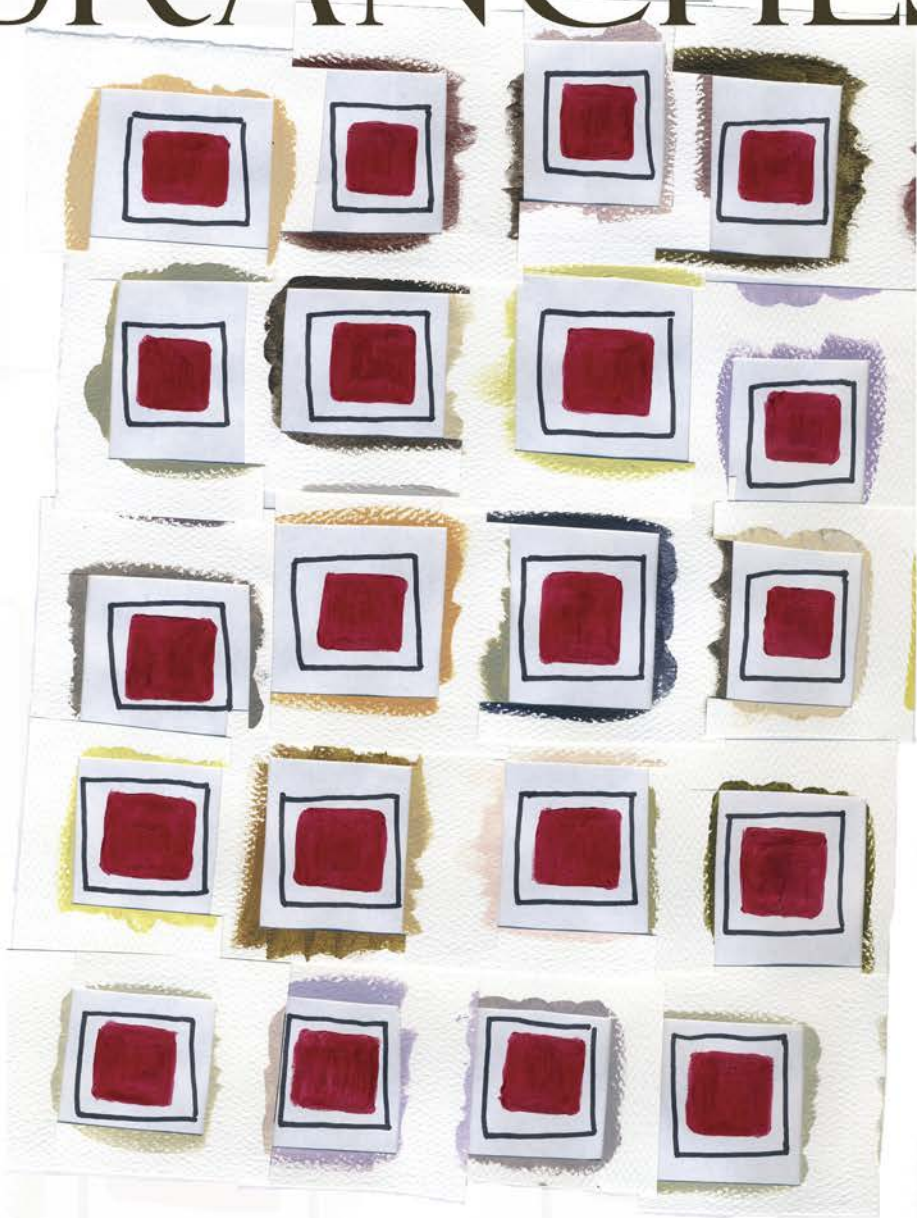


BRANCHES



Volume Eighteen



Shannon Lang
Grid 010
Acrylic, Collage

Acknowledgements

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Special Thanks:

Camille Annas
Laura Bokus Benton
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Margaret Hampson
Jane Harrison
Holly Korta
Heather Duncan Pack
Wyatt Reynolds
Edward Terry
Learning Resource Center

Funding and other support for *Branches* was provided by the CCC&TI Foundation, the College Transfer Division and the Department of Fine Arts, English and Communication, Humanities, Social Science and Physical Education.

To view previous editions of *Branches* or to find out more information about submitting works of art or literature to the 19th edition of *Branches*, please visit our website at www.cccti.edu/branches.

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Joe Hollar
Self Portrait
Intaglio Print

Awarded first place by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.
(2-D Category)

Enough Time

By Dustin Bass

This story tied for first place.

It was packed again. The counter windows were all open and fifteen lines of people stood waiting for their turn. The sun was shining brilliantly through the skylight and Benjamin Smith through squinted eyes made out a bird tracing the nose of a nearby cloud.

Benjamin hated long lines. They were always long in the morning. He preferred the evening lines which were much shorter, and for that matter, nonexistent on most days. He would have preferred the evening, but he simply didn't have enough time.

The walls were an immaculate white, as was the floor. Their porcelain memories haunted Benjamin now as he saw them congested with the morning crowd. Their dirty feet were already marking up the thing with endless tracks of mud and scuffs. It would need to be mopped, and the floors were always mopped before the evening. Yes, the evening where there would only be one line waiting for him and only one window open. It was his window. It was his line. It was his floor.

In the evening, the skylight was always a crimson swipe across a tangerine hue sprayed in amongst the gilded noses of the clouds, which were his too.

Most importantly, though, it was the custodian who was his. Yes, she was a short blonde, full in all the right places, and with personality to spare. She was always eagerly awaiting for his return behind her little counter window. She would greet him cheerfully. Her pearly white teeth and snug uniform were like those floors he so adored, and her eyes were a cool you down blue which he warmly desired. She would be his, he thought, if only he had enough time.

Today's custodian would not be his. It would be a new custodian; a morning custodian. It would not be his evening fantasy standing confidently with her chest puffed out smiling ever so lonely across a broad sea of alabaster which he so adored.

He looked absent mindedly at his watch without noting the time and then around the room to his company. His company was not the company he would have chosen if he had the option of doing so. No, this was the company of someone else. This was someone else's morning company.

They were young and old, sick and robust, screaming and quiet. Their uniforms were dirty. That is they were mostly dirty and he could spot the few clean ones in the crowd as the lines slipped ever near the little windows. Those clean shirts were like brilliant stars amongst a dingy sea of filth. He was one of these brilliant stars, and he bathed in its glory.

Being a star troubled him though. When at last he came to the window and left through the turnstile behind the great herd of morning people would the little gate muck up his uniform? Would he be one of the morning people then? Is this how all morning people came to be morning people? Maybe they would keep their uniforms cleaner if they only had enough time.

His quiet musings had shortened the line and the shuffle of feet in front of him came ever closer to the little window. He looked around and saw the morning people digging in their dirty pockets for their little green cards and pulling them out they

hurried over them with obsessive little fingers counting the tiny punched out squares. Benjamin never had to worry about such things. He kept up with his cards. Evening people, even temporary morning ones, never forgot their cards.

The squat morning person in front of him came to the counter. He could see the thin custodian in the window. He seemed to be a sickly man with thinning black hair slicked back with some kind of diluted grease. He was a pale man too, but it was a different kind of pale from the floor. It was a sickly pale. Maybe he wouldn't be so pale if he had more time.

Benjamin heard the old familiar punch and wind in front of him and the stocky morning person in his dirty uniform hurried off to the turnstile where his swinging belly swiped the bars some earthen tone before his contemptuous mind.

Benjamin stepped up to the counter.

“Name?”

“Benjamin Smith”

“How much?”

“Two days worth. More tomorrow.”

“Card please.”

Benjamin slipped his hand into his pocket fishing out a little rectangle of green. He passed it over to the custodian and he looked toward the turnstile and said “I'll never understand why people can't wash their clothes.”

The pale man behind the counter looked up and said, “I'm sorry sir, but this card is empty.” Benjamin whipped his head around to the small black eyes of the custodian. “Empty? Are you sure?” he asked. “It should be full.”

The custodian lifted the card revealing dozens of little holes. The rays of the skylight passed through them tattooing his lapel. “I'm sure. See? There is nothing left. Do you have another one with you?”

Benjamin felt around in his pockets “No, I must have accidentally grabbed the wrong one by mistake. I can run back and get it.”

The custodian smiled weakly and asked, “Are you going to have enough time?”

Benjamin looked at his little wrist watch with the numbers counting down. There was a minute left. In a panic stricken voice, he screamed, “No! Please, I have two days at home! I have another five on the way!”

The custodian's eyes traced over his own sour smile and the pale man turned his head to a microphone resting near his shoulder. He pressed a button and spoke into it. “Out of time,” he said.

Benjamin grabbed hold of the counter and pleaded “Please, I can run right back. I've got two whole days! I've got five on the way!” The custodian through sleepy eyes blinked with one and then the other. Through thin indifferent lips he muttered softly, “I'm sorry sir.” Benjamin lunged forward, tugging at the pale man's suit “They're coming for me! Just let me go! I can get you all the time in the world!” The custodian sighed weakly and peeked at the mic for a moment. “Please sir, let go. You'll soil my jacket.”

Benjamin, aghast, let go of the little man and took a step back. He could hear them now. There were the heavy foot falls of the tall boys. It was too late. He turned to run, but only ran into another line where the people pulled away from him as he fell to the floor with a scream. The tall boys picked him up and started carrying him toward the turnstile. Benjamin kicked and called trying desperately to escape. When the tall boys came to the turnstile, the tainted thing rolled off his uniform drawing a long irregular streak of brown across his chest. Looking down to see the thing, he broke his nose against the metal bar and his head bounced off it with a long disjunctive moan echoing off the fresh spill on the dirty, dirty floor.

A moment later he was gone, and the big numberless clock above the counter windows ticked silently on into the night.



Zachary David Smith-Johnson

Untitled

River Stone, Steel, Glass

Awarded first place by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.
(3-D Category)



Remodeling

By Taylor Brown

This story tied for first place.

“... and she loved a boy very, very much -- even more than she loved herself.”

— Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*

You watched as he walked from one room to the next, slept in your bedroom, ate in your kitchen, and lounged in your study. He lit the fire place to keep you warm in the colder months, and he opened every window to cool you in the warmer ones. When you fell apart, he repaired your broken pieces. When you stood strong, his callused hands offered further support. You were his home, and he loved you for that.

Only one thing about him bothers you. He leaves. Every day he leaves your painted walls behind him. He walks out your door and down your sturdy steps. He always locks you, key under the handle, but not once does he look back. You know he cares, but it still hurts to see him go. There is no way of telling what he does while away, other than his clothing in the morning and his smell upon returning.

He leaves in black slacks, a white shirt, black tie, and a black jacket. His dress is comforting. He has a good job and supports you, but the evening is what makes your nerves shake. His arrival time constantly varies. Sometimes he walks in with the smell of toner and ink cartridges still clinging to his hands, but other times it is as if he takes off his watch and loses it among his pocket contents. He smells cheap when he opens your door. Clouds of cigarette smoke and whiskey breath welcome themselves to stay the night. They share your bed and he passes out no sooner than his head hits a pillow.

You don't like this side of him. However, you overlook these nights because you love him. Is that not love, accepting his faults just the same as his virtues? Besides, he always washes your sheets the morning after a filthy night. You don't have to tell him; he just knows.

Lately, it's harder to ignore. Some of his nights don't end, and when he does return to your walls, he smells sweet. His normal musky odor has been replaced by sweeter scents. Perfume overpowers your vents and laces his dirty laundry. Occasionally, his white collars are stained red with marks of lust.

You think, maybe he goes to the gentlemen's club with co-workers. That would make sense. You accept this as another dirty habit. Those girls mean nothing to him. You still think of him as a good person. Even if he does spend a few extra hours away, he still comes back. He always comes back to light your fireplace and open your windows.

He has been gone for a week. He took a suitcase and locked your door. Dust tries to fill his presence. There is a fine coating on your kitchen counter and a slightly thicker one in his favorite chair. Your bed has remained the same, no ruffles in the sheets or head-sized divots in the pillows. You miss him. He left no note, but you expect him home soon. The suitcase wasn't that big. He will run out of shirts soon. Then he will have to come back and open your closet. You have everything he needs. He will have to come back soon.

He does come back, just as you wanted. Now he will remove the film of dust that covers you from floor to ceiling. He will open your closet, and remove the rust from the pipe under the kitchen sink. He does all of these things and more, but he is not alone. He has been followed through your halls by a young woman. She is beautiful. Midnight-black hair falls around her face and brushes her shoulders. Her eyes are a

dark brown, that gaze with endless depth. You watch as she tip-toes, barefooted on your hardwood floor, ivory on oak. Her dainty hands run through his hair as they sit in your study. They do not study.

You get jealous. Your shingles begin to fall from your roof. He fetches a ladder to fix them. Your plan has worked. It is just like it used to be. You are together, but when he is finished, she calls him back with a cold beer. Your bedroom door scrapes the floor when opened and closed. He remounts it, and you are happy to feel his hands. They are not as callused as you remember, but they are still his hands. Later, she grabs those hands and pulls him to the bedroom for a movie. Your paint peels from bathroom walls, and he spends a weekend with you. It is the best two days you have had in a while. Monday morning, she runs water and pulls him behind the shower curtain to “show him something.” Your plan has failed miserably.

Months later, you overhear news of a wedding, but it is muffled under an argument. She cannot stand you any longer. She talks about how she wishes for a new house, a bigger house, a house that does not fall apart. By pulling him closer, you have driven him away. The argument lasts for days, and you do your best to hide squeaky floorboards and cracks in the cabinets, but she finds them.

After a couple days, the decision is made. You are heartbroken. They plan the wedding, but do not plan to be wed here. Your kitchen is full of different cake flavors. Your study contains stacks of papers, each paper an invitation, printed in a different letterhead. You see him in a rented tuxedo, and he looks everything but rented. You also see her in a marvelous white dress, not cream or eggshell, but white. They set the date, and soon after final arrangements are made, they leave. She leads him out your front door, and he locks you, key under the handle.

Your halls are empty. Your bedroom is barren. Your study is cold. You are empty, except for the front lawn. Shortly after they leave, a woman steps onto your grass and plunges a sign into your dirt. You have seen this time and time again, red sign with white lettering. The relators always put it in the same numb spot, but this time you feel it.

Over the next year, multiple people are brought through your door, and every time you are disappointed. You start to realize he will not come back. You become depressed and angry. You begin to think about how no one else will ever be good enough. Your windows collect dirt. Your paint peels. Your stairs can no longer support people. Loose shingles fall from your roof. No one fixes them. No one cares as much as he did. You condemn yourself.

A day before demolition, a man stands in front of you. There is no doubting his identity. He has come back to you, but you have nothing. You know you are too far gone for any repair. Your wood is splintered, windows have been broken by mischievous children, and dry rot infects your insides like bees in a hive.

You wonder why he has come back, and after staring at you for a few moments, he answers you. He carefully steps over caution tape and walks up to your front door. He places his hand on your side-paneling, and you feel the tap of a metal ring around his finger. His hands are soft. Not a single callus remains on the hand of this man. He has changed, and so have you.

He removes a screwdriver from his back pocket and begins to work at your handle. He is not repairing. One screw at a time, your tarnished brass handle and lock becomes looser and looser, until you can no longer feel it. He puts the lock and handle in his back pocket and walks away from your door, never looking back. As you watch him walk away, you feel a crack in a support beam. A loud moan comes from inside your walls and the cracks continue. Your foundation gives out. Now, you have nothing left to give.

Paying Attention

By Scott Owens

This poem tied for first place.

Tell me, what else should I have done? -- Mary Oliver

The woman in the Sherpa hat
is short and not unbeautiful.
She gathers her coat around her
and walks on the heels of her feet,
the weight of her buttocks pressing
down through the lines of thigh
and calf all the way into the ground.
She has walked by eight times
with the illuminated sunset sky
behind her and the weeping branches
of this one tree. Her fingers
are long and slender and draw
circles in the air as she measures
each carefully taken step.
She is involved in serious business.
She is nothing to me.
Her face once full of pouty lips
and the straight line of her nose
grows indistinct, begins
to fade to mere silhouette.
I write more furiously now
to get it all down while I can.
I owe her this much
for all she has shared with me.

Prisoners

By Alyce Nadeau

In grad school the telling:
They don't change;
There's no hope for reform;
Just lock 'em away
So they can't harm others.

My reading path
led to discovery:
People create their own existence.
Karmic debts get worked out.
We reap what we sow.

So there!
Live and let live.
Don't stir the pot.
So be it.
Finis.

A week ago, eavesdropping, I heard
from the mouth of a Franciscan curate,
a man who ministers to inmates
as his own life work:
An increasing number proclaim

Gratitude for those walls,
for the Christian family inside,
the love, forgiveness, the opportunities
for service because outside
they would have long ago been dead.
Selah!



Katie Sweeney
Sounds Like a Memory
Ink

Awarded honorable mention by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.



Maggie Flanigan
Swings
Intaglio Print

Awarded honorable mention by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.

The Day Doc Watson Dropped the Body

By Linville Wiles

This poem tied for first place.

The day Doc Watson died I was drunk no doubt;
the day of his memorial I had been bad-enough drunk to hospitalize,
my pancreatic enzymes at a high; nevertheless, I pulled the tabs off my chest
and shins, arms and thighs, and left the ER and stopped en route to Wal-Mart
to get a pint of vodka and maybe a bus.

I ended up on King Street

late and alone on the front lawn of the Jones House.

Doc's music permeated the steamy, summer, aftershower atmosphere
of King Street from speakers lined up on the white-railed porch.

The memorial statue of Doc looked like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi
covered in polychromatic splendors of flowers of all-kinds. People
from all-over had alighted in Boone to pay homage to Doc—the man
who made the music—the man:

Saintly Everyman Arthel Watson,
healer of history.

I waited a long time to steal the ultra-bright-green, see-through-plastic harmonica
someone had slid beneath the goldengreen, patinated bronze chin,
rested on the supple clavicle, balanced in a bounty of blossoms.

I waited long to take it where it lay

and claim it as my own though I cannot play

the guitar or the harmonica or the piano, or anything;

however it's been a dream of mine to captivate fine people everywhere
by the strength and excellence of my imaginary talent at making music.

Music-making is not one of the gifts that I received from Nature,

but I gave up pretty-late forcing my clay into the habits of finer natures.

I could not out-wait the one devotee of the Master who out-waited me.

I got too sick waiting and crying and creeping behind my tree

and had to return to hospital for what healing I had renounced

earlier in the day, still too thirsty to submit to the compassionate art.

Coming like that upon Doc's memorial, it was all an accident,

felicitous, nonetheless, in its way, in Nature's way,

the way of the music of life. But the tears I cried were real

and perhaps not all about me.

The harmonica was gone next morning I returned, but the people
kept coming and the flowers remained.

New flowers came with new people from all-over.

Fathers bowed to sons

(who'd never heard of Doc) explaining

that this man was music personified, who had been was still music,

deified the man now was, not bronze only,

but allayed to all now, always now: a humble country god.

I remember Doc on the radio said that the country wasn't the same one

he remembered: More birds—mockingbirds-blue jays-robins—sang

when he walked dirt roads up the blue mountain to Watauga from Wilkes.

More music—invisible light—in a dark world,

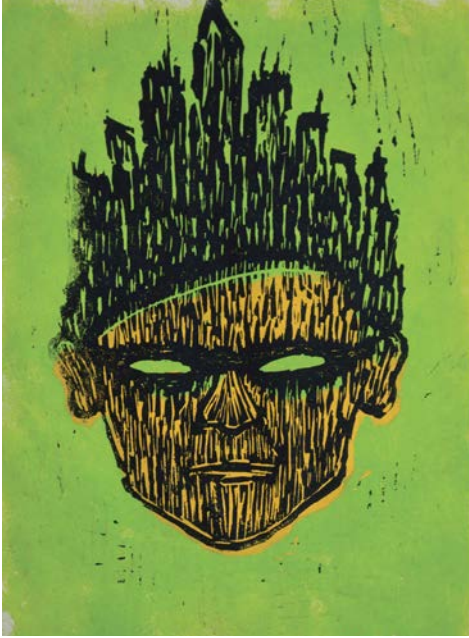
in a dark time.

Doc gave to people

new music in new wineskins to ease the universal blues.

He enriched the embarrassed millionaires who make up America.

People get that!



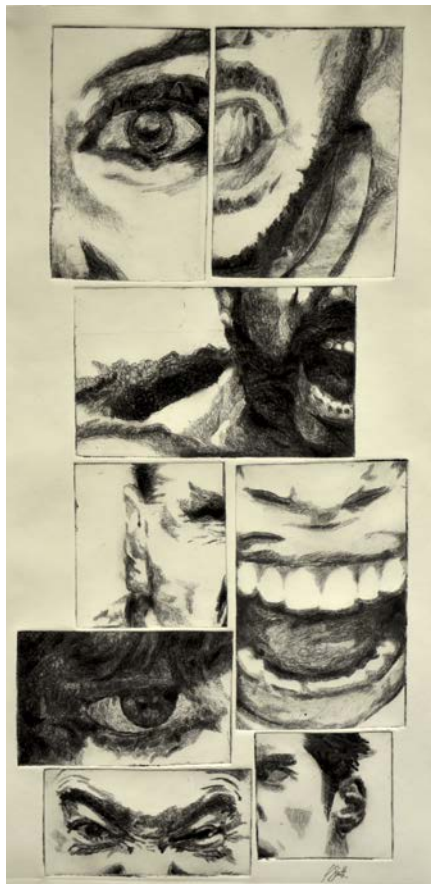
Ethan Walsh
Robin
Linoleum Print



Christine Bolick
Necklace
Intaglio Print



Jefferson Canaveral
Untitled
Linoleum Print



Jared M. Smith
Untitled
Intaglio Print

These works represented CCC&TI at the 2013-15 NC Community College System Art Exhibition: 50th Anniversary

Rummaging

By Nancy Posey

Even though I know you're gone,
I feel like a prowler in your house,
rummaging through your clothes,
reaching far into the back of the closet,
daring to climb the wobbly ladder
into the attic, dark and dusty,
insulation like old cotton candy
camouflaging insubstantial footholds,
light bulb dangling, conjuring shadows.

I keep glancing over my shoulder,
expecting you to enter the room,
to catch me invading your privacy,
if not your home now left to me.
I slide your rings on my fingers,
clip the ear bobs on my lobes,
a grown-up game of dress-up.

My hesitation baffles me;
I hold old night gowns, bed jackets
hovering mid-air before assigning them
to the black trash bag, heavy
and lifeless as a body bag.
I check pockets, wondering if you
too like the surprise of five bucks,
and I flip the pages of your Bible,
the Reader's Digest bookmarked
by the bed, corner turned down,
reading the cryptic penciled notes,
a letter still unopened, a mystery
I'll never solve, and yet I know

you lived your life like an open book,
no secrets, no delicate dancing
around meaning. Forthright, you spoke
your mind, never withholding truth
or your affection. Anything I find here
serves only as confirmation, detritus
of a life you finished long ago,
no more to you than cobwebs
or candy wrappers, your last prank,
leaving it all for me to muse on,
your spirit peeking around the corners,
tickling my neck, whispering my name.

In a Fly's Eye Lies Demise

By Jocelyn Splawn

Wringing hands wait.

He goes
back and forth with
a white knuckled
grip.

There's a tempest throbbing in
his skull.

He sweats.
His forehead a windowpane--trickling.

In a single motion
the grip on the forefinger
tightens.

The shot sounded with an absolving cry.
Then he was gone.

The scene of a woman lay marked.
A suicide they say.

Only the fly that watched from the wall
would know:
She was a right handed woman.

To find a self-inflicted wound on the left
temple would be,
unusual—

Requiring quite a bit of contortion.



Tom Nail
Light Rail
Digital Photography



Andrew Groothuis
Bleak Mid-Winter
Digital Photography

Lots of Rain

By Alyce Nadeau

falling
every day
two 'till four
a.m.
would be perfect!
Why didn't God
think of that?

Instead,
five inches
in one hour
flood flat land
in Eastern North Carolina

Standing puddles
miles wide
invade crawl spaces
activate spores
of mold and mildew
activate bronchial problems
activate miracles

For if temperature drops
to thirty degrees
vibrational frequency
slows molecules
and
I can walk on water

Camelot Nights

By Rachel A. Michaels

I should be home; I am lost instead
Lying with you on this earthen bed.
A murder of crows flies overhead
And my heart races away.

With a fog subtly drifting in
The night tries to veil my sin.
Giving myself to you, lover and friend,
I dread the light of day.

My king deserves staunch loyalty
From the woman he still calls his queen
A lady known to be pristine
Who could do him no harm.

Yet, love is much too strong to fight
And, though, I know, it is not right,
I surrender my heart to his trusted knight,
As I fall into your arms.

The trees all dance as the wind blows on,
A night bird sings a seductive song.
Our Love is real, and still so wrong
Yet our passion reaches great heights.

The stars see it all, but they'll never tell,
How bittersweet my teardrops fell,
While the good of the kingdom, so quickly fell
In the long, Camelot nights.



Tom Nail
Rodanthe Pier
Digital Photography



William Butland
Beach at Sunset
Digital Art

Sydni's Emotion

By Dustin Bass

The river of my heart flows dark and deep,
And dances shallowly upon a beach
Where the shimmer of light laughs underneath
And my reflection smiles in disbelief.

If only I could speak or write the words
And wasn't so tongue tied by all I've heard
From inside my head who knows not my heart
Where all good sense leaves and letters depart.

Mercenary's Rhyme

By Anthony Tolbert

Death tonight
Delivered by a short flight
I will make my mark
And get paid
Tonight.
With that pay I will have my woman in red
And drink more than my share.
It's a damn shame
That a man will have to die
Just so I can have my sweet Desiree
Because if I don't fight
Or if I do and die
Someone else will, and steal
Both pay and plight.
And even though I never will
Be quite-- quite settled, quite right
I will still make my mark
Tonight.

To My Father

By Taylor Benjamin Brown

Because I feel our hands far from reach,
thoughts differ from yours;
as they once molded mine,
from your lips to my core so open,
still receiving word, but more than just yours.
And none hit me like "Father."
So I have called you and will continue to do so
even while my own tongue is received
by one who speaks the word
to me in a life that is far from present.
But when the time comes, my son will know
the word that grew from no wiser man.



Michelle Bingham
Web
Digital Photography



Eric A. Price
Galaxy in the Rain
Digital Photography

Understanding

By Rayanna Christian

The electro-atomic blast was only supposed to affect China, end the war. Instead, it has killed off the whole world. Her father had put her in a bomb shelter to be safe. Now she was alone with nothing but 15 years of memories and thoughts.

She cried for the first week. The second week she came to terms with her situation. She collected food and took up shelter in a library. She kept close tracks of the dates and conversed with herself. She didn't want to go crazy.

A year passed. She discovered a new mathematical principle. For the first time in months, she wished she had someone to share it with.

She travelled for another year. Bugs, rats and a few other creatures had survived. She let them be. It was their world now.

She was looking for a place to stay for the night during her travels when she saw it: A silhouette, moving in the distance. Its shape was one of a human. At first, she thought she was going crazy, thought it was a doppelganger, a ghost come to get her.

It wasn't. It was a boy. She asked his name and he replied he'd long since forgotten. She realized just how much of her memory had drifted away, including her name. She didn't care. She could make new memories now. They chose names for each other and that night Sebastian and Lily made love under the stars.

They travelled slowly for a year. Lily grew ill that winter. They found a host of toxic drugs and kept them close by, just in case. They wouldn't be alone.

Sebastian asked her if she loved him, if he was more than just a companion, an anchor to keep her from floating to insanity. Lily replied, with a smile, they may have never met under normal circumstance, but fate had bound them regardless. She asked how he felt. He said nothing, but his eyes glittered like when they first met, and he placed a hand on her swollen stomach. She understood.

Five years passed. They had three daughters. Lavender was learning to read. Crystal was clumsy and energetic and had a vertical scar up her cheek. River was just beginning to speak. They fended for themselves. There were no cars to hit them, no vans to be lured into, no monsters to speak of. The world was full of goodness when they were the only ones in it.

They settled down when their youngest was born. One afternoon, while their parents read research on the electro-atomic project, giggling was heard in the distance. It was not the giggling of their daughter. They found their girls playing with two younger boys, a bit older than they. The boys' parents came looking for them an hour later. The adults didn't speak but their eyes all sparkled. They understood.

They began slow travel to the coast. Under the theory, there were more survivors. They found a cruise liner and spent years repairing it and learning how to operate it.

Lavender, now sixteen, asked her mother if her partner truly loved her or if she was just his only option. Lily smiled. Her daughter did not have to question sanity or solitude. All she saw was love. Lily saw the way the young man touched Lavender's swollen stomach and whispered in her ear.

Lavender listened intently to her mother's story and when she stood at the front of the ship as with the others, she saw the sparkle in their eyes. No one said a word but Lavender began to understand.

They all understood.



Sahasa Ben-Avari
Untitled 1
Collage



Teresa C. Armas
Snowing
Acrylic and Gesso

Dessert Haiku

By Nancy Posey

One tiramisu,
four spoons, guilty pleasure shared,
fewer calories.

Someone has eaten
the Snicker bar I hid there
behind the eggplant.

Chocolate makes me smile,
she says. That's why I need no
justification.

We eat dessert first.
Not because life's uncertain.
We eat it last too.

Learn to spell dessert:
Sweet Sugar has two S's;
desert, one S--Sand.

I knew you loved me
when you gave me the first bite
of your crème brulee.

Beware if a girl
claims she doesn't like chocolate.
She'll tell other lies.

Irresistible You

By Dustin Bass

Oh you,
Irresistible you.

Still I sit and reminisce,
Over last my little transit with,

Oh you,
Irresistible you;

Whose beauty proved,
A smile so true,
With body curved,
I wanted to learn,
Every rise and run of,

Oh you.
Irresistible you.

Please keep doing what you do,
Because what you have,
is what I need
And, if you'll dare,
Continue to share,
On my heart, this I swear, for,

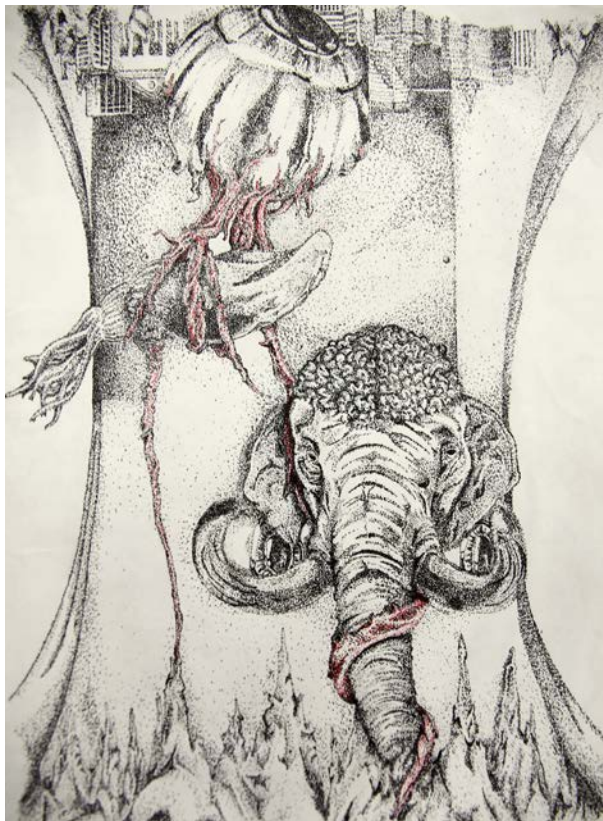
Oh you.
Irresistible you.

A world of love without fear,
And every kiss without a tear,
In joy,
In song,
In dance,
We do.
This seedly poem blooms only and to,

Oh you.
Irresistible you.



Sahasa Ben-Avari
Bedroom in Winter
Acrylic, Gesso, Paper



Jared M. Smith
Teaching My Words to See
Pen and Ink

The Ames-Treet Rehearsal

By Linville Wiles

White and pink, a spasm-splash of laughter, a reptile wink intimating disaster,
perfume invisible to the nose, yet the eye can read a scent ascending
in a spiral toward the coming hour when—no longer on stage—she shall be
with Mr. Ames. About every wrinkle around her eyes, desire shuts
its eyes and swallows. Open, the windows, like eyes, are stared through from outside.
Only the groom-to-be can be seen from there. A slight breeze tilts the boughs down
and a slight breeze brings them up again past their comfort, and down.
She conducts herself to all and none; you are not the only one. She is adored
by all present—by everyone; even here you are thwarted. One of her admirers: no more.
As her aunts and their friends, her brothers and their friends, her mother's
and father's friends and acquaintances from church and office, her former
teachers, some of whom attend, and her golden retriever and the household cats.
Out back the children play Tag, You're It! and Hide and Seek and Red Rover.
Great-Grandmother Treet—who survives her daughter—watches
to be sure none goes missing, or get too rough with one another. The champagne
toast signifies that soon you shall all have roast, and that she is promised.
The flags on the terrace proliferate over the parapet like a neoplasm
on a tortoise's carapace. You saunter there alone back and forth watching
the expensive boats carried around the bend out of sight in the river far below.
The Tennessee is a worthy river. It may not be as grand as some others
named after their host states or troubled by names none now understand
and which not even the last natives in the state can commend.
Still the river is and beautifully still: If only there were no distance and nothing
moved at all ever, and there was no time during to traverse distances,
and all the laws of physics could ameliorate the way you feel;
and you should not have to explain to yourself why you must feel like this.



Maggie Flanigan
Baskerville
Intaglio Print



Amber Kornreich
Dias de Los Muertos
Linoleum Print

Fighting Vices

By Taylor Benjamin Brown

You sat across from me
And played a game of “set fire to the enemy”

And I burned to the core
Was eaten by worms
And birthed again in a house that can't forget your name

It's cold between these walls
Where ribs arc and bend
With hands trying to break out of a cell
Words can't begin to mend

And I don't know how all of this started
But I know how it stalls

Preventing the inevitable
Dancing on a grave for many
And clapping rhythmically with animal paws

And as the salt hails from your eyes
I collect the grains in a plastic baggie

I divide this house between my life, as is,
And mistakes I made sadly

I expect you to leave like the air in my lungs
But you stain my insides black
Making the promise,
“I'll never have to come back”

And you won't

Because I've lost and won virtue
Hardened by vice
So take my advice
And don't let me gamble
This life that's not mine

My hands are failing and breaking at the knuckles
But I catch each one and fill my mouth
With destructive impulse I can't consider loveable

And as I continue to swallow
I choke on lumps in my throat
Determined to disarm bombs
Before walking us home



Jason Bostian
Colorful Decay
Digital Art

Regret

By M. Brent Tomberlin

My mental image of you is fading
Like water dripping through fresh paint
My mind sometimes panics and races to think of you,
To hold you in a thundering cloud of remembrance

I have not seen you in many years
A snail's breadth of time
Yet, I have had long conversations with you
In futile attempts to explain myself

My train is heading another direction
Shameless, I watch you depart
Hoping, in the smoke, to see you
Happy

One more glance at your face – I must have
Even though it means putting another memory down
Worn out with melancholy -
Not sure I have the strength

But to wish you climb your highest mountains
Overcome the broken places
Fill the deserts with rain
And smile with giggling kids at your heels

And reach your home port full of health
Standing in the sun

From the Waterfall

By Angie M. Clement

Life flows on
through the river of time only
to fall from the waterfall and crash
on the rocks below, taking with it
the knowledge of the person who is now
part of nature through the virtue of death. Who
cries for the life that takes the plunge? Will
the life flow on forever into the ocean or does it
live on through the trees that take the water
in through their roots? Will that knowledge help
the leaves to become brilliantly green or will it poison
the tree and allow it to fall just becoming another
drop of the river to once again fall
from the waterfall?



Christina M. Whitney
Grave Treasures
Low-Fire Ceramics



Home at Last

By Katherine Schoenhals

I love the fog.
I love to walk in the fog.
Its grey, damp haze
Foretells a good day.

I love fog, except
I hate to drive in the fog.
Where's the side of the road, I wonder.
Side of the road---who am I kidding?
Where is the road? I can't find the road!

Is my fickle machine propelling me
Over a cliff
Or into a tree?
My feet would know
But I'm not on them
I'm behind this alien wheel.

Inch along, creep along
Tail lights ahead would help.
A cool dampness above my lip:
I'm scared when I cannot see.
I may never get home at such a pace---
Two miles an hour won't do.

Will my husband worry?
Will he wring his hands and watch the clock?
Will he stake out flares
To show me the route?
I'm sleepy. It must be near dawn.

He'll surely wonder what keeps me.
He'll drive out to find me
And then lead the way.
He'll blast a fog horn so
I can follow the sound.
Sure wish I could see the ground.

I'm almost there, I think.
This harrowing journey will end.
He'll stand out front
With signal lights
To motion and guide me home.
He'll cheer and wave and tell me how he worried.

I see the house,
I see the drive.
I think it's the drive and not the ditch.
One way to find out so onward I go.
The garage, I made it.
Where's the twenty-one gun salute?

I made it, dear.
Just barely of course.
No dents or scratches, nary a one.
No harm to me or to the car.
Were you worried, dear? Were you worried,
sweetheart?

What is that horrible sound I hear?
A snore? Could that possibly be a snore?
How can he sleep at a time like this?
I fight my way out of the jaws of death
And all the while he sleeps?

I'm home, I whispered in his ear.
Mmmm hmmm, that's nice.
It's so foggy out, I nearly died.
Mmmm hmmm, that's nice. Good night.
Good night to you too, you sleeper you.
You snorer, you sleeper, you scoundrel, you!

I'm home safe and sound and that feels good.
Time for sleep at long last.
My eyes won't close. They are frozen open
In wide-eyed terror no doubt.
The warm, wet breeze drifts softly by.
I dream of fog.
Whimsical, mystical, wonderful fog.
This time I'm walking.



Tom Nail
Rustic Head
Clay and Wood



Braxton Beaver
Two Left Hands and a Bottle of Wine
Plaster

The Persistent Desire to Rise

By Scott Owens

Monday morning, Indian Garden,
a lone honeybee wrestles with the anthers
of a prickly pear, extracting
what could be called a rough love,
stumbling over stamen as I have stumbled
four and a half miles down,
three thousand feet to achieve this sweet
breathing oasis among rock
without regard to the heavy load
that awaits me on the climb back,
just as every other Monday morning
I enter a week full of expectation,
unconsidering the need of getting out
before turning, like rock, to abiding sand.

Running Through Barbed Wire

By M. Brent Tomberlin

Shadows are just shadows
Running through the dark –
I thought of you
Just enough to be confused
Let myself be part of
Some false light
Like a flickering dagger
Your sunshine was like a desert
No rest from the heat
And an oasis of pain
True, I created my own mirage
I owned it
Like an entrepreneur's fancy
And to think I thought you were all that?
Instead, just a wisp
A blink
A molecule of mistrust –
I had to wash my face to
Remove the dust from my eyes,
And see
Unbroken,
Unprofitable truth
In a private
Unspeakable drift
Oh, I wonder where you are
So I can give you a look of pleasurable disdain
And be finished
Cuts and all.



Kayla Tharrington
Untitled
Mixed Media



Zachary David Smith-Johnson
Untitled
Steel

Elda

By Robert Masterson

Losing one's thoughts
Must be very aggravating.
Misplacing a memory must be much worse.
Like remembering the names of your grandchildren...

Why all these people in all these white coats?
Why do they all look so concerned?

Does no one carry a smile?
Is there not a single pair of warm hands
To place upon her cold shriveled ones?

She resembles a bird,
A bashful, dainty one...
Curious and quiet.

The white coats must not hear the music
Their dance is always bland
Their skin is healthy
Tan as island sands
Strong, healthy curling hair
Mouths moving faster
Than the rubber on their feet
Wiry...thin mouths
slivers of spam
trying to place themselves back together
so they may once again speak.

Elda looks forward to the darkness in the borough of sleep
Forward to the comfort of dreams,
Taking her back
To a time when the fragments seemed more complete.

Some days when the mornings are warm
She joins three or four others
To watch the morning colors
As they streak across a field.

All around her fellow dwellers look so drained and distraught
Some stare at her from afar with a smile
Giving her hope...
That others may hear the music as well

But with all the white walls and coats
Death will in itself be heaven
For all these sights of white, scents of bleach
Must be a clever disguise for hell

Elda watches from her chair
As the white coats flee from hall to hall
Scratching on their clipboards upon visiting every door

Their lips move so slow
When their heads bend to talk to hers
Squinting into her eyes
As if she were a blur



Katie Sweeney
Untitled
Low-Fire Ceramics



Amanda Jackson
Autumn Leaves Mug
Low-Fire Ceramics

The Judge's Death

By Robert Masterson

All of his life
he derived meaning
from the power
determining whether man should live or die.
Justice was in his hands.

Oak doors, oak furniture,
blood red drapes,
wooden floors, oak columns supporting his
mahogany ceilings
Make up the hearth in which he resides.
His study, dull... much the same.
His haven, sanctuary from his wife.
Seeming so sweet when courted,
Wine and dancing made her so distorted.

Bred from the depths,
Every word she breathes
releases a horrible hex.

They married.
He regretted it,
yet determined
he transformed into a father and husband.
He fed the children
and paid the debts,
withstood the revolting sounds
echoing off his wife's dreaded breath,
embraced all the burdens
a family man has upon his head.

When his wife got herself too excited
Ivan could be found in his study
where he sat and read

Case after case,
acquisition after appeal,
gruesome, laughable.
He was the hand over the lives off all these men.
Their names and faces ... very real.

He felt needed, important,
a sifter of the vagrants plaguing the shadows,

deciding whether or not
to deem men worthy of life.
He embraced himself with his work...
his relief from his wife

Ivan had a knack for being able to ignore
one thing
by immersing himself in another.
In his life
he erected a sophisticated front.
His work... his passion
for which he yearned

one day Ivan gouged his side
never imagining
a mere bruise... sensitive to the touch
would lead to his ultimate demise.

Time lapsed as he hoped the feeling
would subside.
Something sucked the life from him day
by day.
His eyes sunk deep into their sockets.
His skin wore a yellow tint.
With one look upon himself
he grew reluctant to the lie.
He and his family continued to hide.
He was dying
... in the peak of his life

He pitied himself,
and expected the same from those
whose eyes dwelled upon him.

Floating kidney?
Is that all the doctors could muster?
From Stalingrad to Petersburg
they came to his door
as a stray seeks refuge from the streets.

Pills and therapies.
Theories and conspiracies.
Their conjectures and hypothesis
only accumulated his misery.

Bed ridden, soiling himself without notice,
he felt content by being alone.
He knew he was making the entire house
miserable...

His daughters could barely stand in his
presence
for a few minutes.
Their eyes on their shuffling shoes,
His eyes making idle talk,
while their eyes checked the clock...
finally announcing they had something
to do.

Ivan wishes they would leave him alone in
his room
with a single syringe,
holding enough morphine to kill a mule.

Escaping through books and imagination
Ivan remained content between the opium
supplements
until he sensed his presence was a burden.

His family no longer spoke to him as a human,
as the father and husband who had supported
them,
animating their sympathies with false sentiment.
Their mere presence made Ivan suck his teeth.

Ivan lies in bed for weeks and months
seeing doctors,
dismissing his doctors,
ordering his daughters
to send away the doctors.

Ivan reminisced and dwelled,
Reliving his memories
As if they were in the room as well.
He replayed them differently every time,
seeing scenarios ever vividly
As the opium's hold
affirmed its grasp.

His room was the ocean.
The bed his raft.

After so many months
Ivan convinced his errand boy
to deliver the concoction
which would plunge him into the void:

A 3 piece syringe of horse tranquilizer, opium,
and morphine
dripping full from needle's point.

Ivan ordered the young man
to leave it on the bed stand.
Together they said a prayer,
embracing hands.

Ivan gave the boy a small fortune
to flee far as he could,
knowing repercussions would befall the boy for
doing what he knew no one else would.

Upon leaving, Ivan instructed him to leave a
single candle lit
for he did not want to die in the dark.
As the last of the footsteps left the stairs
Ivan pressed the needled into his skin.

Dropping the needle, hearing it roll to a stop,
Ivan felt the excitement of a child.
Having copious time to accept his fate
He was now merely terribly curious
of to what he would awake.

Ivan closed his eyes, and smiled... walking into
his mother's kitchen

Spring Surprise

By Nancy Posey

In these foothills, seasons tease,
flirting from the mountains
outside our window,
a ten-degree drop
just an hour drive away.
As each tree unfurls her colors,
flowering cherry
then Bradford pear in puffs,
our dogwoods wait for Easter
to bear the print of nails.
Daffodils and forsythia bloom
in spite of ill-timed snows,
defiant, a butter yellow promise
of change. We find hyacinths
first by scent then sight
before tulips push through soil
to take their turn. In spring,
forgetfulness is a blessing,
each new burst of blossom
a fresh surprise, as flower beds
explode with color, auditioning
as backdrop for snapshots
of children who can't help
picking bouquets so lovely
they know we won't scold.

Terroir

By Liza Plaster

The bucks' aura says "terroir" to me ~
the earthy character of our goat cheese.
A rowdy buck can knock you down
in play, meaning nothing but fun. As for
the does, they do eat ivy, like the rhyme;
it helps to close a bleeding womb
and calm an upset stomach.
From their milk, we make 5000 pounds of
cheese a year that tastes of the growing season,
March to December.

Nearby, tree trucks rattle down the farm road.
We hear the martins chortling,
flying, returning to feed their chicks,
poking in food to two broods in a season.
We hear the goats nicker, hoping for a treat,
and silence from the dogs, as they recognize me.

Terroir is in the cheese, defines the cheese.
"The bucks are half the herd!" they say.
Those boys get roasted peanuts when I have them.
They dash to their shared manger and thrust in
their horny heads.

I love to make them happy.
They love me.



Teresa C. Armas
The Bull
Wire, Wood, Charcoal



Jared M. Smith
Untitled
Soapstone

Renewal

By M. Brent Tomberlin

I took a walk into the wild wood
It was a fall day, full of the history of summer
Heat turned cool and I traced the small creek towards a small, rippling pool
The air was full of nature's spray as the smells of spring and summer changed
From green leaves and blooms to the brown of mold and decay
I could close my eyes and remember. . . .
In our walks I was the observer - and you the companion
Looking closely into this undergrowth, I can imagine you
Playing with me along the creek bed and laughing without a care
I can remember how you made me smile
In the wild wood

I continued on, past a few fallen mushroom-covered, bending, and broken trees
I tried to think when I last saw them tall
What seemed like glimpses in minutes had to be years
Here, the termite holes, the ivy, and the smell of death
Reminded me, further, growth comes from change
And loss is often renewal

I wandered on where the beaten path
Edges itself off in a faint direction - the trails covered by the
Trappings of a coming winter
Pine needles, discolored leaves, and bent grass in the undergrowth
I imagined, again, both of us taking these avenues together.
All these paths were once yours, and then, mine
In years which were only yesterday

I chose one path - the least recognizable of all
I walked slowly as a mathematician ponders different equations
Remembering how I would count on your fingers and stamp my feet
In an arithmetic rhythm
I heard your laugh travel through the trees
I knew it must have been the October wind
But your soul was in it

I buttoned my coat and pulled the collar up around my neck
The cooling air pushed me along the path to the other side of the pool
A different picture - a different time
The place did not look the same after an hour of walking
I remembered you, here by the water, feeding the birds bits of bread and corn
The fish too, because you loved nature as a passion which showed

In the flower gardens, bird baths, and hummingbird feeders
Every day, you showed me how to give.

I retraced my steps to the first place you held my hand
It was back on the path and towards other adventures we shared
In the wild wood last, I had a feeling I would not see you again
I believed not to be honest with my heart to have it tell me the truth

But the evidence in front of this path is the leaves are falling and
The trees are bending to meet the winter temper
And the cool air covers me as your soul lingers and stays in the wild wood behind

Yet, like spring, I rest in hope –
Of constant seasons
And beg for the knowledge which comes from change
To pray and begin anew

Serendipity

By Katherine Schoenhals

Settling into this new place;
We explored our surroundings.
Sudden trumpets pierced the air....
The elephants! It was the elephants!

They had formed a circle around a
fallen young one,
And were facing outward.
A threat coming from any direction
Would be face with a wall of elephant,
Rallied and ready to defend their young.

Sensing their alarm,
Caught in some mystical
Merging of my identity with theirs,
I screamed out, "Oh, no, the baby."
My voice strained with fright.

I was stunned by this emotion
Which flowed with empathy for their cause.
My face flushed in apprehension;
My heart quickened its pace.
It seemed I became one with these giants.
These marvelous and brave creatures
Who breathed in unity for the common good.

Quick, he said.
Up on the roof.
We rushed to the viewing deck
And stood in wonder among the treetops.
One hundred elephants, all sizes and ages
Had gathered at this famous water hole.

They played in the water, splashing
and squirting
Each other like children in a lake
On a hot summer day
They frolicked and rolled in the mud;
They tweaked and pushed each other
With abandon and delight

A teen-ager, a potential delinquent, he;
Challenged and chased Grandpa away.
But the old one sought retribution,
And came back with the matriarch.
She had curt words with Junior,
And with tail between legs, he skulked away.
Perhaps he learned to show proper respect.
We stood spellbound as we watched
This wondrous sight, a rare one they said.
These splendid creatures of grace and might

Appeared to have a sense of humor,
And a zest for life they fervently cherished.
So special, this sight. A privilege to share.

Through the rain forest we walked,
Her lumbering gait swayed back and forth.
The morning was blessedly cool;
The setting enchanting.
She threw her trunk back
And like a vacuum swooshed
the banana away.
Sing a song for her, he implored.
I thought a bit and remembered
The one they like as children.
“You are my sunshine, “ I sang,
And she listened intently.
She seemed to grasp my tone.
At least I thought she understood
That in that far away place, I
Loved her dearly. I truly did.

You Ordered Your House Black Too

By Jocelyn Splawn

Do you know how intimidating you are?

I wish more than anything in the world I could know where else you go in a day's time. I don't understand this connection, near infatuation, I have with you created by nothing at all but the fact that you are here too.

It takes this moment in time for me to see you. Anywhere else you would have been invisible to me but as you sit across from me—I am grateful for this place.

You're truly stunning from this perfect distance—

But not in the same way that everything else seems perfect from a distance.

As we depart and aim ways at separate worlds, drift far okay?

I can see you understand.

On Recent Reports of the Death of Poetry

By Scott Owens

News Flash: Poetry is dead!

Earlier today poetry was announced dead on arrival at the University of Iowa Research Hospital.

Authorities were initially called out on a drunk and disorderly report and were surprised to find poetry wandering aimlessly, muttering incoherently what eyewitnesses claim sounded like post-avant, flarf, no it-ness.

Charged with irrelevance, narcissism, a smug pretension to universality and taking indecent liberties with language, poetry went quietly enough but fell into cardiac arrest while handcuffed in the backseat of a black and white cruiser.

Autopsies reveal poetry's guts had been pulled out.

Foul play is suspected.

This was the first verified sighting of poetry since 1987.

It is thought that poetry has been hiding out in an underground network of coffee shops, biker bars and community colleges.

The County Coroner cites evidence that poetry has been clinically dead for years and has been living in appearance alone.

Poetry is survived by the Poetry Slam, Spoken Word, the Prose Poem, the MFA, the BFA, the AA, hip hop and the poetry blog.

Services will be held Sunday morning at West Street and Lepke.

In lieu of flowers please send your best unused metaphors to the Foundation for Poetic Justice.



Teresa C. Armas

Piece of Wood

Wood and Acrylic

Awarded cover art for *Branches*, Volume 19

My Darkness

By Candida Black

Self-loathing...although fleeting, worthy adversary against springing of hope eternal.
Deftly melting resolve, happiness waning...

an undercover agent of doom, caustic,

dissolving strengths in its path...slithering, bathed in its own silent control.

Emotional rollercoaster... peaking at the point of exhaustion, leveling off at
darkness' edge,

easing toward the impending cliff; broken tracks...

rusted, steel rails of the tracks traveled...

Scrubbing, screaming... oozing with drippings, incidental wastes of the
acidic attack.

Descending... dank, moldy...stale. Reminiscent of an underground cavern...

constant, distant drip-drip-drip,

meltdown continues...the cave, decorated with disparities of life... of Love... of loss

Refusing to weep for humanity...these tears will be for her, her own short-comings,
regrets...

Wondering if her faults hinder her worthiness to be bathed in light.

Soaked in liquid blackness; searching for specks of light...dreaming... seeking.

Glimmers indicative of purpose, meanings of life, as there are many.

A battle between good and evil, to either find renewed appreciation of the warmth
of the sun or bask in the darkness of loathing...

Realizing... without the cave, the dark, the mold, the dank... the sun may not shine
quite so bright in the morn...



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