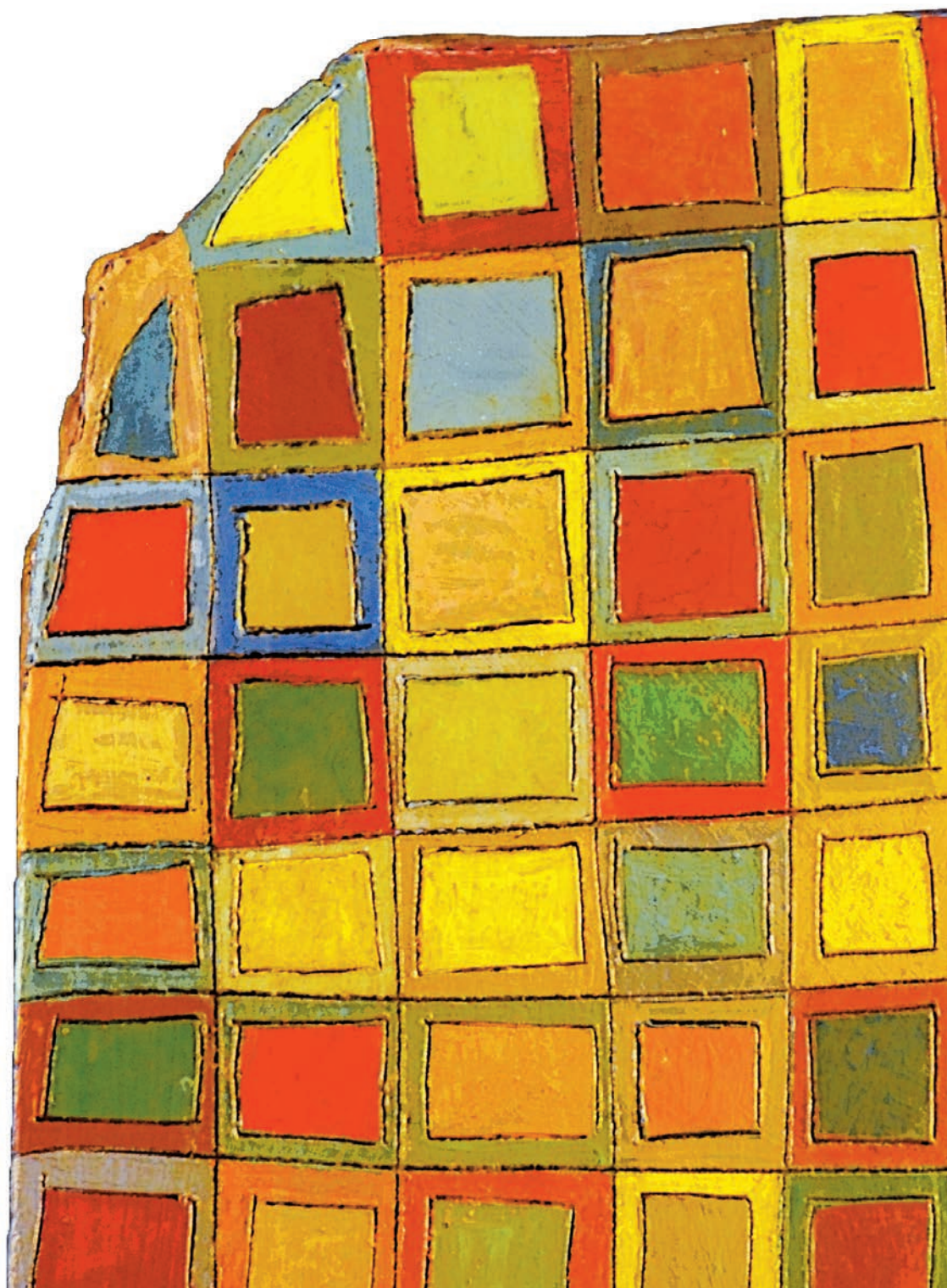


Branches

volume nineteen





Teresa C. Armas
Piece of Wood
Wood and Acrylic

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To view previous editions of *Branches* or to find out more information about submitting works of art or literature to the 20th edition of *Branches*, please visit our website at www.cccti.edu/branches.

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Amber Kornreich

Untitled

Monoprint

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

The One That Got Away

By Alyce Nadeau

Awarded first place, prose category, by the literary editors of *Branches*.

Remember the Mae West line, “I’ve had six husbands, and three of them were my own?” Well, me too!

After Louie died the light went out of my life. Plodding through my full-to-the-brim-working-days and wandering the dark house when I should have been sleeping, I can tell you laughs were scarce as twenty-dollar bills.

With spring came new focus. The Farmer’s Market each Saturday meant selling cakes and muffins and herbal creations, seeing regular customers from previous summers and greeting friends. Things were looking up.

Then on a Saturday in late May a man, whom my brain had linked with Rum Cake ordered in past seasons, patiently waited while I sold cakes to a crush of early customers before approaching me. He took a sample cube of cake from grandma’s cut glass cake stand and asked,

“Does this contain sugar?”

“Yes.”

“Real Rum?”

“Well, yes. Mount Gay Rum from Barbados.”

“Too bad! It is delicious but I’m diabetic. Do you bake anything without sugar?”

“No. The physics would be wrong.”

And he disappeared in the crowd as customers moved in front of him.
(I did observe he took one of my business cards from the table.)

Mid afternoon he phoned and invited me to go out to dinner in Blowing Rock. I agreed to meet him at a service station (Remember them?) on highway 421. (Despite his polite manners and southern voice, I did not know this man. I didn’t want him to know where I lived.)

We had a delightful dinner in a pleasant restaurant overlooking a view. We dined (so nice to eat delicious food prepared by someone else), danced (Oh, it had been so long since I had danced.) and he sang softly to me. (You need to know that music makes my world go ‘round.)

Later he drove up a winding road outside Boone and led me by the hand into and through the dark living room of his Watauga County home to his deck for a God’s eye view of Boone, shining and twinkling in distant blackness. (He had warned me to tiptoe so as not to start a landslide of dirty dishes stacked in his kitchen sink and on the surrounding counters. What a sense of humor!)

On Sunday, he phoned and invited me on a picnic to Price Park. (OMG! A man who could cook! Unheard of. Impossible.) We had so much fun that when he delivered me back to my car (Hwy 421 again) I allowed him to follow me home.

CC knew more jokes than Al Corum. Everything he heard set him off. The laughter was continuous. We spent much of his vacation exploring the Parkway (Thanks,

Jim.), attending concerts and theatre, cooking in his kitchen and watching baseball on his TV. Glorious!

I will tell you CC made the best Eggs Benedict I ever tasted- anywhere! I was totally comfortable with him and he was probably the second sweetest man I have ever met. (Louie was #1.)

One Saturday night, (This relationship lasted three summers) CC took me to dinner where there was "live" music, excused himself during our meal and disappeared. (You know where I thought he was headed, don't you?)

Soon the band started another selection and I realized everybody was looking at me. On stage behind my chair, CC was singing "You Are Always On My Mind" just like Willie Nelson (whom we had seen in concert). I was blown away!

When he returned to our table I asked, "Aren't you fearful someone in this crowd might know your wife?"
"I don't care."

So much romance! (So greatly appreciated.)

And we had big plans for us when he retired from his medical practice.

BUT HE DIED.

(Bless his heart.)

What a way to get away!

If you know me at all and have for any length of time, you probably figured it all out way before I did. My assignment in this life is
HOW TO DEAL WITH LOSS.

Dammit! I am slowly getting the hang of it.

(And every day I say prayers for CC's soul.)

A Gypsy's Path

By Kimberly Wyckoff

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

Alone I wander
Alone I roam
No one to call my own
This path I take, I take alone
Nature is my peace
Wind is my music
The sun's rays, light my way
The moon's beams, to guard my rest
Carefully I step, as to harm none
Always cautious, I walk alone
Silently I cry, for what was and what is yet to come
No regrets, for all I did I wanted to do
Just wish I would meet a like-minded soul
My journey is not done; feels as if it has just begun
Touching those along the way, I give of myself every day
I walk my chosen path with courage and strength
Knowing there is yet another day and more to come my way



Andria Lycoff

Untitled

Low-fire Ceramics

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



Indifferent

By Robert Masterson

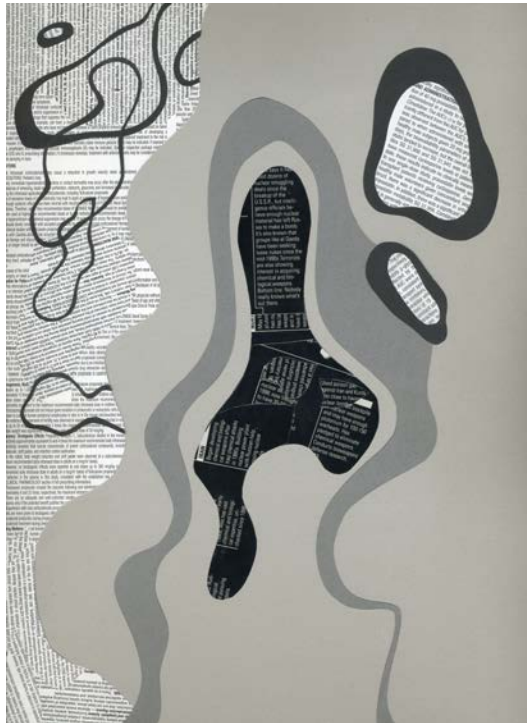
Rain, snow, sunshine, sunset
All hours of night and day
Are all blind in the difference they make
All the meaning their existence sheds
In this head of mine
Much is the same,
Where so much is kept dear
Why so much more is kept at bay

Outside strange sights meet my eyes
Panicking howls reach my ears
Looking in the sky
I finally see the reason
For the widespread fear.

Aliens, witches on brooms
Busses hurled through the air
Buildings and people alike
Eagerly consumed.
Blinking once
I open my eyes to find everything alright
Blinking again I open them with a sigh...
Either way aliens or blue sky
I really don't think I would mind.

Parties and dungeons are all the same
Just like stumbling drunkards and beautiful dames
I smile at them all
Always finding time to hear what they have to say.

Bad guys and good guys
Need each other to continue their fight
Neutral I sit on the side
Curious as to the outcome...
Though either one is fine.



Kendall Cahan
Microorganism
College

Awarded Honorable Mention by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.



Jonathan Triantis
Mr. Piggy
Low-fire Ceramics

Awarded Honorable Mention by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.

Quiet Sounds

By Thomas Truesdale

Sitting here with peace and quiet,
thinking of that sound I hear.
Hearing nothing, as if it were here
But nothing is all that sounds.
It's as if I were never alone
But with no one else around
Like being here, but being gone
To me I guess it all makes sense.

Synchronicity

By Rachel Michaels

Cottony white, pristine clouds
turn dark in the evening sky,
form intricate pictures
against a starlit background.

Images reflect onto the cool, gray water
of a stunning mountain lake.
A gentle breeze teases the surface
which shivers from the lightest touch.

Blue violets grow up wild and robust-
ballerinas in full pirouette,
along ethereal green, mossy embankments,
as night closes in on the majestic scene.

A regal, ebony-black swan courts another;
together they swim in graceful strides,
with a romantic serenade that ricochets
from tree to tree, as they sing of their desires.

A haunted, silvery moon softly shimmers down;
pale, romantic illumination glows.
Nature's soft candlelight flickers all around
as extravagant colors of the night combine.



Sahasa Ben-Avari
Blue
Intaglio Print



Braxton Beaver
Sef Portat
Intaglio with Monoprint

A Series of Short Stories

By Rayanna Christian

A 15 year old's first born son has her stepfather's eyes

An average moody teenager put a bullet in his brain

A boy grows his hair out and is told he looks like a girl. He mutters thank you

A boy who fears commitment and being a man and a girl who fears losing control and being alone get married

An ambulance stops

A cheerleader cannot insult the barrel of a gun into submission

In a parallel universe, an evil queen destroys the magical castle that the prince had built for her at the same moment that a mother breaks down a pile of Legos to vacuum

A normal reclusive teenager commits assault with a deadly weapon on her own forearms

A promiscuous young woman lies about a rape to spite an ex-lover and becomes a definition

A ten year old pulls a girl's hair to show he likes her. Twenty years later, no one has explained to him that he is not in prison for an overabundance of affection

A three year old only child who craves sugar and was born from a woman terrified of keeping promises and a shy sixteen year old girl on her first date with a boy who believes he has never been refused learn the meaninglessness of the word "no"

An average hormonal teenager signs a contract for a child and herpes on the same weekend

A little girl keeps her mouth shut

An average angry teenager leaves his fingerprints on his girlfriend's neck

An athlete with a cherry red sports car lets a white tablet fizz in his date's first taste of alcohol until he can name her limpness consent. A high school dropout receives his girlfriend's virginity as an 18th birthday present. One is convicted of rape, the other goes to college on a football scholarship.

A good, wholesome family man who is a productive member of society paints murals, and hides secrets and soaks up tears between the thighs of little girls.

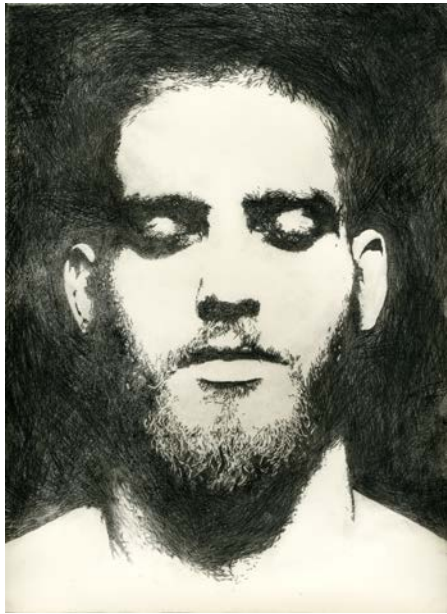
An average moody teenager puts bullets in the brains of twelve classmates

A good, wholesome, family man and productive member of society spends his daughters lunch money on pills

Three angry men who usually fight with meager fists meet at a bar armed with guns and new sense of power

A room full of depressed teens laughs at the remembrance of emotion

An average, reclusive, hormonal, angry, moody teenager writes a poem



Joe Hollar
Closed
Intaglio Print



Christina Whitney
Self Portrait
Intaglio Print



John Walker
Me, Myself and I
Intaglio Print

These Words are Econolodged in my Throat

By Holly Michaels

Dear liar,
the next time you desire to fill a girl full of promises
until false hope seeps from her pores
at least have the courtesy to make hotel reservations in a town far away
so her daily commute doesn't become a slap in a face
she no longer believes
is beautiful.

Note to hotels:
You are full of endings, never beginnings.
Your signs speak of making memories,
but I wish that you would keep them,
because the fake smiles on these vacations
never last past the car ride home.

Note to smiles:
I don't think I can trust you anymore.

Note to trust:
You are the cancer in the pit of my stomach when I believed you were the cure.
Each day this sickness grows and I can't fight it anymore
I'm not sure I want to.

Note to stomach:
I do not know how much longer
I can deal with the stench of your decay
from the day all the butterflies died.
I often wonder if you mourn them
and if I should find some way to apologize.
It was me I was trying to kill.

Note to me:
I feel like we are growing apart.

Dear growth:
I am ready for the transformation that you promised
please don't let it be
one more vow that is broken
because I would ingest Miracle Grow
if I believed it could make me
bloom.

Dear vows:
Why am I the only one that has to listen to you lecture
when I was never loved or cherished
and it was broken glass
not death
which made us part.

Dear love,
I hate you.

Note to hate:
You stay over too often
and leave your molding food
hidden in my dresser drawers.
I think it's time we start seeing other people.

Dear people:
You don't know me
and you never will
because if there is anything I've learned
from our phone sex
it's that you can't be trusted
to see my real picture.

Dear picture:
I am sorry
that my mind operates on a photoshop philosophy
which is not capable
of accepting myself.
You were lovely
with background and focus in all the right places
it was the me part I didn't like

because no one else did.

The Stench

By Robert Masterson

Is it me, my feet
Or the air I breathe
These walls, floor
Ceiling with years of tar
And oversized beds with dirty sheets

First I thought it was the bus
Then I thought it was the school,
After hours
I thought it was either the bar or its fools

Surely it's not me
Perhaps it's the stench of diabetes on my breathe
Or the gases that emerge
From all the stuff I digest.
Perhaps when I finally stop to rest
The testimonies of my shoes
Begin to make their way towards my head

Around and beneath
I believe is the lair of the beast
In between the drywall and studs
Where after so many years
Moist wood is mostly debris

It is the same stench throughout my life
Which has influenced how I breathe, think and dream.
It is dank
Of mildew and mold
Combining with all else
Just enough to touch my nose

How I wish I could breathe
The same air as the birds and trees
Instead of being fumigated
In my pile of stick built debris

How I wish my wishes would no longer remain wishes
and would appear before me
Served on bright platters and elaborate dishes
How I wish I could breathe
Instead of sniffing in between this sneeze
This rejection from my head
Of the injection
Received from all sides of the bed.

How I wish the next phase of my life might begin
So my efforts to live a healthier life
Will not succumb to their ever brief end
How I need my stench to disperse in the wind.



Christina Whitney
Mongoose
Intaglio Print



Jaden Voils
Colors to Spare
Relief Print

Love

By Thomas Truesdale

With eyes of love heart full of desire, with burning truth and hair of fire.
Your love, it awaits a single kiss, from the one you married, without a miss
I can only hope you still feel the same, if not, I am lost in this endless game.
But I vow this word will always be true: that if given the chance, I would die for you.
In a moment's notice I feel your skin. It soothes a hurting that's deep within.
I can only dream that you feel the same, If not remember this...my name.
The longing to hold you forever eternal is only the beginning of my love supernal.
I look at you as a gift from above, as if, you have the wings of a dove.
I can only treat you with grace of a queen, just never forget this faithful thing....LOVE!

Here I Am

By Marlene Burmeister

Here I am Lord
I come to worship
Pants too tight
Jacket too big

Holes in my stockings
Shoes big and clunky
Fake pearls and shamrocks
Around my 'thick' neck

Silver bracelet bound
By 'inner elastic'
Hair combed, slightly askew
My wind-blown hair

I am here for You.
You are Mighty, so strong
Your world so very perfect
Sun, moon, grass, trees

Young voices in worship
Clear, comforting as a bell.
Love me, for I love You
In all You are, I give thanks.



Trace Houston
Black to White
Collage



Kendall Cahan
Edges
Collage

Stained Glass

By Anthony Tolbert

on this church pew, light burns bloodshot eyes
Amber...
inside my weary head
jonesing for things I know aren't right, temptation
another of those battles I can't win.
our joy as false as my sense of victory.
the only time I hear "I Love You"
is when toxicity is pumping through your veins.
silver stiches mark the path from your arm to mine.
I am a fool to think our time
more than a chemically induced ride.
no longer will I renovate this space
in my heart or my mind.
I wake to a light
peering through a stained glass window
taken by its amber embrace
my heart illuminated, elevated, purged, and exorcized.
Upright,
no longer am I living with your ghost inside
my head

Good Night Irene

By Nancy Posey

We stumbled-danced to "Good Night, Irene"
letting Thursday out the front door as Friday
slipped in through the back in the dark.
No one mistook us for the regulars, working
class stiffs celebrating the approach of payday.
College students out past curfew, underage,
signed out of the dorm to the homes of imaginary
aunts and uncles in town, we drank longneck beers
as long as someone else was buying, knowing
full well we should be cramming for finals
just days away. We loved everybody, dispensing
sloppy Miller-marinated kisses to boys we hardly knew
from World Civ, boys we wouldn't see all summer,
might not remember again in the fall. If they looked
cuter in the neon and shadows after midnight,
surely we glowed with the beauty and enthusiasm
found only in the temporary landscape of youth.
Only later did we realize there is no young Irene.



William Butland
House
Digital Media



William Butland
House 2
Digital Media

Never Wear Flip-flops in the Rain

By Kristy Hardway

Shelly arose bright and early on a Sunday morning, at 10:45 a.m. Well, that was her definition of bright and early on her one day off from the world. She pondered whether or not she should rename it “bright and early enough” to be fair. Five days a week, she was Little Miss Responsible, working a forty hour week, putting on makeup and pantyhose, paying bills and being an actual grown up. Saturdays were for dressing up, going shopping, going out to eat at a nice restaurant, and maybe catching a movie with Tracie, her BFF since she was fifteen. But Sundays were strictly reserved for being lazy.

Her typical Sunday-morning-single-twenty-eight-year-old-woman routine was as follows: 1. Sleep late. (She could check that one off the list) 2. Stay in pajamas all day. 3. Watch Lifetime channel movies all day long. 4. Eat horribly-bad-for-you junk food all day. 5. Stay up late (until about 1:00 a.m.) refusing to be a responsible adult with an early start to her work week. And by early start, this time she really meant it. She had to punch in at the office by 8:15 a.m. She typically used her three minute grace period, therefore, she needed to be up by 7:00 a.m. at the latest. The only interruption to her Sunday morning schedule she ever allowed was her ritual of driving to Bojangles’ in her pajamas while listening to a retro 80s show on the car radio. She would go through the drive through, get her share of greasy food, and drive home to gobble it up (okay, she ate most of her seasoned fries on the way home). She didn’t do church, didn’t feel the least bit guilty about it, and couldn’t be made to do either. She had been there and tried that. People never failed to disappoint her. Enough said. Shelly did more soul searching on her couch every Sunday morning than most of the people that filled the pews of local churches.

This particular Sunday morning was going to be good, she could tell. It was gray and rainy outside her bedroom window. The sound of the rain on the roof was actually what woke her up. The little house that she rented from her Mom was well insulated, so it has to be a real gully washer (or frog strangler, as her Daddy would say) in order for her to hear the rain. She wasn’t sure exactly why, but she loved rainy Sunday mornings. She wondered to herself if maybe her last name should have been Addams. Was it normal to love rainy mornings? To her, just knowing that she didn’t need to go out in the rain somehow made things seem cozier. It meant that she could thoroughly enjoy being holed up. She had an excuse not to go out, and could shut the world out without feeling guilty.

She went to the bathroom, took her seat on the throne, and sat there staring at the dirt ring around her bath tub while she conducted her business. She thought how nice it was not to have to worry about anyone else thinking that she was lazy for having a dirty bath tub. It had been on her mental to-do list for a couple weeks, but still remained undone. Every time she took a bubble bath (once or twice a week) she would see that dirt ring and vow to get rid of it. Oh well. On a brighter note, her floors looked like mirrors. That was at least one point for her housekeeping skills. As she took pride in her gleaming, clean linoleum, she reached for the cabinet, only two feet away, for her “feminine products” (otherwise known as FPs). There was only have one left. Bummer. That meant that she would have to go out, driving in the rain and go inside a store to purchase more. That put a huge hitch in her plans for the day. She sat

there until her legs were tingling and she was certain that she probably had a red toilet seat ring imprinted on her backside, contemplating and dreading. Why me? She resolved to go through all of the purses she kept in her closet to see if she could find any emergency FPs. Her search resulted in total failure. She rationalized that she would be going out anyway, and that she could just put on sweats, step into a pair of flip-flops, tie her hair up into a quick ponytail, and be in and out of a store in five minutes. No problem. She realized that she had better get going soon, though. The next Lifetime movie started in about forty five minutes. Rushing would only hamper her enjoyment of Slacker Sunday.

She went to her closet, wearing her most comfortable fleece pants (with pink and red hearts on them) and an oversized gray sweatshirt. She loved those soft, warm, fluffy pants. She reasoned with herself that if she switched the fleece pants for her gray sweat pants, they would match better with the sweater she was wearing. I can always put these fluffy pants back on when I get home. It sounded like too much work, and was probably breaking several of her lazy day rules, so she told herself that she would think about it while she chose the appropriate color flip-flops to wear. It was cold outside, so she was wearing socks. Her mom had laughed at her before for wearing socks with flip-flops, calling it “your thing.” It was typical quirky, slouchy, “Shelly’s day off” style. No one was going to see her feet from behind the counter at the Dollar General (DG) anyway. She never ran into anybody she knew there. She would leave that honor for Wal-Mart. Every other time she shopped there, she would see someone she hadn’t seen since the third grade, or a cousin or an aunt that she hadn’t seen since she was six. It was like a weird Twilight Zone for impromptu reunions. Shelly immediately ruled out wearing pajamas and flip-flops with socks. She decided that flip-flops and socks was just too weird for going out in public period. Granite Falls, North Carolina was just not ready for that yet.

She finally caved in, put forth the effort to change pants, and selected her favorite red flip-flops. Why not? Red and gray are a great color combination. She may not have cared to impress other people, but she didn’t want them to think that she had escaped from an asylum, either. Then it dawned on her that if she went into a store in her pajamas and flip-flops just before church services are supposed to begin or just after they let out, she would be subject to the “ooh, she didn’t go to church” stink eye. All this over FPs. Why did she even care what they thought? She decided that if that happened, then she would just have to allow whoever glared at her to feel smug about the whole thing and carry on with her life.

She drove up the back way to Lenoir, Highway 90, thinking about how creepy this road was at night, singing along with “How Soon is Now” by the Smiths: “I am the sonnn, and the heirrrr, ooof nothinnngg in particularrrrr.” It was difficult not to dance along in your seat with most of these songs. “I am huuuuman and I need to beee looooved, juuust like everybody eellse does,” she sang far too loudly into the emptiness of her Corolla, closing her eyes for emphasis, disregarding peril. It was also impossible not to be dramatic when singing songs like this one. Thank goodness for the fact that she felt anonymous in her small car. There, her heinous lack of musical talent didn’t matter. She could sing and perform with feeling, and there was no one to see, hear, or be offended by it on this lonely stretch of blacktop.

After getting her food, she headed for the Dollar General, when a new concern breached her mind: What if she ran into Prince Charming in the DG? It wouldn’t be fair. On one hand, it would be the modern day equivalent of Elizabeth Bennett meeting

Mr. Darcy in a field, her hair wild and messy, her cheeks flushed and her skirt filthy from walking a great distance in the muck and tall, wet grass. On the other hand, she hadn't yet been proposed to by a wealthy, handsome man. And anyway, what the heck would he be doing in Caldwell County, shopping at the DG? It was safe to assume that bumping into her soul mate there would not present a problem at this time. She did her best to dodge puddles of rain in the parking lot while walking in. It made no difference, because she still got her feet and flip-flops wet.

Wet flip-flops are slippery, she suddenly realized. Her thoughts wandered to classic horror films, the ones where a woman is running from a chain saw wielding maniac, when she breaks the heel of her stiletto (as you do in situations where your life depends on escaping) and falls down. Hopefully, no maniacs would be chasing her between now and the time she arrived safely back at home. She began to mentally flip through the catalogue of other scary story scenarios, starring helpless females. There was the standard yarn where a woman is driving (usually at night) by herself down an isolated back road, when her car breaks down. Enter the maniac. She ends up abducted, and either never seen again, or found murdered, in a ditch, (it's always a ditch in those stories). Shelly wondered how she would walk for miles in flip-flops in the rain to get to a phone if she had to (cell phones never seem to have signals in these settings), or how she would escape, running from a would-be abductor in wet flip-flops.

Shelly was terrified of being pulled over by a cop. She never drove too fast, and never drove after she'd been drinking, but she always felt like she must be doing something wrong when a state trooper got behind her. She scanned the horizon in her mirror and didn't see any, but couldn't stop the escalation of neurotic, frenzied, irrational fears in her mind from forming a scene: In it she was horribly injured or killed in a car accident because she had been driving while wearing wet, slippery flip-flops. The worst thing about that whole picture would be when other women said things like, "She never did get married or have any children. What a shame," clicking their tongues and nodding their heads in disbelief. The thing that scared Shelly the most was the possibility that those women may have a valid point. The truth was that there was something missing from her life, which was why she needed things like these rainy Sunday mornings, listening to the music of her teenage years and loading up on junk food. These things soothed her. She was only human, and just like everyone else, she ached for that sense of belonging. She couldn't help but wonder if her neuroticism would be quelled once she was in that lifelong relationship that everyone dreamed of. Was that the reason she felt so very vulnerable out in the world? Would Prince Charming really rescue her one day?

Get a grip, Shelly. She decided to talk herself back down to the reality of the situation and resume normal breathing. She was safe and sound with food and FPs successfully purchased, and nearly all the way home. She checked the car's clock and saw that she still had fifteen minutes before her movie started. Breathing a sigh of relief, she pulled into her driveway, got out with her Bojangles' bag and FPs, and walked carefully to her front door, looking down to make sure of her footing. There was a reason her mama often said, "Clumsy should have been your middle name, girl." She was calm now, but was leaving nothing to chance. It was difficult to balance everything and unlock the door, but she managed.

Once inside, she kicked her flip-flops off and plopped down in her cushy recliner, remote in hand. Time to kick off the Lifetime marathon. Just before the first movie

started, she had time to think about what she would say when all the ladies at work asked her what she had done for fun over the weekend. “Oh, the usual. I saw that new horror film and tried a new restaurant,” she would probably tell them. None of them would have anything exciting to tell either, but still they would dismiss what she said as unimportant, and charge tactlessly toward their point: the burning question they would really want to ask would be who she had gone with. Smiling devilishly, they would torment the token single girl of the group. She could dazzle them all with her cooking skills at the company dinners, cast her vote in every election, return her library books on time, keep her car spotless, and swap recipes with the best of them. The fact remained that she was always going to be the odd woman out until she had a ring on her finger and a car seat in the back of her car. Shelly would try to get out of the office unnoticed on Mother’s Day, dodging the inevitable, “Oh, you’re not a mother yet,” typical sort of reminders bestowed on her by the other ladies as they said their customary goodbyes for the day. They had no idea how their careless remarks stung her. These words, however intended, planted seeds of self-doubt in a young person, who needed encouragement rather than repudiation echoing in her budding mind.

She looked over at the red flip-flops, flung haphazardly by the door, glistening with rain. Should she regale them all with a story of how she risked life and limb to get a pack of Kotex pads and some greasy fast food while sporting a sweat suit and slick flip-flops? She considered it only briefly, and quickly opted to keep that tale to herself.

For Mature Audiences

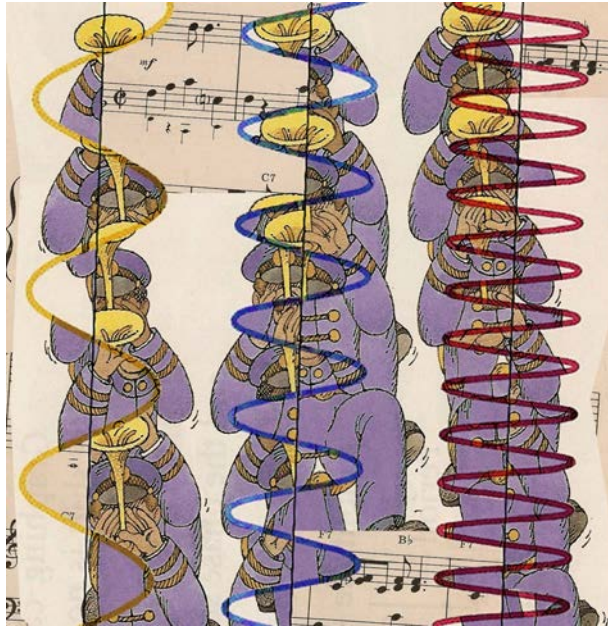
By Nancy Posey

Someone should put up a warning sign
at the city limits of this town, a caution
in this neighborhood where next-door
neighbors fear to stop and chat, where chains
are kept on doors and deadbolts serve
to bolster confidence. Never picture perfect,
even years ago, when in houses
with pickets fences, moms in aprons,
pearls, and heels, served dinner on TV,
this town garnered notoriety,
the opening story on the local evening news
too many times to count, almost cliché:

Another drive-by shooting in West Arcadia. . .
Police are on the lookout for a suspect. . .
The parents of a one-year-old are being held. . .

Instead of blaming something in the water,
some primal toxic sludge flowing in from far way,
and instead of blaming genes or race or history,
we diagnose deficiency of hope—failing schools,
factories shut down, moved overseas, a culture
of drugs and guns and hate, self-loathing and despair.

The pressure cooker world cannot contain
the seething turmoil boiling up, the rage
exploding one fatality at a time—one more
fatherless child, one more mother racked with grief.



Robert Schley
Sound
Mixed Media



Leanna Gruen
Twisted Ocean
Intaglio Print

Lost

By Kristy Hardway

This alcohol doesn't taste the same
As it did when I was twenty;
It doesn't blur the focus of the mundane.
It gives me a headache halfway
 through the first short glass
And I just fall asleep in front of the TV.
These movies that we stood in line to see
At the theater long since torn down
Aren't quite as magical
When you can rent it for ninety nine cents
Or find it at the bottom of a bargain bin.
Those factories that used to belch filth
And cause traffic jams at 3:30
On weekday afternoons
Stand empty and haunted,
By people who lived for that holiday pay
So they could stand in line for hours
At the layaway department
And buy for their families
A meager Christmas
Wrapped in bright paper
With shiny red bows,
Or a vacation close to home.
Buildings that used to be homes
Filled with happy families, smiling faces,
And the smells of home cooked meals
stand surrounded by cracked pavement
With weeds growing through,
Tall like the trees that must have been there first
Only one hundred and fifty years ago.
The trees made the lumber
That made the furniture

That employed hundreds of thousands
Who made a few wealthy enough
To expand worldwide
And send the jobs away.
This cheap furniture I sit on
Came back from overseas
And is falling apart
Piece by piece
And is nothing like the stuff
They used to make
That fills antique stores, prized and admired.
That tent I saw put up in someone's yard
Couldn't hold all the memories
We made while camping.
These occasions for family to meet
Are becoming more dreaded
As we grow older
And the family grows smaller.
Youth, pride, honesty, the familiar,
The safe and reliable;
Where have they all disappeared to?
If only we could escape from
All the for sale signs
And being forced to settle for less
The world has become too big and too small
All at once.
I would like to have a word
With the culprits that designed it all.
They are indifferent and unavailable to me,
And I am invisible and insignificant to them.
Clever and fortunate is the one
Who discovers how to manipulate
Nonexistence.



Nancy Posey
Rust in Peace
Digital Photography



Sarah Vang
Jelly Doughnuts
Acrylic

Respiration

By Holly Michaels

she breathes in

passes minutes silently sipping at the coffee shop
complains of the smog
wondering
how anyone could ever want to go for a jog
in such a run down city
she doesn't feel pretty when the wind
grabs her hair and tries
to run away
whispers in her ear
that she could elope with the springtime
no one would need to know before the flowers
start to fade
yet summer feels like miles away
so instead, she envies girls with tussled hair
and yoga pants
pursuing purpose on playlists
with ipod shuffle faiths

one of them skips a track

a new day
new hair color
new name
yet everything remains the same
she can almost taste complacency, almost
if she could just taste anything
except for day old coffee
and the lingering smell of ash
from fires which always seem to burn
the reds and golds of yesterday
leaf piles fill her lungs with their memories
beg her to come take a leap
lose her reservations
with a splash of autumn engulfing her senses
yet she could never give in to the laughter
like one of the foolish children
which always smile at her
as if they know her past

one of them strikes a match

days shorten
fire burns lower
as snow clings greedily to the glass
she stares out a window
laces up her tennis shoes
but the days for making memories have passed
how did they pass so fast? she questions
as she closes her eyes
dreams of time

breathes out



Jayme Braun
Untitled
Intaglio Print



Katie Sweeney
Modern Mom
Graphite

The Aurora of Life

By Dustin Bass

Life is so beautiful it makes me cry
Life is so tragic it makes me cry

My flesh is warm
touch it and I'll pull away
touch it and I'll stay

Colors,
oh what colors of gold
orange,
to hell with heaven's white
give me paradise of ephemeral sunsets
orange melting indigo
before my watering sight
shapes of maidens in gold
and knights of fire
always pulling apart
pushing together
always swimming higher and higher

I hope I die there
in the sea of light

Oh but give me night
darkness
let me know sorrow
make me an intimate friend always
give all this wonder meaning
let the drop of joy
make brilliant the darkness
and give it stars
always stars
thousands by millions
brilliant in my sight
let the terror be quelled by wonder
chill me
shiver me in this play

Oh, I am putty before your might
be gentle
ever gentle

I, glass
human like the rest
clay and water
how sublime to say I lived life



Josh Keranovic
Face
Monoprint



Tapainga Kemp
Untitled
Prismacolor

Moonlight in a Window

By Rachel Michaels

I

She gazes intensely at the full moon
as it shines precariously through her window,
a golden chandelier suspended
high above her bed, for such an occasion as this.

II

He whispers to her in the darkness,
tastes her perfumed sweat mingled with his own.
“Tell me you love me,”
he runs his finger across moist lips
“I love you,” she whispers assuringly.

III

He sighs deeply, satisfied with the words;
caresses her firm breasts, taking his time.
He savors the moment,
knowing their intimacy will be short,
as it always is with forbidden love.
“Tell me again,” he begs; softly she replies, “I love you.”

IV

She stares out her window,
wonders if the moon is watching,
thinks briefly of her husband
still at work, for hours yet.
Then at last, it is over,
the gun put away, the thief has gone;
there in the dark,
 alone
 she cries.



Elise Osha
Untitled
Digital Photography



Chris Dula
Blossom
Digital Photography

ManBoy

By Robert Masterson

My god.... I'm crazy...
It is wet, it is dark, it is light.
It is hot, so humid and bright
Heat waves dance ahead in my line of sight

Sweat reddens my eyes
Crawling down my skin like patient bugs.
I am glistening in sweat
Mangled with rat-tail hair

I am crazy for letting the army take me so far from God
My stories would make you think I am a devil
I could be honest with you, tell you of what I have done
You would think I am sick...
But in all my stories, I ask you to remember
I had a mother once...

When the blue helmets and giant trucks
Took all the children and women
And left the boys and men in mud
My father told me to be brave
That the only chance for living was to run.

When the soldiers came
We listened to their sounds,
Their shots and screams
The sounds drove the men to tell stories
Stories of how the attackers extracted intestines
And struck the still living with their whips of flesh
How they gouged eyes and tore limbs
And tantalized the living
Simply to find their nerves end.
My father silenced them
And faced me towards him.

“When the light is seen... run
Do not dwell on me
Find your mother and sister
Run and hide and run some more
I love you my son, it is my bad fortune
I have raised my only boy in the middle of the war.”

He then kicked open the door
Dust swirled and sunlight flooded my eye
I saw only leaves, only green
And the darkness behind
I saw where I needed to hide.

As I ran, bullets slapped both sides of my line of sight
Kicking dirt and dust
And everything else their tip managed to strike.
That is when I felt the white
As it threw me in sky so high.

When I awoke
I tried to open my eyes
And still saw black
I smelled...felt the burning
But knew I was alive
For a crack lie close by
A crack filled with shadows and light.

I lay there...pretending to die
Laid so still for so long
I might as hell have been dead
Until all at once, multiple hands
Tore the tin metal roofing from over my head.

I was unclothed and thrown in the mud
Before the boots of a mighty brute
Whose face towered over me, blotching the sun

He smiled wide and smoked long
Offered me food and drink
And spoke my name as if it title of an old song
I was thrown in his ranks
Thrown a machete and pair of fatigues

Soon my shirt became my skin
My eyes became red and scarred
I lost the power to sleep
I stayed awake
But was still able to rest my eyes and dream
as I sat with my blade, staring out at the jungle
Leaning against some tall, towering tree.

I believe the trees sent my messages from earth
Through the root, mud and soot
Perhaps God still saw my soul was good.

It was not long before I had to kill.

One day I was commanded deface a man
I watched as he cried to me as if i were god
Soiled his trousers and grasped my feet
Commanded by the same smoking giant
Who had killed my father
And made my mother and sister flee.

I stroke the man
As a hammer strikes a stone
Feeling the pain ricochet against his skull
Back into my own.
The men laughed
As blood mixed with the sweat
And demonized my eyes.
I felt an anger that came to me with impulsive surprise,
The pain infuriated me
Embedding me with a sudden spite.
Embraced from within
I soon learned to feel without
To feel with your face, skin and hand
But not where memories would linger in the mind.

Now I am murderer
Killing another man
Is like introducing
Cold boot feet
Into hot bathwater
At first repulsive... as it's supposed to be
Then with repetition
Something dark stirs within
As it begins to feel so sweet.

Now I am a character
In the nightmares of little boys
Much like myself
I am an apparition
I wisp of smoke in the shadow
Which can suddenly spawn the seed of hell.

I am a monster, a beast
With a numb conscience
And an ego supreme
Yet smaller and younger than any other
Yet as you read of me and shake your head
I simply ask that you remember
That I as well...once had a mother.



Katie Sweeney
Autumn View
Low-fire Ceramics



Katie Sweeney
Boone View
Low-fire Ceramics

Finding Iris

By Kristy Hardway

He woke up again on the same park bench beside a bronze statue of some forgotten Civil War soldier atop a horse. The sun was beating down full force, and birds were chirping, singing loud and trilling songs. Too many at once, shrill and piercing, heightening his sense of confusion. He raised his hand to shield his eyes. He couldn't remember how he'd gotten here, but somehow he had fallen asleep again without being conscious of it. Then he would wake again, on this bench. He began to have vague remembrances, brief flashes in his mind, of a blond girl sitting here on the bench with him, talking to him. In his strained, foggy recollection, she had begun to cry and begged him not to leave. It was Iris. How could he forget Iris? Where was she? Panic gripped him. Was something wrong with him? Was he having a stroke? Had he been struck on the head? Maybe he would try to find a hospital.

He searched hurriedly but unsuccessfully in his jeans pockets for his wallet, panic rising in his chest. He felt a sense of relief when his hand touched the smooth leather wallet in the pocket of his jacket. He opened it and looked at his driver's license. Peter Franklin Hutchins, 1502 Indian Summer Lane, King's Fork, NC, DOB 11/08/1949. For a brief moment, he didn't feel connected to any of the information printed on the small plastic rectangle, yet he knew that the face on it was his. Strangely enough, he could recall with perfect clarity the morning he had gone for his license: He had started to slick his hair back into the style that was popular with all of his classmates, but his mother had protested. You have such gorgeous, wavy black hair, son. Why would you want to put that goop in it? She had emphasized the word "goop" with a sour face. He had been a little nervous because it was his first license, but he had put on his typical air of cockiness. No sweat. There were other things in his wallet as well: a library card, a business card for Sam's Garage, and over two hundred dollars. He suddenly got the feeling that he wasn't supposed to be here. There was somewhere else he needed to be, somewhere very important. But where? He tried hard for a few minutes to focus. No answers came. He decided that he wasn't going to let it worry him right now. He knew something was wrong and that it was more important that he get to a hospital. Perhaps he'd been attacked the night before. But nothing was missing from his wallet. He was beginning to feel anxious again. He got to his feet and looked around. The park started to look more and more familiar. Iris. Her face flashed in his mind again. Promise me you'll come back to me, she pleaded with her large, dark eyes, framed by melting black mascara. She was sobbing, her arms tight around his neck, her wet face pressed against his shoulder. He hadn't been the only boy arriving at boot camp with traces of some girl's makeup on his collar. Please don't cry, Iris.

He decided to walk around and find his bearings. The sun seemed to be setting already. Hadn't it just been morning? His sense of time had become distorted. Who knows how long he had been in this park, perhaps suffering from a life threatening injury. Odd, though, that he felt no pain. He continued walking the narrow, paved path that continued along the perimeter of the park, just inside a wrought iron gate. He surveyed the distant horizon, a skyline that seemed to undulate with the curves of low mountains that had been blanketed with snow. When had it snowed? Why wasn't it cold? The sun was a giant, red-orange ball of fire slipping slowly down behind the pale blue hills. The ground under his feet was now covered in a thin dusting of fine, powdery, freshly fallen snow. It was melting on the black tarmac of the pathway. "Pete, that's one sweet hotrod!" Mental flash of a young blond man in a white tee shirt, sleeves rolled up. He was grinning from ear to ear. They had been

somewhere eating a cheeseburger and fries. It was their favorite place, where all the kids went to hang out in the evening before curfew. The young man was his best buddy, John, and he had been admiring his baby blue 1955 convertible Chevy Bel Air. They were in the front seat, with John at the wheel, driving down Main Street on a warm summer night. The lights of the shops made a brilliant show in the evening hours of the sleepy small town. John was revving the engine, laughing uncontrollably as the big engine rumbled like a beast issuing a final warning to its prey before it mercilessly devoured it. "Dorks like you don't deserve cars like this!" John teased him like the brother he had never had. "It's yours if anything happens to me. I've already told Mom and Dad," Pete remembered telling his friend. John's smile fell away, the happy light in his eyes dimming with sadness. "Don't say things like that, Pete," John managed to mumble, a slight tremor in his voice. "John, something is wrong. Can you take me to the hospital? And I need to speak to Iris," Pete asked quietly and gravely. Pete? A distant voice seemed to be saying something, full of concern tinged with fear as John, the interior of the Bel Air, and the town lit with neon signs in the deepening dusk faded away. Pete?

He was on the bench again. The snow had become a gentle rain. Pete thought that he should quickly head for the shelter of a nearby clump of trees, but then realized that he was somehow perfectly dry. He walked slowly over to the trees, standing beneath the cover of the canopy they formed with their limbs. He was gazing up into them, trying to see if there were any stars peering through the rain clouds, when that sense of urgency returned full force. He suddenly felt alarmed, and that he needed to tell Iris something right away. There was some movement in the dark from which he had come. Someone was on the bench. He looked closer. It was Iris. He couldn't believe it. Finally, he knew that everything was going to be all right. He must have run toward her, but it seemed to take too long to reach the bench. Everything was moving in slow, nightmarish speed. No, this can't be happening! I have to get to her!

Judy knew that she'd find her little sister in the park. It was where she'd always gone with Pete for evening strolls and the innocent affection shared by childhood sweethearts. Iris had been taking things hard. Judy knew that in time, Iris would heal, but for now, she was suffering indescribable pain. There was nothing that Judy could do or say to ease her sister's misery, and now she had to perform a dreaded task. She had to give her the small box and envelopes with Iris' name and address on them. She could understand why Pete's parents couldn't handle delivering these things to Iris in person. They had enough of a burden to bear. Iris had not been home when the postman, his face grim and troubled, delivered the items. He knew. Judy had wept privately in the bathroom, muffling her sobs with a plush towel. "Let me do it, Mama," she had said, gently placing her hand on her mother's. She was as prepared as she would ever be. Time to get this over with, so everyone could begin the process of getting back to normal.

Iris was on the park bench, clearly lost in thought, her small hands neatly folded in her lap, atop the skirt of her bright green and yellow floral sheath dress. Her long legs were crossed at the ankles, the scuffed bottoms of her white pumps showing. Her chin length bob, now bleached to platinum although naturally a dark blond, had been teased and sprayed into impenetrable perfection, with the white hair band carefully and strategically nestled. "Judy?" Iris looked up from her lap, flashing a smile of perfect white teeth. Judy could not speak. She could not bring herself to step any closer to her sister. She suddenly saw just how fragile her baby sister was. God, this was so unfair! Iris saw the look on her sister's face and the parcels that she had in her sweating, trembling hands. "Iris," Judy choked, her voice cracking, failing, becoming a whisper of anguish.

Pete woke on the bench in the park. Here comes that feeling of *déjà vu*. This time was different, though. He felt calm. The confusion was no longer there. He knew that something terrible had happened, but now the devastation and upheaval had dissipated. Somewhere a dust cloud had settled. He was more relaxed than he had been in a long time, though just how long he couldn't be sure. He could remember that he had just been somewhere warm and sunny, but he had returned here. This time he knew that he was going to leave the park and go somewhere that only certain people could go. He felt peaceful. Iris sat on the bench where they had said their goodbyes the day he shipped off to the Army. He had been drafted, and was being sent to war. He knew very little about Vietnam, but it didn't matter much. At least he hadn't known enough at the time to be scared. He sat down on the bench beside Iris. On her lap, she had what looked like an old package of some sort. The lid of the small cardboard box was open. Inside, among wadded up newsprint paper, lay his dog tags, the chain entwined with her small class ring. The box had been sitting on top of an envelope. It was the last letter he had written. It hadn't been delivered before it happened. The envelope looked as if it had been through all kinds of weather on its way to her, and had been torn open. She took the yellowed paper from inside and unfolded it. She was smiling as she read the words written in Pete's loopy handwriting. I'm here, Iris. She closed her eyes, smiling, remembering Pete's peculiar laugh. She heard herself laughing aloud. "Loony lady in the park; News at eleven," laughed John as he walked toward her. For a brief moment as their eyes met, they paused in their mirth. There was a weariness lining their faces, a tragedy temporarily etched on the smooth faces of ones too young to have suffered such a loss. The faint freckles that were scattered across the bridge of Iris' nose belied the wisdom that now dwelled behind her sapphire eyes. John sat down beside her. After a long silence, he spoke to her, "I know you don't want to hear this, but you're young. You'll find someone someday and get married and probably have lots of kids." Though awkwardly delivered, it was a valiant attempt to console his best friend's girl. Pete smiled at both of them. He was awash in the light of the love that he felt for them. Yes, you will, Iris. I can picture him now. He's a good man who is going to love you for the rest of your life. Iris couldn't help but smile at John, like a mother smiles at a small child with chocolate frosting on its face, defiantly denying that it had eaten any cake. She knew in her heart that John could never say or do anything purposely to hurt anyone. He had always been there for Pete, and she had no doubt that he would be there for her if ever she needed him. He was truly Pete's chosen brother. Never were two people more alike. He pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and dangled them in front of her face. "His mom gave them to me yesterday," he explained, "She just smiled and said that a deal is a deal." He had had an unsettling dream of riding in the car with Pete the night before, and had woken from the dream crying, his heart aching with a cruel, lingering melancholy. "It's nice what they did for him," Iris added, blinking in the bright sun. John nodded in agreement. Pete felt himself filling with warm, pure light. He knew that any moment he would shatter soundlessly into trillions of particles of love, becoming one with the breeze that blew past the flowers and the trees and the people who carried on with life. "Wanna go for a ride?" John asked. "I haven't been in that car in a while. It'll be weird, but nice," Iris felt clouded by a mix of emotions. They walked away from the bench, now adorned with a bronze plaque that read: "Dedicated by the Hutchins family, in memory of their son, Peter Franklin Hutchins, 11/08/1949 – 6/19/1970." Pete watched them drive off, knowing that everything was going to be okay. Someone called to him. Several voices were talking and laughing from somewhere over the hill, just behind the blinding sunlight. He turned, smiling, toward its warmth and stepped into the bliss of eternity.



Bobby Jordan Sumpter
High Wire
Wire



Robert Miller
Study of Emotion and Ancient Cultures
Low-fire Ceramics

Mama Mia

By Alyce Nadeau

Her mama's name
Was Angelina Pastore.
(An-je-leigh-na
Pass-tor-ree.)
Don't you just love the way that feels
Coming out of your mouth?

An arranged marriage to Roberto
Back in the days,
Their exuberant verbal battles
Could attract more attention
Than minor earthquakes
Frequent along the Mediterranean.

And when three "blessed events" could toddle
They were frozen wide-eyed,
Breathless in their play
As name-calling,
Enhanced by consumption of new wine
Filled their property
Blasted little ears
Singed their skin like white hot flames
From an open furnace door.

Somehow they immigrated to New Jersey.
(Did Italian neighbors empty their own coffers
In order to erase that noise,
Restore peace and harmony?)

Angelina
Pastore
Could have been the mother of Gina Lollobrigida
Or a female Mafia boss.

The daughters grew to teenagers
Speaking perfect English
Listening to Metropolitan Opera on radio
As they polished furniture,
Scrubbed all house surfaces
Every Saturday.

Never allowed to be unchaperoned
These three sisters obeyed,
Stayed,
With their alabaster skin,
dark flashing eyes,
Thick black curls,
Tiny waists
And minded as they went to Mass
Fingered Rosaries
Did penance for naught.

Angelina Pastore's time became occupied
With finding suitable husbands
Before it was too late
Before disgrace visited
Disguised as healthy young males.

High school was all her girls needed
And cooking
And sewing
And obedience promised.

The nest emptied
But Angelina and Roberto
Continued full throttle
Even into Nursing Home placement
Starting as roommates in the same space
Then different rooms
Finally, separate halls
Scorched by their habitual, finely-tuned,
white hot hate.

Children and their children
Stayed as far away as possible
Drew lots for duty visits
Short and sweet.

Then, when both were older than God
The ancient Roberto died
And Angelina Pastore
Wept bitter tears
Could not be consoled
Lived out her life in a wheelchair
Shrunken, wrinkled as an apple-doll
Spinning tales of Roberto
Handsome, saintly, wonderful
Roberto
The love of her life.

Say what?



Tyler Berryhill
The Wave
Low-fire Ceramics



Jared M. Smith
Delicate?
Low-fire Ceramics

Pressed Petals

By Holly Michaels

calloused hands trace stretch marks
like highways sprawled across the map
yet there is no destiny
in our destination

every thrust of your prideful pelvis
reminds me
 reminds me
 reminds...
that I am nothing more
than rotting petals on a rose
 edges turned to ebony
 fill the air with sickening sweet decay
while summer is still as fresh on your tongue
as I am

a blind night moves on
without questioning
and I begin to loathe
languid limbs
which will not tap into the courage
coursing within my bloodstream

arms which refuse to rise to action
legs which could only lose
 only lie
 only p a r t
in a room almost as dark
as I am

cotton mouth
protests too quietly
when two simple letters
shouldn't be so hard
 to scream

still I softly say them
 over and over again
 I say them
 weakly
to ears which will only hear
the message you are seeking

your salty sweat
rolls down my cheek like tears,
you find permission I never granted
in each smack
of traitor thighs
 you hear the yes
 my words deny
until my dignity collapses with you
and it's done
 or maybe
 it's just begun
as I lie across this prison cell bed,
I listen to you sleep

try to remember
what it felt like
to be new
and clean

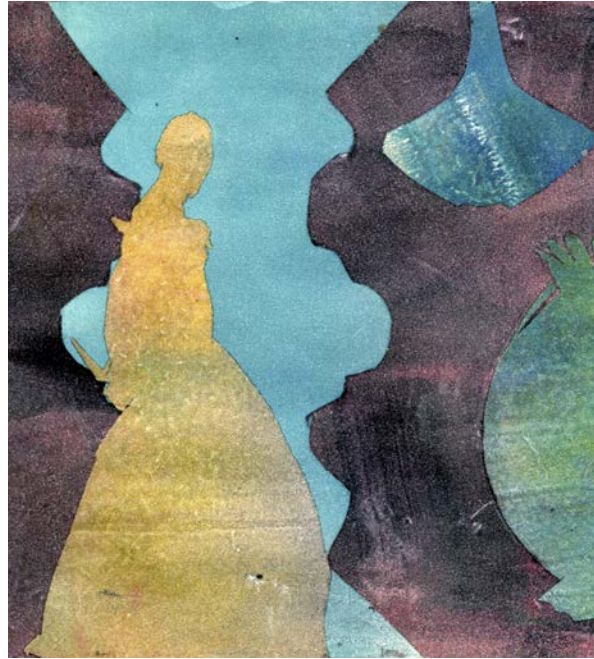
try to remember
the way my heart believed
the first time you looked at me

try to remember
what little girls dream of
when they dream

of love.

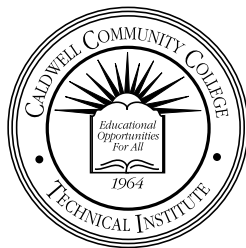


Carrie Hayes
Fish
Low-fire Ceramics



Sahasa Ben-Avari
Petticoat with Knife
Monoprint

Awarded Cover Art for *Branches*, Volume 20



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