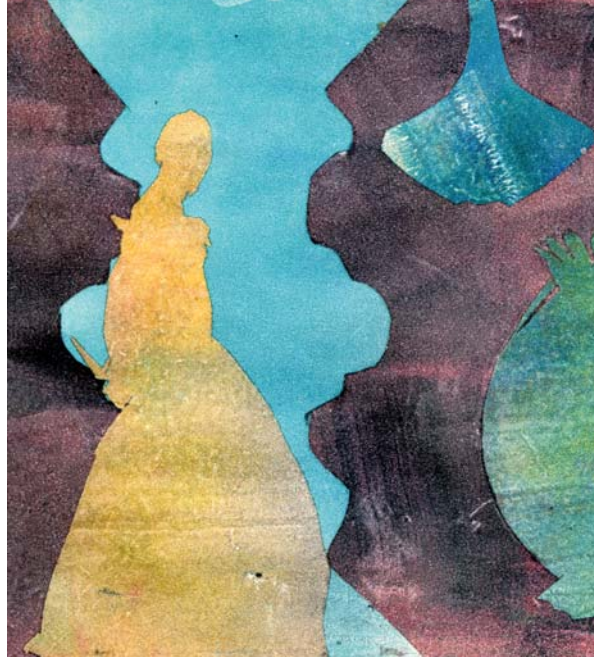


Branches

volume twenty



Sahasa Ben-Avari
Petticoat with Knife
Monoprint

Acknowledgements

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Special Thanks:

Dustin Greene
Sandra Reece
Edward Terry

Funding and other support for *Branches* was provided by the CCC&TI Foundation, the College Transfer Division and the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences.

To view previous editions of *Branches* or to find out more information about submitting works of art or literature to the 21st edition of *Branches*, please visit our website at www.cccti.edu/branches.

Table of Contents

Who Has Forever Anyway.....	Rebecca (Ivy) Fyans	Frontispiece
Fade Into You	Matt McGuire.....	1
Untitled	Michael Buschine	2
Fire!	Holly Michaels	3
Northbound Armadillos.....	Nancy Posey	5
Wedding Mums	Leslie Gragg	6
Mother of Pearl	Joel Pilchard	6
Hearts	Taryn Miersch.....	7
Progress	Andrew Thorp	8
Collage.....	Samantha Blevins	8
Waves Upon the Shore	S. David Arnsdorff	9
Questlove.....	Dominic Ascanio.....	10
No Matter What People Tell You, Words and Ideas Can Change the World	Alexandra Fishero	10
Hidden Mother	DeAnna Hawn Chester	11
Box Mug	Melinda Presnell	12
Red Bird.....	Kristy Hardway	13
Mangos	Samuel Oliver	14
2 Bananas	Carole Childers	14
Depiction	L.B. Sedlacek.....	15
Arnolfini Double Portrait as Squares	Brian Her	16
When Memories Bloom	Carol Hartis	16
Dead Letter Office	Nancy Posey	17
Untitled	Daniella Alvarez	18
Untitled	Jessie Taylor	18
Reckoning	Nolan Capps.....	19
Saint.....	Katie Price.....	22
The Ritual	Braxton Beaver	22
The Bee Cup	L.B. Sedlacek.....	23
Tom's Tea.....	Holly Kort.....	24
Cardinal Rouge	Lindsey Brewer	24
Bubblegum.....	Kristy Hardway	25
Ennui	Colin Bolton	26
Untitled	Joel Pilchard	26
Someone Else's Life	Sharon Howard	27
Imperial Six-Twenty.....	Kaitlyn Smith	30
Please Don't Call It 'App'	Kristy Hardway	31
Frekin Out Da Neighborhood	Bennett Lloyd	32
Stutts Self-Portrait	Walker Allen Stutts	32
Backward/Forward	L.B. Sedlacek.....	33
Stoke the Flame	Michael Buschine	34
Card Table.....	Aaron Harris.....	34
Sonny.....	Holly Michaels	35
Pushing	Shannon Saunders.....	37
Untitled	Chris Dula	38
Reflections	Robert Kent	38
Alarm Clock 3 a.m.	Nancy Posey	39
Dark Face	Tapainga Kemp.....	40
38 Special.....	Kristen Jones.....	40
When Henry Ford Hid the Moon	Matt McGuire.....	41
Rorschach	Holly Michaels	43
Banana Paradise.....	Jennifer Jackson	44
Bottles	Ashley Barnett.....	44
Trails	KJ Maj	45
Forest.....	Jayne Braun	46
Candle Lit Ambiguous Sphere Reflection.....	Briana Schaller	46
Am I a God of Writing?.....	Claude Pearson	47
Book Bouquet	Monica Moore	48
Transcendence	Jennifer Winebarger	49
Gus Gus.....	Melissa Anderson	49
Taxi	Frances Nicholson.....	50



Rebecca (Ivy) Fyans
Who Has Forever Anyway

Oil Paint

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

Fade Into You

By Matt McGuire

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

The stars trailed off behind us as we blazed through the cool desert night in my old convertible the summer before you died. We rushed towards the silver black horizon holding hands and trying not to look at each other. I was taking you away from nothing, really. We were headed towards nothing and running from nothing into a future of nothingness that didn't matter anymore because we had three months, tops. The doctor whose name I can't remember told you that your breast cancer was terminal, and we'd decided to just go. As if the interstate was the cure for grief and loss and infertility and ductal carcinoma and all the other random cruelties that two people married for a three-year eternity could suffer. The sand slid by in the periphery as you squeezed me a little tighter when Hope Sandoval's gravel slick voice on the radio made you remember our honeymoon in New Orleans. Walking through St. Peter Street Cemetery at 3 am. The smell of lemon verbena and old bones. I gazed bloodshot down at your small, thin hand with its golden band in mine and I pressed the gas pedal a little tighter to the floor. I watched the needle climb way past illegal and looked long over at your midnight hair flowing back towards yesterday. I raised your pale left hand to my lips and tasted the salt of your skin mixed with my tears, coming now like long-awaited rain. I saw your smile flash in the dim light of the waning moon. Your eyes said, "It's going to be okay."

Ten years have passed. I'm remarried. At her request, my old convertible is rusting now in a junkyard somewhere near Dallas. We have a daughter and a son on the way. My new wife is everything you weren't. She's a bottle blonde, a great mother, a good cook, and a sorry lay. In my more introspective moments, I have no idea who she is. I still tell myself, inside myself, in your voice, that "it's going to be okay." I never believe me the way I believed in you. Some say that true love comes once in a lifetime. Whoever "they" are, I believe them, because I died that night in the Arizona desert as the mile markers slipped away in the taillights. I live now because you wouldn't respect a quitter. The smell of verbena and the grave lingers under the scent of my morning coffee. I go to work in our Dodge minivan, come home, kiss the kid and hug my wife, do my long-term service commitment to God, country and family values, and then I go upstairs after dark and slip on my old headphones. Mazzy Star isn't on the radio anymore, but she's still got the only slot in my single disc player. The world is a cruel and different place without true love, but round midnight I slide into my leather chair, press the gas pedal a little tighter to the floor, and fade into you.



Michael Buschine
Untitled
Alabaster

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



Fire!

By Holly Michaels

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

They told me to yell fire.
Yell fire,
because all these things are worth more
than a woman's body,
and we can suffer the ashes of a childhood dream
easier than those of the flat screen tv,
yell fire
and they all will come running.

So I scream it.
Scream the wrong four letters
until the flames burn my lungs
like a crumpled up suicide note.
I scream it
until a phoenix is reborn in my throat
and you hear every note that it sings
as it cries out for redemption,
cries out for change,

change
for every girl that takes the wrong way home
because it has more streetlights,
who has practiced the right way to hold her keys,
has practiced
looking sexy on her knees
because maybe he will settle for that
this time,
for every girl trying to measure the millimeters of her skirt line
to ensure it doesn't move beyond alluring
to consent,
that's not what she meant
but everyone measures differently.

It is important that she understand
in their minds it won't matter
how her syllables land,
her every sentence contains a question mark,
because she is "asking for it."

That is how they read her,
read her like a too-thick novel they had to get for class,
skimming quickly to the back,
never appreciating the dark paragraphs
in the middle.

One of many,
where women stand as musty, yellow-paged bookshelves,
take what you need
and rearrange what's left
for someone else to put back
in place.

Put her in her place.

So I yell for her,
fire! fire! fire!
we are more
than the sum of your desire,
more than our attire,
more than a trophy you can acquire,
we are more.

We are dreamers and mountain climbers,
we are the survivors,
though we should not have to be
and do not say
we are someone's mother or wife,
not tonight,
for we have value in ourselves
and we are tired of screaming fire
when the building already burned down to the ground.

We are tired of standing in smoldering embers
as you ask us what is wrong,
ask us why it took so long to call,
when we've been screaming all along
and you warmed your feet by the fire.

We are tired
and we will not yell fire
anymore.

Northbound Armadillos

By Nancy Posey

Through some strange geographical evolution
armadillos migrate north —
possums on the half shell —
appearing dead in the tall roadside grass
in northern Alabama and middle Tennessee.

The live ones, almost as rare as unicorns,
must move by night, under cover,
armor clad, as if heading
toward the northern lights,
not only miles, but centuries away,
their hues a mystery, a temptation.

Only a glimpse of sunset or rainbow
keeps them waddling toward that pole.



Leslie Gragg
Wedding Mums
Digital Media

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



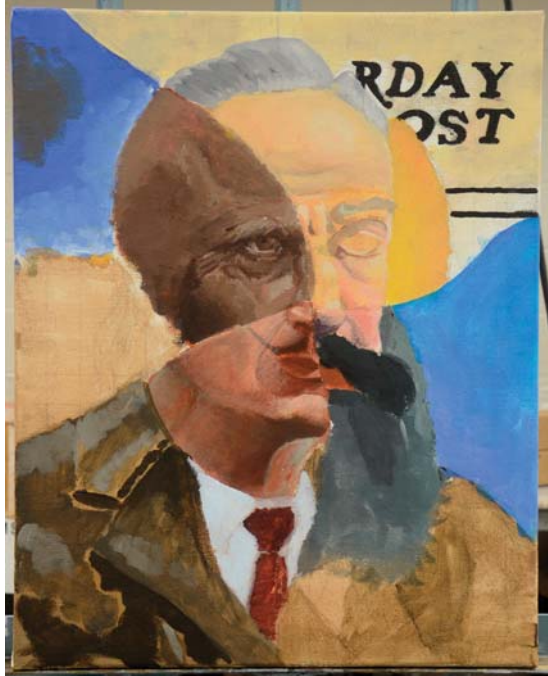
Joel Pilchar
Mother of Pearl
Low-fire Ceramics

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

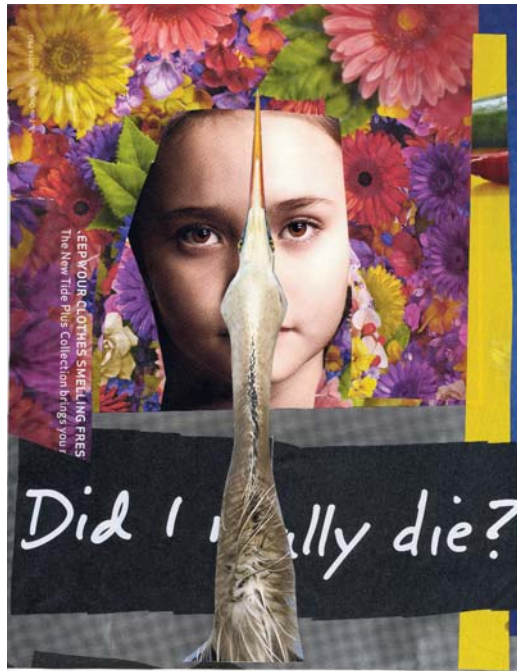
Hearts

By Taryn Miersch

Hearts beating as one, whispers are a surreal sound.
Moans calm every nerve in the body,
as the heart unwinds in pleasure.
Coming to be the most recent memory in the brain.
Pleasure bares the mind as it finds the greatest release to the day.
The mind calms thoughts, and errands run out of sight.
Slowly, the peak of love is around.
To refrain from sound, grasping whatever is tangible. Peace floods the soul.
Body aches from the gratification.



Andrew Thorp
Progress
Acrylic



Samantha Blevins
Collage
Collage

Waves Upon the Shore

By S. David Arnsdorff

Eyes trace as far as can see;
 motionless, I sit upon this shore.
Wave upon wave lap endlessly;
my heart soon forgets days of yore.
 Many have gone before.

Waves lap as lives passed,
memories fade, lives lapsed.
Thoughts fade, last breaths gasped;
 hounding, memories of lost past.

Lineage served by the past;
remember, others stood upon this shore.
 Lest we forget days of yore,
those who loved and passed before,
 just as waves upon the shore.

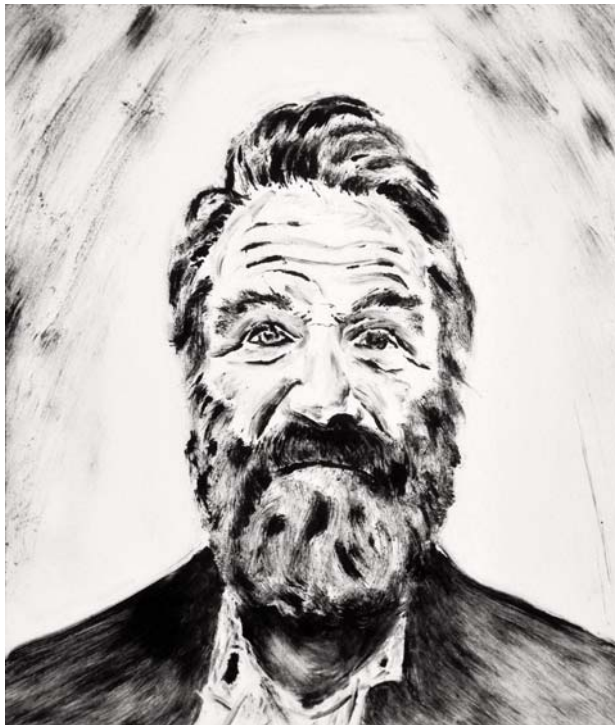
Heights attained and passed once more,
depths descended as happened before.
Careful not to forget the past –
 as many have before.
Will we ascend –
 just to crash once more?

Focus on self leaves empty lore,
 lonely life is but a bore.
Lives are lessons from before;
time makes present past once more.

Gently lives pass –
 as lives upon this shore.



Dominic Ascanio
Questlove
Monoprint



Alexandra Fishero
*No Matter What People Tell You,
Words and Ideas Can Change the World*
Monoprint

Hidden Mother

By DeAnna Hawn Chester

I study the photos of me as a child, looking for something to connect the me I am with the images I was. I search the faces that peer posed, the eyes that stare directly into the camera lens. I recognize the legs. They are mine. Even at three, I was curvy and proportioned, my legs when held together forming two perfect diamonds—one between my thighs and knees and another between my knees and calves. I know the feet, too, a bit bigger than they should be for my slender body. The same with the fingers. And, I cannot escape the tell-tale dimple in my chin. It is the defining feature of my face then as it is now. What I don't see, what I can't find as I search the images, is the reflection of my mother.

"Honey, you've got your Daddy's mouth," says my husband, who is seeing the photos for the first time.

"Well, yes, I do," I say, surprised he is just now figuring this out.

I ask him if he can see my mother. He looks, but he cannot. No one can. Yet, I think to myself, "Surely she's there. She must be." And, I look closer.

My mother did not like me as a child, but it made sense to me. She didn't like my daddy, either. To be fair, I didn't rightly like my mother. She was just too different, too unlike me. She got on my nerves, and I on hers. My mother did like my sister, my sister who looked like her—had her feet, her slender face, her knobby knees. My daddy liked me. I looked like him. But, I did not then, nor do I now, act like my daddy. He's reserved. I'm outgoing. He seldom speaks. I rarely shut up. He hates change. I love an adventure. He's a picky eater. I like collard greens and vinegar. Yet, it has always been said, "You're natured just like your daddy." And, while I cannot even to this day tell you what that means, it is true. I am "natured" like him. I think like him. I am logical, dependable, practical. And, I have his dimple, his mouth, his feet, his hands. But, where is my mother in me? I stare at the pictures. I ponder over them. I cannot find her.

* * * * *

I stand naked in front of the full-length mirror on my bedroom closet door. I stare at my body. I am 38. I am thin, probably too thin. I touch my droopy breasts and wonder if a boob job would help. Probably not. I hold up my arms and flip the skin under my upper arm. It, too, sags. I look at my knees. They're falling, along with my butt, making my legs appear even shorter. I tighten my leg muscles, suck in my stomach. That looks better. Now if I could only walk like this.

It is as though my skin has stretched, and now there is too much of it so it just hangs on my bones, instead of hugging them like it did when I was 20. I study my face. The underneath of my chin is not so bad, at least not yet. My neck isn't wrinkled or lined, but flaccid enough that I can tell where the wrinkles will settle. I have white circles under my eyes. Most women have dark ones. My forehead is lined. I stretch my bangs. I can cover this, I think. No one has to know, at least not yet. I try smiling without my eyes. Eye smiles cause crow's feet.

As I stare in the mirror, I recognize this body, this image. It is vaguely familiar. I have seen it before. It is my mother, my mother when I was 20. Most people

probably don't know what their mothers look like naked. I do. My sister and I always got dressed with my mother. We thought nothing of being naked in front of her, or she us. We still don't. It's just our way. I recall looking at my mother's body, silently comparing it to my firm form as a teenager. I remember mother saying we were the reason she looked like that, that having kids does that to a woman's body.

I am barren, so Mother must have been wrong. It isn't babies. It is time. It is years. It is life lived. So, she, my mother, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones, is here, reflected in me. She must have been here all along, only hidden.

My mother likes me now.



Melinda Presnell
Box Mug
Low-fire Ceramics

Red Bird

By Kristy Hardway

Red bird
Tells me
To shine in the dark,
Stand out
Amidst the gray.
Shows me
How he catches the predator's eye.
His glorious scarlet back
Makes it easy
For hungry cats, stalking through the woods,
To see him,
And yet he builds his nest,
Flies to and fro,
Goes about his red bird business.
So I will go 'head
And be bright red,
Stand out in the grim, dark world
Where I must stretch and reach,
Spread fragile wings,
And I will think of their strength
Against the bracing wind
Instead of the ground
Beneath me.



Samuel Oliver
Mangos
Colored Pencil



Carole Childers
2 Bananas
Acrylic

Depiction

By L.B. Sedlacek

Who hasn't imagined
climbing a coconut tree?
One hand placed high

on the back of the trunk.
The other at chest level
on the front of the trunk.

Almost like standing on tiptoes
to reach a top bookshelf or squatting
for one on the lower shelf.

Put your bare feet on the trunk
frog-legged,
one on each side.

Leaf through the pages
Table of Contents, the blurbs
check the back then the cover.

Push with hands and feet
on the trunk and
lift your body up.

Buy the book
check it out or
just browse.

Always practice close to the ground.



Brian Her
Arnolfini Double Portrait as Squares
Collage



Carol Hartis
When Memories Bloom
Quilt

Dead Letter Office

By Nancy Posey

Bags gathering dust
in the dead letter office,
old love letters lost.

With numbers transposed,
just that brief inattention,
you missed your last chance.

She checked the mailbox,
each day feigning nonchalance.
By June, she gave up.

I saw her new guy.
Nothing special to look at,
doesn't write. He phones.

Reaching retirement,
the clerk who works the window
thinks she'll read just one.

They find her weeping,
but they misinterpret why.
It's not the job she'll miss.

Bags of Mother's Day cards;
What kind of children don't know
where their mother lives?

All the uncashed checks,
sincere notes of sympathy.
Were they even missed?

Sometimes I wonder
if you wrote me after all.
I pretend you did.



Daniella Alvarez
Untitled
Digital Photography



Jessie Taylor
Untitled
Digital Photography

Reckoning

By Nolan Capps

I fidget in a chair at my probation officer's desk as he mindlessly punches details from my paperwork into a computer. "So why'd you get out the Marine Corps?" he inquires to stir conversation.

"Hard to explain."

He presses the topic, "It wasn't what you thought it would be?"

I do a quarter turn in my seat towards him, draping my left arm over the wooden chair back. I ruminate for a moment. "No," I begin, "I think it was basically what I expected. It's more like, I wasn't as tough as I thought I was. I went overseas and realized I wasn't cut out for war. Most men aren't."

The man grimaces and twists his head slightly in acknowledgment, saying, "Well, I understand that."

"No," I think, "you hear what I'm saying, but you don't understand."

I left the United States at nineteen for a combat deployment to Afghanistan with 1st Battalion, 8th Marines. I spent my seven months there on a tiny combat outpost called "Panda Ridge." Panda was situated on my company's northern front, in the district of Musa Qala. Our outpost was positioned on a rocky strip of hills between two long, winding river valleys. The valley to the east was sparsely populated by mudbrick huts, once tan but now bleached by the sun and baked hard as concrete. These dwellings were arranged in small villages of perhaps a hundred huts, divided by dirt roads that had been tamped flat from a million steps by man and goat and the occasional underfed cow. The valley to the west was unpopulated, as it would be choked by the rushing floodwaters during the rainy winter months. At night in the supernaturally bright starlight the western valley resembled the cratered dust-white face of the moon. I shared memorable moments with the Marines of 1/8, (some I would like to forget). No events from that time, however, pierce painfully through the years of my life like the recollections of September 20, 2010, the day of my first foot patrol.

I arrived there with perhaps ten men who I already knew, my friends Marcus Blalock, Chuck Peltier, Lucas Pearman, and several others from my platoon I had trained with in the previous year. Another two dozen strangers would also be sharing the spartan outpost with us, Marines from Weapons Company, in possession of four armored trucks and heavy machine guns. Our first task together was to escort Panda's previous tenants, the battle weary Marines of 1/2, back to the safety of Forward Operating Base Edinburgh (or FOB Edi for short). There they could be returned to their friends and families in the United States. It was only a twelve mile round trip, but it took an entire night to complete because of the painfully slow rate vehicles must travel in attempt to avoid running over an improvised explosive device, or IED. While we were gone, a skeleton crew of 1/8 Marines manned Panda Ridge's four posts: sandbag structures equipped with machine guns, binoculars and night vision optics where the men would watch for possible threats to our outpost and the surrounding area. It was not long before such a threat was spotted.

As we arrived back to Panda Ridge from FOB Edi the following morning, we were greeted by a grim-faced, visibly exhausted Weapons Company corporal. "Get something to eat, quickly." He grunted at me and my friend Blalock, "We're gonna need about

twelve men for a patrol. Last night our north post spotted some guys on the ridge about 1400 meters to the north us. It looked like they were digging in the dirt to plant IEDs. We shot at 'em with the 50 Cal and dropped about a dozen mortars on their position. Now Captain O'Brien wants us to push out a squad up the ridge before first light to try to get some intel and an assessment of the damage." Blalock and I showed up with our gear at the top of the hill to join the ten other marines and the Navy Corpsman selected for the chore of searching for bodies, blood or explosives at a flat spot on the ridge 1400 meters away, a place we hereafter referred to as "the crown." Staff Sergeant Yeaton of Weapons Company was leading the patrol and tersely briefed us on our mission. Time was of the essence; our squad needed to reach the crown under cover of predawn darkness, investigate the situation, and if possible return to base before any enemy combatants spotted our patrol.

The terrain to the north was far too rugged for trucks; our squad left the thin strip of concertina wire that encircled Panda Ridge on foot, spread out single file. I was near the rear of the patrol, my function on this morning was something like a pack mule. In addition to my flak jacket and my m4 rifle, I carried 400 rounds of 7.62 caliber ammunition for the squad's medium machine gun, a reserve in the event our 240 gunner expended the 200 rounds he carried on his person. I had been training for the better part of a year for a squad patrol into enemy controlled territory, and I felt woefully unprepared. We reached the crown at sunup without incident, and set up in a circle for security, watching the unfamiliar bone colored buildings below us. Blalock and I were next to each other, positioned some 15 feet apart watching adjacent sectors and trying to stay awake as our leaders investigated the hilltop for signs of the enemy. Our camouflage was the same dirt-grey color as the hilltop we occupy, and though the streets in the village below were empty, I wondered if we are being watched from the crude black square windows of the distant primitive structures. If so, could they even see us? My fear overrode my exhaustion and insisted, "They see you. They are watching and waiting."

After a time of these dark thoughts and creeping nerves, Sergeant Cinader, with a rasping voice that indicated his lifelong smoking habit, walked over to address Blalock and me: "You're not gonna believe this. Me and Sergeant Marcucci have found fourteen IEDs up here so far." Instantly I am afraid to even shift my weight. "SSgt Yeaton is getting the time fuse and detcord prepped for a controlled detonation, then we RTB. Keep your eyes open, if you see anything out of the ordinary down there call it back to us." We affirmed that we understood our instructions. I crouched back into my meager place of protection behind a small boulder and turned my attention to the dead silent streets far below.

The IED's were destroyed without incident. I plugged my ears against the monolithic BOOM hundreds of feet behind me, and unplugged them in time to hear the gentle drizzle of pebbles showering the hilltop. "Capps, Blalock, let's go!" Cinader barked, and our patrol regrouped near the center of the crown. The point man, a baby faced PFC from Weapons Company fumbled with his metal detector as the rest of us formed up behind him in a line, eager to return to Panda and relative safety. "Hurry up with that thing!" SSgt Yeaton ordered.

He gestured to the rest of the patrol, "Get some goddamn dispersion! You're all way too close to . . ." SNAP! The crack of a bullet interrupted him, and we all fell to the ground instinctually. The air was possessed by whining bits of metal. Bullets impacted the ground all around us, kicking up circles of fine dust or breaking rocks; some passed so close to us we could feel their energy uncoiling whip-like in the air a foot away, and a microsecond later the brutal CRACK jarred our bones and set hearts racing. "I need a corpsman! Corpsman up!!" Yeaton strained to be heard over the buzz and smoke. From his proximity I heard blood curdling screams from a young American throat. I knew someone had been shot. Our Navy Corpsman, Doc Rodriguez, rushed to the boy to give him attention. Our squad formed a crude circle around victim and Corpsman,

attempting to respond to the assault. To the right of our perimeter the 240 gunner POP-POP-POP-ed off explosive bursts of suppressive fire in the general direction of the enemy. I sprang to my feet to take my position alongside him to provide my load of 400 rounds when his ammunition ran dry.

I covered half of the fifty feet between us in a short, lung-busting sprint before my instincts commanded me to hit the dirt. I hit the ground on my belly like a baseball player sliding home as a burst of machinegun fire riddled the air above and around me. I crawled the rest of the way, gasping with primal terror; I swear I have never moved faster. For the briefest of seconds during my crawl I saw the injured boy, but my mind was flooded by adrenaline. I witnessed the silver flash of medical tape across his chest, the blood across his mouth and the tatters of his cut-off shirt without thought. There was no time for thought. As I took my place next to the machine gunner, I fired my weapon recklessly, as if squeezing the trigger would somehow protect me from a similar fate. The problem was, the enemy was invisible. I saw nothing and no one in the village below, only the black windows glaring up at us like the empty sockets of a skull. "Stop firing until you see a target!" Yeaton called out to us, and as I paused, I noticed the enemy gunfire had ceased. A cold silence enveloped us, punctuated by the screams of the injured boy, Josh Ose.

"It hurts so bad!" he moaned. I listened helplessly as he apologized to SSgt Yeaton, saying that if he had been a better Marine, he would not have been shot.

"No," Yeaton's voice was desperate as he struggled to reassure the young Private, "You're the strongest sonofabitch I ever met. You're gonna be just fine; we've got a bird on the way, Ose. Look at me- look at me! It's gonna be okay!" We waited for a helicopter to evacuate the boy for what felt like hours, days even. I was later told that fifty eight minutes elapsed from the time Ose was shot until the medevac arrived. Fifty eight minutes where eventually, Josh Ose grew silent. In the stillness after my first firefight, exhaustion pressed into me like a heavy weight. I selfishly hoped the medevac that came for Josh would also pick the rest of us up and take us back to Panda. I felt robbed of all my strength, broken, and my new home felt a thousand miles away when it was only about a thousand meters from me.

When the helicopter arrived, touching down in the hundred-meter wide circle our squad had formed, we loaded Josh's lifeless white body into the bird's belly and returned to Panda Ridge. As I stumbled over rocks on the goat-trod path we followed, I muttered the Lord's Prayer under my breath. I was not religious, only afraid, only shocked. I barely knew the boy; I only knew he was even younger than me. Looking back at the events, I am struck more than ever by how young all of us were, at the theft of full, rich lives from men who were barely more than children. I tasted bitter anger in my mouth, anger that I harbor to this day when our Battalion Commander visited us at the end of September.

He discussed Private First Class Ose, 1/8's first casualty, a young man Lieutenant Colonel Canfield did not know existed until he bled to death waiting on medical attention. "The surgeons told us that PFC Ose's injury was so severe, even if he had instantly been put on the table of the greatest surgeons in the world, he still would have lost his life." The Colonel was in full gear as he addressed the Marines of the Ridge, thumbs tucked under the thick shoulder straps of his immaculate, canvas colored flak jacket, Kevlar helmet buckled tightly under his soft, white chin. The old man even smelled clean. He paced back and forth before us as we looked to him dumbly, faces caked with brown dirt, the shine from our eyes hammered out by violence. "I know it's hard to lose a brother, especially one who was as good a friend and Marine as PFC Ose, but I need you men to stay focused on the task entrusted to you. This is the greatest battalion in the Marine Corps, and 1/8 is going to accomplish great things here," Canfield lied.



Katie Price
Saint
Digital Media



Braxton Beaver
The Ritual
Acrylic

The Bee Cup

By L.B. Sedlacek

The momentary guilt of trapping the bee
replaced by the need to not get stung
the fear of the allergy, suspected never proven
the surprise at seeing a hornet, unexpected

The momentary success of catching the bee
a large empty soda cup slammed down
on the carpet never quite clean enough
the nervousness of having the hand so near

The momentary reflection on the necessity of bees
the honeybee, most especially delivering
raw quiet nectar sweet to the tongue
smooth down the throat or swimming in tea

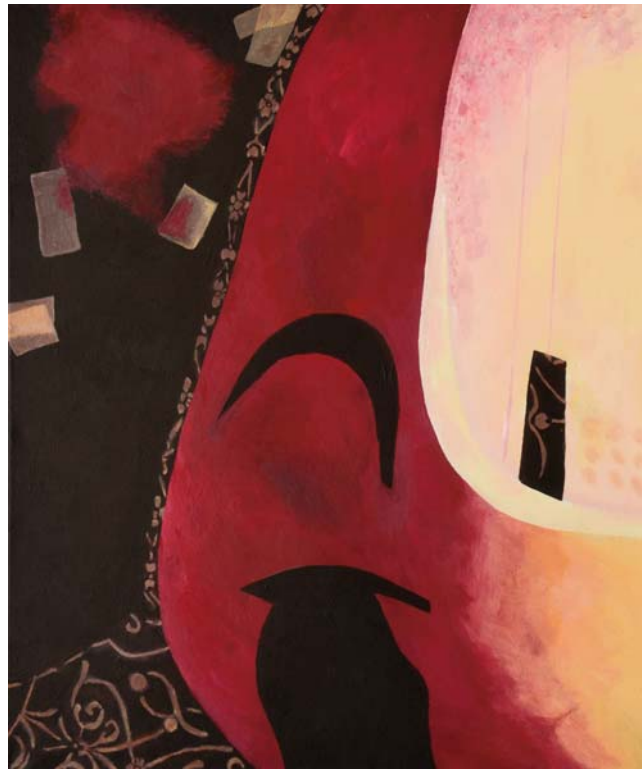
The momentary capture of the bee
a full life that was going pretty well
until flying under the eaves through the vent
catching a flight without the rest of the hive

The momentary defeat of the bee
final under the spouse's hand
a quick execution slap from a magazine
a final ride to the sewer

and for just a moment
the earth quivers and sighs.



Holly Korta
Tom's Tea
Acrylic



Lindsey Brewer
Cardinal Rouge
Acrylic

Bubblegum

By Kristy Hardway

Bubblegum makes me smile
Makes me feel like a stringy-haired kid
Peddling my sky blue bike,
Tassels on the white handle grips,
Flying on the breeze.
Faster, faster!
Racing boys
And outrunning black snakes
That stretch across dirt roads
Between cow pastures
And banks full of wild honeysuckle and blackberries.
Bubblegum
Popped bubble
Pink and sugary
Sticking to my six year old pixie face,
My upturned nose,
And even the freckles
Sprinkled across my sunburned cheeks.
Still got a stinging scrape
On my bony little left knee
From a crash landing in the gravel.
Orange mercurochrome shining through the Band-Aid,
Dirty and falling off.
Time to twist open a fresh piece.
Get it started, soften it up.
Pigtailed Snaggletooth,
With a red Kool-Aid moustache,
Working on the gooey blob.
Super Bubble, Bubblicious
Till all the flavor is gone.



Colin Bolton
Ennui
Monotype



Joel Pilchar
Untitled
Intaglio

Someone Else's Life

By Sharon Howard

Alena hefted her suitcase onto a low chest of drawers beneath the window of her rented room in a battered bed-and-breakfast. Dust drifted up into the sunlight reminding her of the snow she'd left far behind, along with everything else. The urge to move, that pacing the living room night after lonely night could no longer contain, had not diminished. She changed into shorts and a light blouse. Taking only her ID and a few dollars tucked into her camera case, she headed out to explore a whole world of room.

Alena crossed the brick street in front of the inn to a park where walkways, flower gardens, and stands of trees surrounded a small lake. Alena turned right to avoid the activity-filled playground brightly planted in one corner in favor of a red and black gazebo, which promised a quieter setting at the water's edge. She stood on the gazebo's wooden deck and watched, mesmerized, as a few ducks, a couple swans, and several red-throated loons drifted toward her perch.

After capturing half a dozen images of the gather of birds on her Cannon Rebel, she focused her lens toward the panorama of the lake park and then beyond where the downtown buildings stood as if painted against the turquoise sky. Postcard perfect. Might sell photos for postcards. She wasn't up to thinking National Geographic.

Alena lowered her camera and moved off the gazebo into the late afternoon sun. She strolled along the concrete walkway that circled the lake, concentrating on the sunlight caressing her face and arms. Such light had tangible weight. And this was a weight she could manage, a weight she could soak in and make her own.

But there was that other weight holding her back, holding her down, the weight of a world, of a life not of her own making. The world of Wade, and children, and in-laws and parents, a world of presumption and surrender.

Wade's life for over two decades had largely circled her own, sometimes touching but seldom including. Now that the children were spinning out into orbits of their own, Wade's had pulled even further away. His business was his business and never hers. He presumed instead of asked. And she'd let him.

He'd presume that she'd be home when he returned from his business trip to San Francisco, that she'd be as anxious to set divorce proceedings in motion as he was, now that she knew about Doreen. He'd presume that she'd be bitter and resentful and angry. And she was all that. But there was something more. Something that had even surprised her when he'd finally told that he loved another woman, a confession not all that startling in hindsight. What she had felt, that sensation that had enveloped her, she could only describe as relief.

Alena stopped at a snack stand tucked amid a stand of lanky palms, peach-pink azaleas blooming beneath them. She bought an ice cream cone, vanilla fudge, which she took across the path to a bench beside the lake, avoiding the shade. She sat, taking deliberate, thoughtful licks of sweet coolness, absorbing the cold along with the heat of the sun. Wade would find the note she'd left posted to the refrigerator door: I'll return—whenever. Imagine it one of your business trips,

only this is my business. He'd assume she'd run out of pain and despair. He would be wrong.

Wade's response on finding out that she was pregnant—just before her high school graduation, his junior year of college—had been to find out how to get a marriage license, no other questions asked. Alena's mother agreed. "The sooner the better," she said. "I don't suppose a big, church wedding would be appropriate now." Alena took some consolation in that: no fuss, just stand before a circuit court official and say I do. That she might not and that I don't came more naturally to mind had been unspeakable and all but unthinkable.

The eventual wedding of Wade and Doreen would be a much different affair—Alena smiled, pun intended—lavish and pretentious no doubt, like the ones Alena had often been sent to photograph as staff photographer for RKJ Studios. Assignments that became chores sometime last spring, back when Doreen was but a mere phantom possibility, haunting the lonely evenings of Alena's life. Having escaped her own rite of happily ever after, she could no longer document those lies. After much discussion, her boss had agreed to reassign all wedding requests and had kept her busy doing children's portraits in the studio.

Children—she should at least call Gayle and Tyler, let them know she was okay, just taking a break—but she hated the word should. Her life was a long string of should this and should that. She was all too good at should.

Besides they were both away at college, doing their own things, as they had for most of their lives it seemed. She had her cell phone if they needed her. Though she couldn't remember the last time either of them had.

Alena gobbled down the last of her now soggy cone. She stooped to rinse her hands in the warm water of the lake. A black swan floated nearby, his neck stretched toward her, and then with a toss of his head that seemed an invitation to join him, he drifted away. She longed to follow him, though she wasn't much of a swimmer, and this wasn't a lake to be swum in, not by people anyway. She ignored her camera and simply watched—such grace and freedom and sheer confidence. But then, he'd been born to it. She turned and walked back onto the path.

She could leave in the morning, go back home. If there were such a thing as home any longer. She could face the inevitable, the preferable in fact. Get it over with. Wade would agree with that.

Exactly.

She should—or at least could—call Wade, make sure his flight wasn't delayed. But why that would matter in the least, she hadn't a clue. Besides, she wanted him to find the note, ponder its meaning. Then there was the certainty that if she spoke to him at all, she would give in to having a conversation and then would give in to even more. He would sound so reasonable and sane and presume she was doing this to hurt him. Maybe she was—a little. But that was the least of the reasons she'd left.

Alena had nearly circled the lake when she left the park to wander the nearby streets. Streets of old houses and old trees. Streets of old paving, worn and rutted. Some of the streets still maintained their original brick, pushed and prodded out of place by use and time.

Time. All the time in world, and what was she doing with it? Wasting it, more of it? Perhaps she'd best go back now. Get past the ugly part, put it all behind them. Her mother would tell her: "Do the sensible thing." But that was the problem—she was sick of sensible. And right now sick of thinking at all.

Alena took in the scene around her. Block after block of Greek Revival, Georgian, Neoclassical, Federal and more designs than she could name. Houses with history and character and no two exactly alike. But it was a magnificent Queen Anne at its eclectic best—a wide, wrap-around porch below outcrops of gables and dormers, and an angled turret affixed to one corner—that caught her eye and the lens of her camera. This asymmetrical, stucco and stone house was one in which a person could feel unique. Unlike the house she shared—had shared—with Wade. He'd landed a good marketing job right out of college and had begun looking for a house soon after. With two small children by then, they'd outgrown their corner of his parents' home. Alena left the house hunting up to Wade. She had the kids and other things to think about, like how to leave her secretarial job and find work that let her take photographs. It hadn't been enough by then to merely serve as the designated photographer for every birthday party, anniversary, and any other occasion for family and friends. She'd never charged them either, not even for the film. It was her pleasure, she'd said, even after it wasn't any longer.

In the meantime, they'd bought the house that Wade found in a cookie-cutter subdivision outside of the city: quiet streets, near excellent schools, a big yard behind the red brick, retro ranch. A fine place to raise the kids, but it had taken Alena weeks before she could pull into their driveway without double-checking the house number.

Alena circled back to the corner of the park where the playground nestled. Within its red, blue, and bright yellow framework, small children ran, swung, slid, danced, squealed, laughed, and occasionally cried. Weary of parents' reactions, Alena dismissed a momentary impulse to pull out her camera. But this was as real as it got. This was the kind of photography she wanted to do.

Soon after the first of the year, she had declined to take any more staged studio shots of children. She wanted to shoot the little brats all candy-sticky, screaming, and being real. She hadn't even updated her yearly portraits of Gayle and Tyler. She could no longer pose them in those phony studio settings. She'd been fired, of course, for her latest act of rebellion. She couldn't have been more pleased. Gale had been the first to find out when she'd tried to call Alena at work the following day.

"But Mom," she'd said when she'd reached Alena on her cell, "you've had that job forever. What will you do now?"

"Something else," Alena replied with a sense of *deja vu*. Gale had told her the same thing when asked a similar question a couple years before. Her t-shirt-and-jeans-all-the-time daughter had taken an office job the summer before college, dress clothes and shoes required. After a month, Gale had quit. "Felt I was living someone else's life, you know?" Alena had only nodded in reply.

She wandered back over to the lakeside and onto a concrete deck that jugged into the green-gray water. The whole park pulsed now with the activity of evening joggers, dog walkers, Frisbee throwers, and feeders of birds. She would need to find a place to eat soon, perhaps the café down the block from the bed-and-breakfast. For now, she watched the sun-set sky progress from pale blue and pink

to luminous orange. She took a deep breath of sweet azalea and hint of pungent, sensual night blooming jasmine.

Alena tried to imagine being back home in the house Wade would move out of: the dark mahogany, overbearing dining set; the clunky leather sofa; the movie theater TV screen that hurt her eyes to watch; the four poster bed that had to be scaled in order to lie down upon. It was easier to envision life without any of it, with only what she already had with her, in a dinky, dank room with a bathroom one could barely turn around in. She even looked forward to the creaky, narrow bed. She stretched. Her whole body ached from two days of driving and little sleep.

Tomorrow or the next day or the next week, she would head east, turn right at A1A and drive south until she ran out of road.



Kaitlyn Smith
Imperial Six-Twenty
Low-fire Ceramics

Please Don't Call It 'App'

By Kristy Hardway

Ap·pa·la·chian:
Beautiful, mysterious,
Not like stickers on rear windows,
Emblem of an Alma-Mater,
A word over-used by youngsters.
What a waste!
To skip the taste of whiskey
Aged in an oak barrel,
Dripping from the tip
Of a Southerner's tongue
Like wildwood honey.
Like sweet, mournful bluegrass;
Voices of long-gone loved ones
Ringing across the distance
In the mist
Over blue-green mountains
That quenches the laurel and magnolia.
Great-grandma, with her shotgun,
Rocking on the porch,
Held high by stacked-up rocks.
Falling-down tobacco barns,
Going, going, gone,
Like giant dark clouds
Shedding tears of despair
That fall, spattering,
Like the first giant raindrops
Of a violent summer storm,
Pounding on poor Addie Bundren's coffin.
Please, please, child,
Don't utter that monstrosity,
That unspeakable blasphemy.
Yes, life is short,
But Honey, take your sweet time,
Sing that wondrous word,
Stolen from Natives,
Invented by explorers,
Glorious, and heavily pregnant
With stories yet untold.



Bennett Lloyd
Frekin out da Neighborhood
Intaglio



Walker Allen Stutts
Stutts Self-Portrait
Pencil

Backward/Forward

By L.B. Sedlacek

The barn was once new

cinder blocks
and painted red
a new roof
still under construction
and we were just kids
and we didn't know
which was the right side
to get up on a horse
and then we were
scared silly by a water snake
in the nearby stream
too scared to cross to the drive
on the other side

the barn was once new

and after middle school
then high school
the four of us – all girls
we went separate ways
one got married
then divorced
two were sisters
one stayed at the house
with the barn
the other moved out west
the sister who stayed
married and moved on
and left the barn

the barn was once new

I moved to the city
but came back and one day
I took my kids to a farm
for riding lessons
and there it was
the once new barn
the roof completed
tin and rusty
the rafters stuffed with hay
mud piled at the doors
the red paint faded to light pink
I thought about it but never
did tell the new owners

that once I saw
the barn when it was new.



Michael Buschine
Stoke the Flame
Digital Media



Aaron Harris
Card Table
Digital Media

Sonny

By Holly Michaels

I force faded images
into cardboard coffins;
they,
 like you,
refuse to be contained.

In the silence,
I mull over
a back alley story
with a child's name;
I know little more
than that.

Your blood runs a marathon in my veins,
yet there are no memories
to sustain me,
only the silence
around Thanksgiving tables,
on days I dared to call you Grandpa,
still too young to realize
the treason committed,
too young to comprehend
why we never drank wine;
they poured out anger with our feast
yet underneath
the pain was real
and now it would be
mine.

I have given you more flowers
in a granite and elm garden
than I ever did
in the stained glass menagerie we call life.

Sometimes I wonder,
if I would have sat high on your aching shoulders
and what I would have seen
in the pockets
of your smile.

Sometimes I wonder
why we stop counting casualties
the day soldiers return;
the obituary may have written a tragedy
about your liver
but the real cirrhosis
was planted in your mind
the day you came home-
a rusty, gutted tank with lungs.

I still yearn
for answers to questions
I should never ask.
Far too aware,
of their eyes,
 your eyes,
tracing the outline of my spine,
as if piercing glances
could eliminate the backbone
I was never meant
to inherit.

For you are never allowed to be more
than the tears in my aunts' eyes,
never be more
than the thirst for affection
which nestles itself in my mother's side,
in that empty robin's nest just beneath her rib cage.
Days spent questioning
if another layer of winter twigs
would finally lend it life.

Still,
I stand in front of smoke streaked mirrors
and trace your bony chin,
attempt to understand
what it stood for
in the days it projected for something,
 if it ever did.

Can I be more
than the latest bead on a fraying string
of identical identity crises
which carry your last name?

They tell me it means "different"
 yet we are all the same

playing sorcery
with our potions
which poison our broken hearts
into the grave.

Pushing

By Shannon Saunders

So many things, so little time, and it's all caught up in this little mind of mine.

To erase the fault already caused, sometimes I wish I could put life on pause.

That I can't do you see, that's all left up to the big man "G."

He knows what he is doing I guess you can say, it's all part of the game of life that we play.

I keep coming one foot in front of the other, cause nowadays you can't even trust your brother.

What is going on in our world today? Destruction, poverty, and still young children play.

So caught up in our society, I forgot about the man who died for me.

As I get on bended knees, I ask the lord to forgive me. For there are things I still can't change. I just pray for the strength to help me maintain.



Chris Dula
Untitled
Digital Photography



Robert Kent
Reflections
Digital Photography

Alarm Clock 3 a.m.

By Nancy Posey

Determined not to miss another
Perseid shower, stars falling from the sky,
I set my clock, away from home, a guest
inside this unfamiliar house, all creaks
and pops, the silence of other sleepers.

My shoes in hand, I ease open my door,
creep down the long hallway, turn
the lock and step onto the fire escape.
Alone, except for bullfrogs in the pond
beside the Poet's Walk boasting
of their conquests. Unable to sleep,
they wake everyone with their noise.

I find the heavens clear, no remnant
of the afternoon rains, those clouds
long gone. I find my bearings—Big
and Little Dipper, Ursa Major and
Minor, Seven Sisters—and I wait.

I strain my neck until I see
a streak across the northern sky,
then another, teasing, keeping me
waiting, wanting to venture
below, to cross the lawn away
from light, fearful of taking foolish
chances. Who would find me?

Working alone all day here,
in my small room, keyboard
clicking, fine-point pen filling
page after page of legal pads Who
would write the story: Writer-
in-Residence found dead on lawn,
struck by a blazing meteor, its
path, out of nowhere, complete.



Tapainga Kemp
Dark Face
Charcoal



Kristen Jones
38 Special
Charcoal Pencil

When Henry Ford Hid the Moon

By Matt McGuire

His father was a medic,
Royal Canadians
layman Anglo,
in dusty Palestine,
patching Arabs
and pulling Tommies
to safety
during
the Great War.
Turk shrapnel
grazed his collar
so he set up family
in Michigan,
practicing on gout-ridden farmers
and ill fishermen,
sin taxed and
ripe with
dysentery.

His mother was a hennaed
Green Irish
rummy,
six pints of Beefeater
over gin,
the cards trembling
between her manacled
Charles of the Ritz
fists,
chained to laudanum,
priestly teas,
and a checklist
of parties,
yeomanry,
and fools.

He was a large boy,
cherry redhead
fair as milk
with a penchant
for power,
so he played football—
Offensive Line
where the slow,
big, and brutal
fended ends.
He'd sneak flasks
in his trousers,
on the hayrides
after games,
sipping Mohawk firewater,

howling at the stars
over Superior
when Henry Ford
hid the moon.

Falstaff Brown
kept him out
of the draft,
so he laid his leather
helmet
aside
and served his
country.
Four years in West Germany
as a Cold War
soldier,
Air Force Intelligence,
breaking codes
and telling lies
over the wires.

He got a crash course
in Russian,
a few Bulgar
phrases,
and a taste for
clear liquor.
Stolichnaya and filtered
cigarettes
till dawn
in a bunker,
two clips for a Walther,
stacks of red tape
on Reds,
and a view of the
backside
of Uncle Sam.

Stateside broken
not in body,
but in spirit,
he found solace
in the church.
But De Colores and the Knights
of Colombo
couldn't break John Barleycorn's
hold.
He signed up for classes
off base in Austin
where he walked on
and "got clobbered!"

Red shirt in the bin,
graduating cum laude
from Bill's Bar
he scraped by,
passing out
after passing his finals
all in.

He got married,
taught History,
sired a child
and stayed drunk.
Second still born,
wife in tears,
bills in arrears
he brawled, boozed
and whored
weathering the storm
in the rear of
Bill's
slap gone in a
bunk.

His drinking assumed
"epic proportions"
when his wife said
"I won't!"
Divorced deacon,
he turned deaf
to the pleadings of his
priest.
Determined to die
he headed north
to Carolina,
bought a shack
in a lonely hollow
and a .45 semi-auto.
The stack of silver certificates
he'd been shepherding
for his son
went into enough
gin
to see him
through,
to see the end
and have it
done.

As he sat bleary,
in a bentwood chair,
Mozart's Requiem
on the radio,
his death
before him
and gray mist
on the air,

he cried out to heaven
as all drunks
soon do
for an answer to fate,
pleading PLEASE
and
FATHER, WHAT MUST I DO?

Silence.

Quiet.

Whisper of a breeze...
Movement of Handel
began,
as the mist moved
Sam Colt
slipped gently from
his hand.
The moon!
The moon!
Beaming from behind the clouds,
bigger than
he'd remembered,
remembrance
of beauty
tearing the shroud.
He thrust forward to his feet
heaving arms to the sight,
bathing sin, shame, and yesterdays
in the glorious light.

He fell to his knees
in the still evening dew,
tears of joy, grace,
and love—
warm aglow
through and through...

...the moon shined on
as the Sphinx
sits in Giza,
a terrestrial stone,
brilliant,
unaware of her majesty.
An eternal reminder
of the sad fate of
Eve,
mantle of the old gods,
the frailty and madness
of Man
in her
substance,
favor inscrutable,
crown graced
with myriad souls...

Rorschach

By Holly Michaels

Could we rewrite history
if only for a night
forbid it to repeat, repeat, repeat
forbid it to trap us beneath yesterday's failures
once more?

Is there a tune I can sing across your pores
to make you feel alive again?
Will you teach me the lyrics,
until I have a healing tongue and broken song.
Teach me the lyrics,
but not the words,
for words are empty.
I am a chorus of contradictions
and you must learn
to harmonize as one.

Please, don't give another litany of excuses,
for I have exhausted them all
in midnight confessions to priests of shame
who threatened to hang me by my rosary
whilst offering the redemption that I craved.

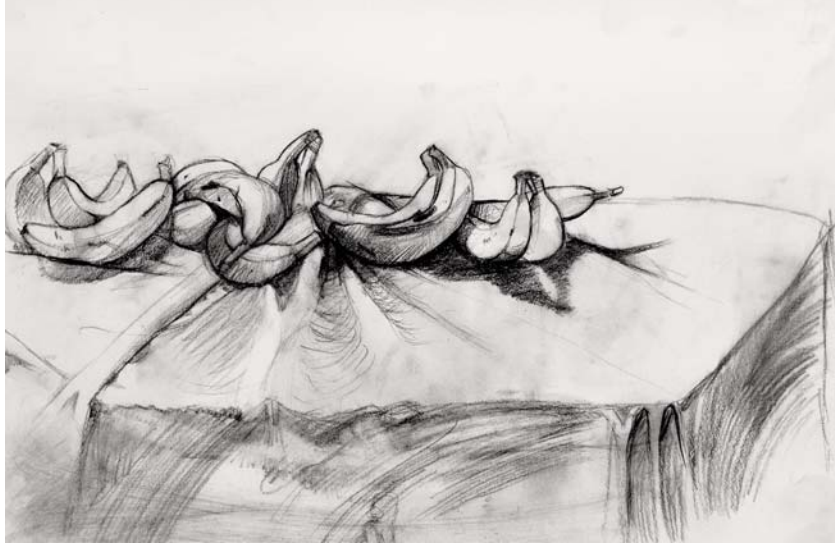
I have drawn pictures from the inkblots
I used to cover up my past,
until I realized
that I was merely using them
to illustrate my fears,
the blackened silk always blurring to reveal
the lion;
he never roars,
but his eyes are full of the fire
and I know he is coming for me.

You say you see a table set for four.
I do not argue.
Demons can take many forms,
but I gave mine a name,
forgetting the words of my father:

"Never name them, child.
You cannot kill them once you give them a name,
Christen your nightmares
and they are here to stay."

To stay.
Wasn't that what I wanted all along?

I do not know.



Jennifer Jackson
Banana Paradise
Graphite on Paper



Ashley Barnett
Bottles
Pencil

Trails

By KJ Maj

As I become older
I will never admit to being old
I will never admit to being that
unless:

a moment I'm hiking and need to take

saying: "let's give this ol' woman a minute!"

What is old is the Grand Canyon

which I will helicopter over
again one day

and this time,
put my trust in mules
get to the bottom
sleep
under billions of stars!

the rising sun Next morning,
breathe in deeply

ready to tackle
the
winding
Colorado
holding
on tightly
through
raging
whitewater
carrying my own pack

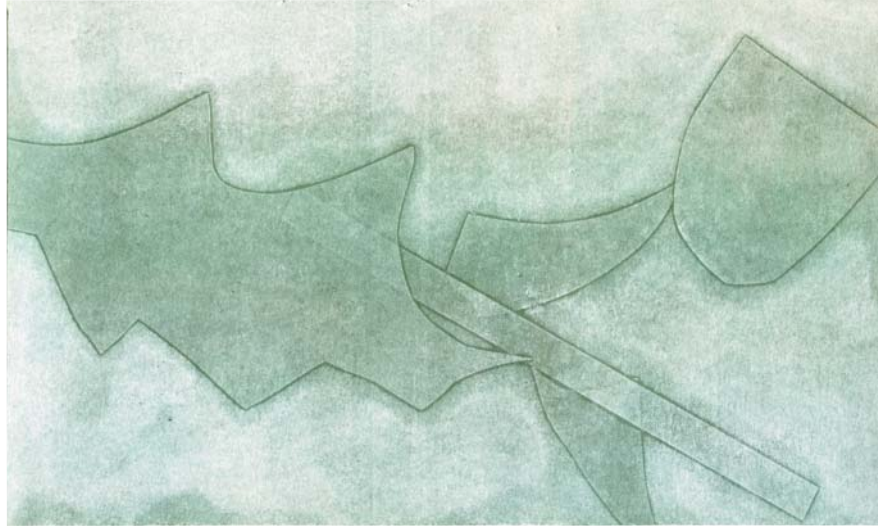
will travel with me that

back to Red Rock Canyon/Bonnie Springs
Ranch, Nevada

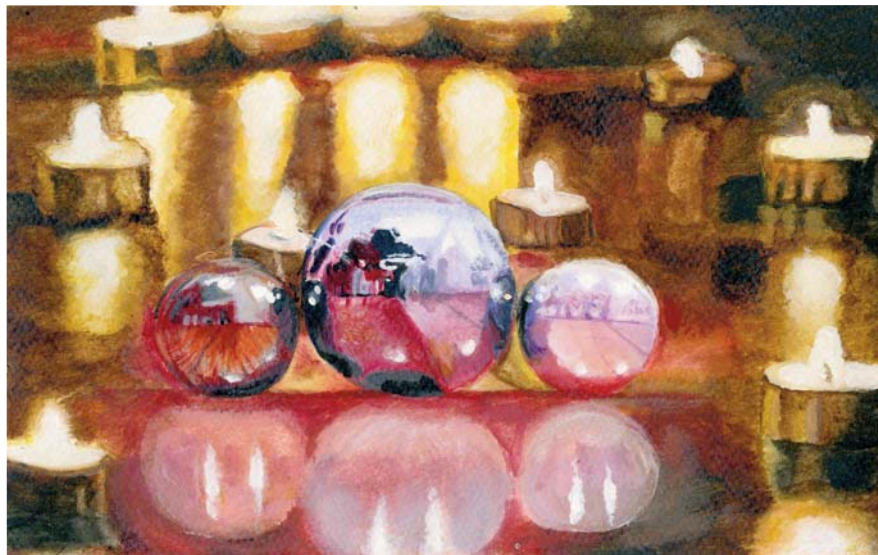
where I stood alone
inside the old saloon
looking out of the large square
windows

bone dry desert.....spiny Yucca rugged
mountains in the distance

to practically
cry my eyes out



Jayme Braun
Forest
Colograph



Briana Schaller
Candle Lit Ambiguous Sphere Reflection
Acrylic and Oil

Am I a God of Writing?

By Claude Pearson

As I write, I begin to question the role of mine in my story.
Am I a god?
Do I pray?
Am I a saint?
Am I real?
Or am I just a quote?
We create characters as we write prose
Each of our characters represents a person who thinks they are real
They are in their own universe
So we, therefore, become minor gods.
We control the destiny of these dolls like a game of *The Sims*.
We control every decision of these men and women.
But are they real?
We create their world and when they pray,
Isn't it to us?
Atheists claim there isn't a god
Yet in novels they are always wrong
As the writer, your creations have some free will yet
Destiny is in the palm of your hand.
If you are good or bad, it is merely objective
But sense your creations are fiction, are you yourself fiction
So isn't our life like a game of *The Sims* for God?



Monica Moore
Book Bouquet
Paper, Wire, Glue, Pearl Beads



Jennifer Winebarger
Transcendence
Low-fire Ceramics



Melissa Anderson
Gus Gus
Low-fire Ceramics



Frances Nicholson

Taxi

Acrylic

Awarded Cover Art for *Branches*, Volume 21



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