pocket and chewed while he thought. This damn French bread! Why do they think we all want to be French!? If they had it their way I would be forced to shave my beard as well! And perhaps speak a different language. I am already building their library so they can fill it with English, German and French! Satisfied that he had made his point, he returned to his station. The other workers knew that attempts to communicate with Sergei were fruitless, and yet somebody came asking for a trowel. Sergei's face broke into a type of pained grimace, one corner of his mouth flicked upward for a split second, and he choked on his tongue as he handed over the tool. Why don't they just take it and tell me! Do they think I will deny them assistance? We are co-workers. After all, I am not so difficult to reason with. He stood up and decided to inform his workmates that they no longer needed to ask for such petty things as long as they just tell him what they are using and bring it back in a timely manner. As he walked among the skeletal mass of brick and iron, his mind traveled

elsewhere, and he found himself being stared at by three men, one of them looking confused and holding the trowel in an outstretched hand.

“No!”

The men were shocked, they had never heard him speak, much less shout.

“No,” he repeated, looking a bit shocked himself. He opened his mouth to explain that he had only come to express his friendship and that men such as these, his co-workers that is, should not have to ask a man such as him, a fellow co-worker, for tools as long as they just tell him how long they need them for.

“Here you can have it back, I am done with it.”

Sergei took the trowel and made a face as a fish out of water might. He then closed his mouth and breathed through his nose on the way back to his solitude. At 7 pm the bell rang, and Sergei had already cleared up his work area. He moved to the clock and then set about walking back to his apartment in the darkness, clandestine at last.

The snow fell lightly at first, and by the time he reached the doorstep his beard was white like Tolstoy’s had been. When he brushed the snow away much of it looked the same. Now came Sergei’s least favorite time of the day. It is far too cold to leave the bed, and it is far too early to sleep. The only thing left to do now is think. Think about how today was like every other day. Think about how today was so drastically different from every other day. Think about how he could have spoken to those men, they are his co-workers after all, what are their names? Think about the girl at the market stall, what is her name? Think and dream Sergei, you will not sleep for long.

# Underlake

By Brett Aaron Smith

Kassidy sprinted out of the cabin like a wolf after prey. The screen door, now behind her, cracked against the wooden wall then quickly swung shut. She wanted to leave there as fast as she could. What better way than to do it like a wolf?

She stopped at a tree to lean on and catch her breath. The screen door cracked against the wood again and a younger boy came running out behind her. By the time he reached her, she had caught her breath. For minutes, neither said anything... It was as if silence had descended on them like a prison cell. They were trapped until Alec sarcastically spoke: "Let's go check out this awesome lake."

Kassidy gave a sigh and threw her hands up, "why not, let's go." She followed her brother down the hill path to the lake. He ran while she walked holding her cell-phone in the air trying to get signal. Alec darted past the beach and out to the end of an old wooden dock the width of a typical sidewalk that extended to the edge of the shallows. Kassidy joined him but halted half way down.

"There's no signal, this place is so dumb," she said while slapping her phone shut and driving it back into her pocket.

"At least it's not as dumb as you are."

"You're so charming."

"Only for you."

"I can't believe this shit." She cursed under her breath as she turned and looked to her left towards the sky and noticed black clouds nearing them. They were coming from the east as if to chase the sun down. A spear of white lightning flew across the cloud that broke into four others before quickly disappearing. A quiet bellow of thunder followed the light show. Thunderstorms had always excited her. Her body shivered at the sight.

"What, scared of storms? Do I have to look out for you now?"

Kassidy sighed. "Shut it Alec, you know I love them." She sat down on the side of the pier and let her feet dangle close to the water; she looked to the right and watched her brother attempt at skipping stones across the lake.

This was awful. After five years of divorce, their "mom" suddenly wanted to see them again. The only reason Kassidy came is because Alec was forced to and her dad asked her to. That bothered her, the whole reason they split was because the "bitch" tried to control their dad and all his money for her own gain. She supposed that's what he got for being a successful author. He had gotten fed up, took them, and left their mom. It wasn't easy; he had thought they loved each other. All she wanted from the settlement was money. He happily gave it to her for it all to be over.

Her gaze traveled to the rocky and jagged hills on the opposite shore. The clouds had come closer, covering half of the hills. It was as if the world had been split down the middle into two separate ones, one good and one evil. However, she couldn't decide which was which. Was it the calming and pink colored dusk that was evil? Or was it the awesome thunderstorm moving in that started her heart like a defibrillator?

She cut the hills clean from the ground that held them. She brought them out over the water where they hovered while she got them centered best she could, then lowered them slowly into the water. Large waves crested from where the hills entered the lake and crashed onto the shore, sand blew from its settled beach further up the slope behind her.

The surge swarmed over the pier but Kassidy held her ground. Soon the hills reached the bottom of the lake and halted with their jagged peaks showing above the water. But Kassidy wasn't satisfied, they had to go deeper, completely submerged! So she pushed the bottom of the lake down, way down, so far that light could not reach the underwater hills.

At first, she thought maybe a lack of light could be a problem, but that quickly left her concerns; she made the rocky formations home to special kinds of gems that were all different sorts of colors. Blues, greens, reds, etc, lit up the beautiful picture of all the majestic homes, which looked like twisted up and molded forms of smooth stone, cut out from centuries of water erosion.

This world was Underlake.

Of course, where there were homes, there were people too. These beings looked very human, somewhat pale skin from a lack of sun, but otherwise typical except for a few fish

like characteristics. In the sides of their necks just under each ear, were tiny sets of gills, toes and fingers were webbed for easier swimming, and fins grew from the outward sides of both forearms and calves for extra glide.

Suddenly, a burst of warm air hit Cassidy in the face breaking her concentration. Alec had belched on her. Away from the rest of the world they didn't get caught up in the hectic shuffle of everyday life. There were no such things as school and chores, everyone just swam and played all day with no cares.

"That was so gross!" Cassidy screamed at him. She slapped him across the face swiftly, almost as if her hand had been waiting for the belch. Alec grasped his face and stepped back.

"What'd you do that for?" He yelled.

"I was off in my own world Alec. I don't want to think about this place. I don't want to be here. I want to pretend like everything is fine. So just leave me alone and go back to your rock skipping. Stupid nine year old brats!" She turned her back to him and crossed her arms.

"Dumb fourteen year old girls!" he said with a snuffle in his voice. Cassidy turned around and noticed tears starting to come out of his eyes. She hadn't meant to upset him that badly; they were in the same situation. "So was that one of your retarded fantasies again?"

"They're not retarded. It's called having an imagination you brainless little gnome, something you missed in the gene pool. At least I can be somewhere else, wherever I want, while you just throw rocks at the water."

"It's not like I wanna be here either. Mom took away my Game Boy." He looked down at his feet and drug his right heel across the dock.

"Well, if you knew how to use your imagination you could be part of a video game right now," Cassidy replied

"Okay, Ms. Imagination, show me how."

"No way, you can figure it out on your own."

"C'mon, please?" he begged, clapping his hands together.

Kassidy hesitated a moment. He could be so annoying sometimes, but he was her little brother, and she felt terrible that she made him cry. "Fine, let me explain where we are."

"Really, you mean it?"

"Yes, I really mean it."

"Alright!"

Kassidy explained everything best she could. "How about you be the prince?"

"No. Princes don't do anything cool. Can I be a knight or something? That would be so awesome. I could like, ride on a seahorse!"

"Sorry kiddo, no sea horses here, it's a lake." Alec let out a disappointed grunt.

Kassidy still felt bad; she didn't want to upset her brother that much. "But sea horses don't matter! You're the fastest swimmer in the kingdom and the head of the royal guard. Right now, you're on an important mission."

They were now swimming on the edge of Underlake, outside of a giant cave opening in the lake wall. Alec floated at Cassidy's right.

"You're dressed in a very light, silver suit of aqua dynamic armor. Its metal plates protect you as well as allow you to swim like you're wearing nothing. You have a long spear used to fight your enemies. Let me tell you about our mission..."

"Hey Cassidy," interrupted Alec, "Instead of a spear, can I have a sword that looks like a mutated fish fin with spikes coming out of the front?" He spoke with enthusiasm in his voice bringing them both back to reality. "And, and, can I have like, a propeller on my back that lets me swim even faster?"

Kassidy smiled and rolled her eyes at him. At least he was learning to be creative. "Tell you what little bro; you can have a fish fin sword but no spikes. And as for that propeller, try to think of something more... magical."

"Magical?"

"Yeah. What can push, or pull you faster that isn't similar to real world technology, it can be anything.

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Okay." He threw stones at the water while he thought. Cassidy waited. She thought it was funny she was teaching a little kid how to imagine.

“I got it!”

“Whatcha got?”

“How about I have a magic blue gem that lets me make currents. That way, I can make us both go faster and I can push bad guys away.”

“Alec, that’s great! Now you’re getting the idea.” She felt proud.

“Awesome! I came up with it thanks to school, we’ve been learning about the ocean in class. Now, what are we gonna fight?”

“Don’t worry about that, I’ve already come up with a villain, I’ll tell you back in Underlake. I’m dressed in a silky and flowing white dress. I use a non-violent magic that does not harm my enemies, but stops them easily. My name is Princess Kella.”

“If you get a cool name, so do I.” Alec quickly snapped one out. “I’m Captain Lynch.” Kassydy let her brother have it and continued “After a planning session and short travel, Princess Kella, accompanied by her loyal guardian, Captain Lynch, floated outside the entrance to the wicked cave...” They returned to their watery world.

“This is it Captain, inside somewhere is our enemy; the sorceress Vexa. She has developed the power to combine living beings with anything she so desires, and has used those wretched creations to attack our home. I will use a shockwave of my paralyzing magic to stop her creatures from attacking us while you deliver the final blow.”

“Alright, let’s do this.” He swam forward.

“Captain, above you!”

He looked up to see a dislodged rock falling slowly towards him, he quickly dodged to his right and it missed him. “Thanks for the warning.”

“No problem, but it will only get harder from here.”

“Definitely. Wait, Kella, what’s that behind you?”

“What do you mean?”

“That rock that just missed my head, it floated up behind you.”

“Alec, what are you talking about?”

“It’s changing; it’s one of Vexa’s minions! She combined a piranha with rock!

“But there aren’t any piranhas around here.”

“She got it from somewhere, just look behind you at its um... mad and yellowish eyes. See its single fin on the left and how its body is like one large rock? It barely has a tailfin, jeez it’s so big! Its mouth is like, like... a cave opening with nasty stalagmites and stalactites for teeth. Look out!”

She turned around and was staring at the monstrous fish lit by the yellowish glow of its eyes. Its mouth opened wide and expelled the bones of many creatures. It tried to swallow the princess whole, but before it could shut its mouth Lynch used his current ability and pushed her to the side.

“Captain, kill it!”

“No need to tell me that.” He launched himself towards it and stabbed his fin sword into its left eye, expelling a nasty green and yellow colored substance out of it that floated to the surface. It raged and chased after its prey. Lynch tried to get away with a current pushing him, but it proved to be faster than it looked.

“Kella, stop it with a shockwave!”

“I can’t, I have to save my energy for later.”

“Can you do anything? This is too much for my gem to handle.”

“Lead it towards me; I’ll have to get a single bolt on it”

“Understood.” He jettisoned towards Kella, just about to slam through the spell-readied girl when he used every bit of his gem he could and swerved up. “Now!”

She shot a white bolt of energy at her enemy and it stopped right in place surrounded by a white light. “Deliver your final blow Captain, it won’t hold long.”

“On it.” Instantly he torpedoed at it from above. “Steel beats rock you freaky fish!”

The Princess sighed at the bad dialogue, but was less delighted at the tink of metal.

“What was that Captain?”

“My sword didn’t go through.” The fish started to shake. “It’s about to break out, how do I kill this thing?”

Kella figured it out quick. “Hurry, stab it inside its mouth!”

“Roger!” He swam from the top along the surface of the fish as the spell started to wear off, he made it inside just as it shut its mouth.

“No, really, you’re dead.” He stabbed upwards into its flesh and then slashed back down. The fish opened its mouth wide in pain and he swam out. Once escaped from the



innards, Lynch joined Kella at her side and they watched as the rock fish flailed about until it stopped and floated to the bottom.

“We did it Princess, we beat it.”

“Yes we did, but we can’t rejoice, we must confront Vexa.” She began her swim into the cave.

A loud blast of thunder shook them from Underlake. They returned to the dock in pouring rain.

“Oh no, we forgot about the storm!”

“C’mon!” Alec said. “Let’s get back to the cabin. Last one there is a rock fish.” He ran off up the hill towards the cabin.

“You’re not beating me Lynch, I might just be a bit faster than you!” She chased him up the hill to the cabin. They made it up the steps and onto the porch under the overhang, Alec made it ahead of Cassidy. The two stopped on the porch, breathing heavily. Cassidy was bent over with her hands on her knees. “Well Lynch... looks like you are... the fastest swimmer... in the kingdom.” Cassidy said through broken speech.

“You’ll need to practice lots to beat me Princess!” Alec said, standing up tall and proud, pointing at his chest with his right thumb.

Kassidy laughed. “Reality sucks.”

“Yeah, it does!”

“But I guess we have to deal with the real Vexa now huh?” She pointed towards the door behind her.

“Do you think Lynch and Kella could beat her?”

“I think so, but it’s going to take awhile, good stories take time to write.

“That’s what dad always says.”

“For now, let’s go inside and quit complaining, it’s only a weekend.”

“Right behind you.”

“The courageous Princess and the venerable Captain entered the lair...”

# Mary's Parting Gift

By Jan Jackman

I rest my head in a wooly skirt  
That smells of wood perfume.  
The carriage seems is draped in blue  
And plays a funeral tune.

Mary, I cry and strengthen my grasp  
Not willing to let go.  
Why should you choose to leave me now  
With so much left to know?

Around me are arms I cannot see  
Their grip impressive still.  
Who says that I chose to leave you?  
It's God's choice, not my will.

I cling to her tightly 'round her waist  
With tears of grief to shed.  
I pray that I might hold her still  
Without my fear and dread.

But heaven has opened its mighty gates  
And invites Mary inside,  
Which leaves me to sit on the ground  
And deny the tears I've cried.

All I have left is a satin box  
Wrapped in ribbon so blue  
I open it up and hear her voice,  
I'm not crying, why should you?



Self Portrait in Black and White  
Kary Sanders



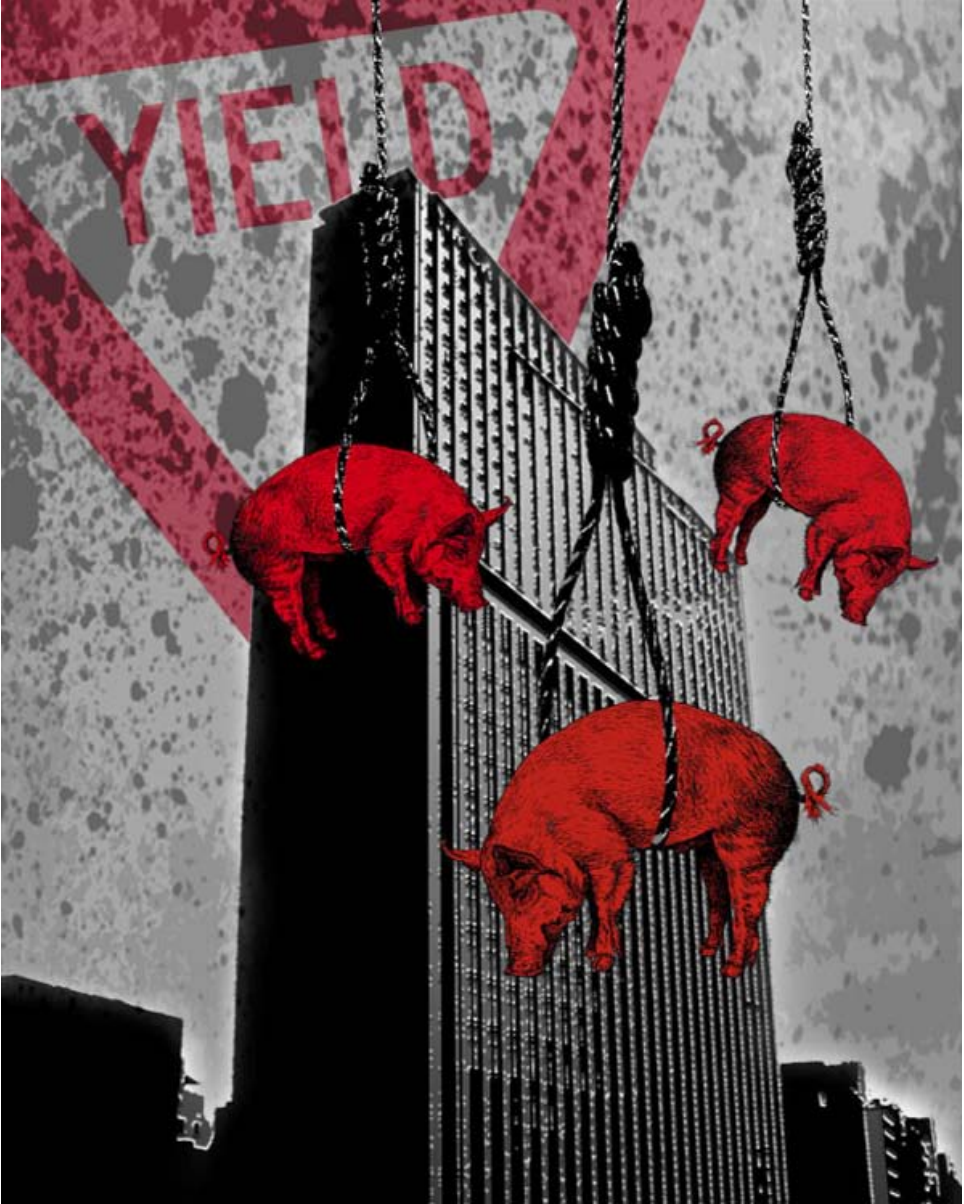
Self Portrait with Paper  
David Jones



Blur Self Portrait  
Elizabeth Lowe



Self Portrait  
Kyle Wilkinson



Yield  
David Obiso



Irish Creek  
Debbie Mitchell



**Caldwell Community College  
and Technical Institute**

2855 Hickory Boulevard  
Hudson, North Carolina 28638

828.726.2200, 264.7670

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