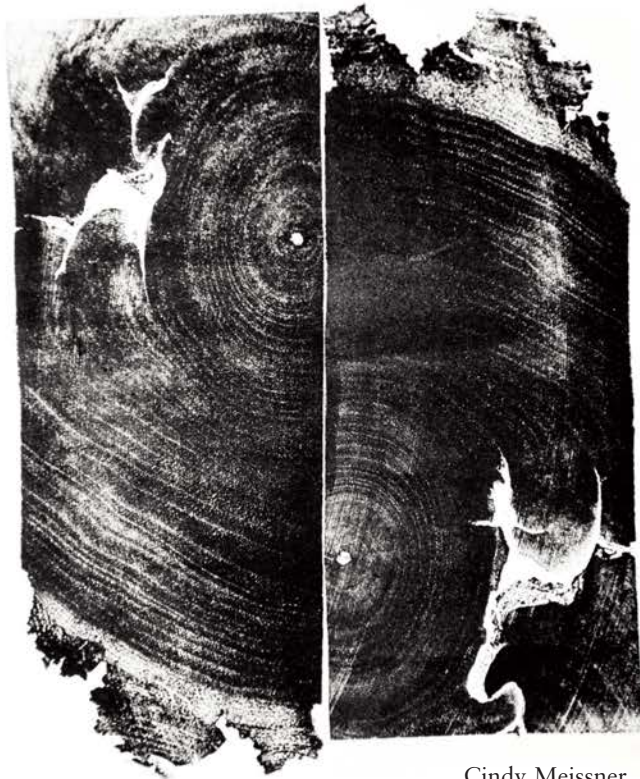




Branches

volume twenty-two



Cindy Meissner
Untitled
Relief Print

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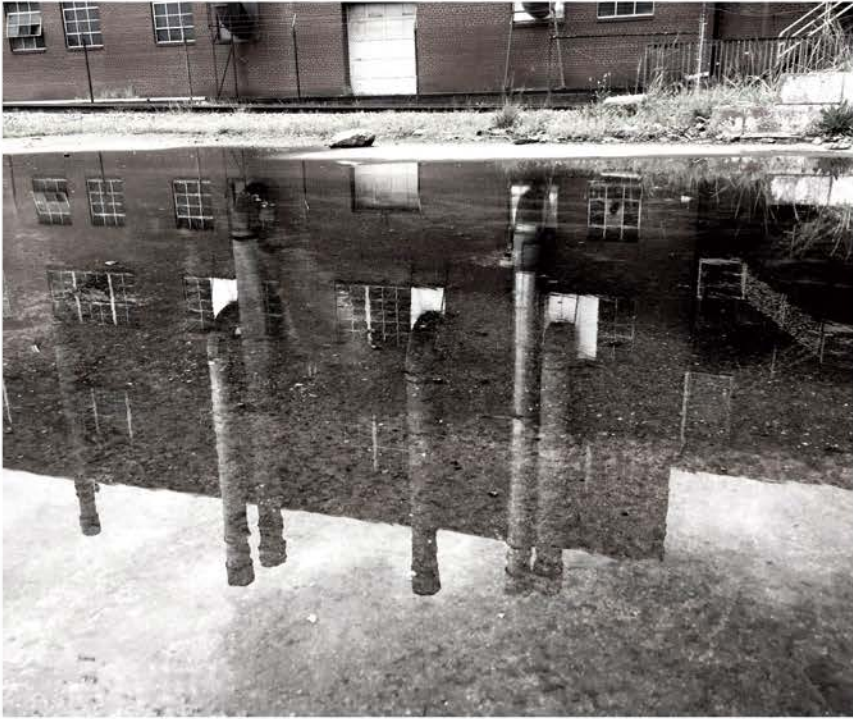
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To view previous editions of *Branches* or to find out more information about submitting works of art or literature to the 23rd edition of *Branches*, please visit our website at www.ccti.edu/branches.

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Scott Garnes
Factory Reflection
Digital Photography
Awarded First Place
(2-D Category)

Sunday Afternoon with Flamenco

By KJ Maj

This poem tied for first place, poetry category, awarded by the literary editors of *Branches*.

She knew it wasn't enough to just
toss them into a colander
rinse them out
shake them, excess water
flinging back
into the sink.
Oh, there was so much more to it
than that.

She searched her cupboard
found a stunning pottery bowl
earth tones of pine green, hillside brown,
a splash of ochre.
Setting the bowl onto her wooden table
she placed
into it
clusters of bright green midnight blue
grapes

she smiled
she sat

yet before enjoying these beauties
she gazed, gazed at the wine bottle in front of her
remembering her experience of tying grapes
what felt like hundreds of miles of rows upon rows
before the existence of iPod

she was in awe
the Thought
that she could not only eat
this succulent fruit
but also drink its richness
feel it embrace and love it
her blush her smile.... deep

she sensed the bottle
knew the elegance of its
neck....shoulders
placing her fingers at the top
she began to pull the foil, slowly un
winding its
purple red almost black
label
then placing the sharp metal tip
onto the cork
she firmly turned the corkscrew;

pressing the levers inward,
she raised the cork till it cannonballed out
of the neck with a pop

she smiled
she poured
she inhaled
she sipped

and every once in awhile
she placed
a grape into her mouth
enjoying its coolness
she smiled
she breathed
she became

wonderfully
deliberately

mellow

Woman on the Liffey Bridge

2017 Dublin, Ireland

By Peter Morris

This poem tied for first place, poetry category, awarded by the literary editors of *Branches*.

She laid against the bridge abutment
Wrapped in soiled clothing
A tattered coat
Stringy brown hair...wet
Shivering against moist cold
Coughing, sick
Forgotten, forsaken, forlorn
So many...
Walking past...just another homeless person
Stopping, turning, convicted
Walking back, offering a Euro
So little...
“God bless...”
Later, welcomed by warmth,
Clean sheets, a comforter,
Food, drink
A good night’s rest
Next day, a man asleep catches attention
Sprawled on stark cobblestone
Wrapped cocoon-like in a black tarp
Somebody’s daughter
Somebody’s son
So many...



Katie Webb
Void
Low-Fire Ceramics and Acrylic
Awarded First Place
(3-D Category)

Yellow Hospital Garments

By Mattea Richardson

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

I ran to the trailer door out of breath, heart pounding. I really don't have time for this. "Hi, sweetheart!" I looked at my grandma and was taken aback. Her hair seemed thinner than usual; her rosacea was acting up too, leaving pink patches all over her face. It was understandable though. She enveloped me in a hug. I sighed. This was going to take longer than I had time for.

"Hi, Mattie." My grandfather looked at me from his recliner, smiling with that gap-toothed grin. He started to push back the recliner's foot-rest, but he was fighting it. His legs are still weak. I stopped him.

"No, don't worry about that, Grandpa. I'll come give you a hug." I dropped my things by the couch and leaned over to hug him.

"How are...you?" he wheezed.

His breathing hasn't gotten any better. "I'm doing fine." I said, trying to push the stress out of my voice. "How are you?"

"Oh,...I'm great!" he'd say, breathing in-between. "The Lord has...blessed me real good! How's...school?"

"Oh, school's school." I waved the question away, "I want to hear about you and how you're doing."

"Oh, but...you go... first." Grandpa wheezed and cracking his gap-toothed grin again.

I tried to smile back. I have so much going on, it's going to take forever. "Oh that's okay. Lets..."

"Oh, but we want to hear." My grandma said smiling and grasping Grandpa's hand. He looked at her smiling, too, and then they both looked back at me.

I sighed. This is going to take even longer if you don't just start talking about it. Just do it. I sighed again. "Ok. Well, I have a speech due in Communications, a test on Monday in Spanish, a paper due for English..."

Both of my grandparents listened to me as the stress I had slowly started tumbling out. I told them about how hard school was. I told them about having to drive all by myself and the fear of doing something wrong or turning the wrong way. I told them I was trying to minister to people at school, and I didn't know how to do it right. I told them I had to help prepare the scrapbook for the youth pastor's going away party on Sunday night. I told them I had to work in Sunday school that same Sunday too. I told them all the things I had going on that week, but what I didn't tell them was that I had almost not come. I had almost turned around thinking I had too much to do. I almost turned around thinking, I don't have to go every Friday. But I couldn't get rid of the feeling that the Lord was tugging at my heart to go. Maybe Grandpa was lonely and I needed to see him.

After taking way longer explaining my weekend than I had intended I asked, "Did they get you all patched up at the hospital?" pointing to his head, bandaged from the fall he had the other day.

"Oh yeah. They...did. They were really...nice. They even...gave me these... yellow socks...and blanket." He held up his prized items. I smiled at them but was punching myself on the inside. "Yeah I saw those when you sent me that photo. I'm sorry I didn't respond. Like I said, this week has been crazy."

He started to reach over to me, "I want...you to have them," he said, putting them in my hands.

"Oh, Grandpa. That's ok. You can keep th..."

My grandma interrupted me. “He especially wanted you to have them,” she said with a meaningful look.

“Oh, yeah.” Grandpa, chimed in, “I really...want you to...have them....they are.... your favorite...color.” This time I smiled inside and out.

“Yes, they are my favorite color! Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes. Take them.” He patted my hands, “And have the blanket ...”

“Grandpa, you don’t need to.”

“Oh, you can...have it...please.”

I looked at the pure joy that shone from his eyes from giving such a little gift. He had really thought this out. There wasn’t much he could do for me or anyone anymore. I knew it would crush him not to take the yellow hospital garments.

“Thank you, Grandpa.”

I left the trailer not long after that, saying my good byes in haste to get back to work. The rest of the weekend flew by. The paper was submitted on time, but barely. The speech went well, I think. Driving myself around continued to stress me out, but went by in a blur. Really, everything about that week swirled a blur. All, except that moment. On Sunday, I was desperately trying to get the scrapbook ready, yelling at a few kids who were trying to escape before their parents got them.

“Dad, do you know where...,” I looked up to see my dad’s face, ashen gray. And I knew. Before he even said Grandpa had a heart attack. Before we were all rushing up to see him. Before he passed. I knew. I knew why it had mattered so much for me to go that Friday. It wasn’t for Grandpa, but me.

I can still hear the sobs from California to New York as my aunt and uncles called. “Just hold on,” they told him. And that was their goodbye; “just hold on.” I still remember the whispers of my parents, wishing that they could go back and take time to spend with him, all the while their hearts silently begged just hold on. I can hear the dripping of the IV, the medicine that killed the pain, seeming to faintly call, “just hold on,” that is, before it cut off hope for him to hold on anymore. Part of me wanted to be able to squeal in-between tears, “just hold on.” But I knew I couldn’t. It was his time. And as I glanced over at my grandma, tears falling from her eyes with every shaky breath, a sorrow-filled calm washed over me. She knew too. And despite the pain that would wound her heart for years to come, leaning over Grandpa’s helpless form, I could see her eyes, her hands, her posture, her heart, her soul whispered, “You ran a good race. It’s okay. Just let go.”

I came home that night and clung to the yellow hospital garments, thanking God through tears that I had listened. And even while I wept, I knew that my grandpa was smiling down at me with God. Not smiling for clutching the garments he gave in love, but for listening to that still small voice my pastor Grandpa had learned to trust so much all those years. Just hold on to God. I felt him say, Just hold on to Him, and you’ll run the race you’re given.

Canned Peaches in Winter

By Amy Millette

A fingertip to the windowpane tells me it's cold outside, the leafless trees beyond it shiver, for its winter time here in the mountains.

The time of year

I most enjoy the sampling of peaches that rest in the cool cellar storage waiting, patiently waiting, to be retrieved from their darkened shelves.

I cradle a quart of golden beauties, carry it up the flight of pine wood stairs, and gently place it on the kitchen counter anticipating the wonder of its syrupy nectar.

The sealed lid releases the slightest puff of air as I pry it from the surface of the bonded Ball jar glass, a place they have come to know as home.

I dip my long handled silver spoon into the center of the jar and immediately I'm channeled to the summer time canning day the hot, hot days of sun drenching July,

Where the kitchen workspace is heaping full of fuzzy fresh peaches and the ladled sticky sugar boil substance drips down the sides of the jars onto my canning fingers.

Aren't you glad that I shared a few of my summer labors with you?
Those quarts that are more precious than real gold mouthwatering,
juice dripping with peach delight?
Come this summer, there'll be more.



Lucci Murgolo
Portrait of Tom
Acrylic on Board
Honorable Mention

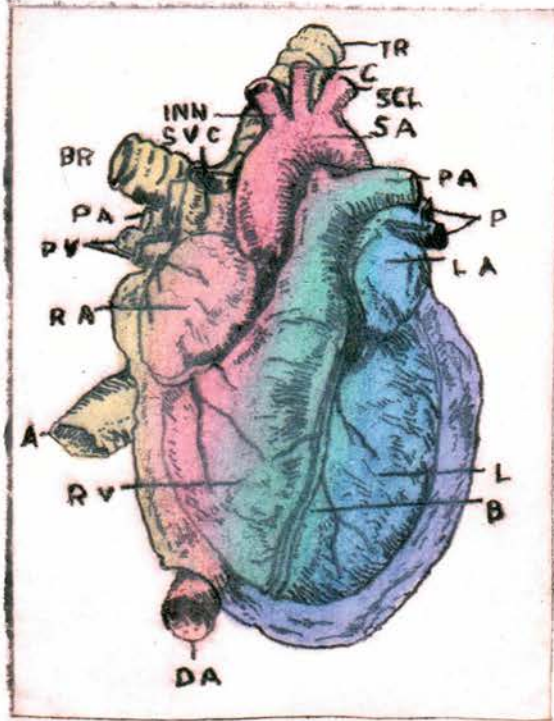


Aleshia Taylor
The Unfinished Journey
Assemblage
Honorable Mention

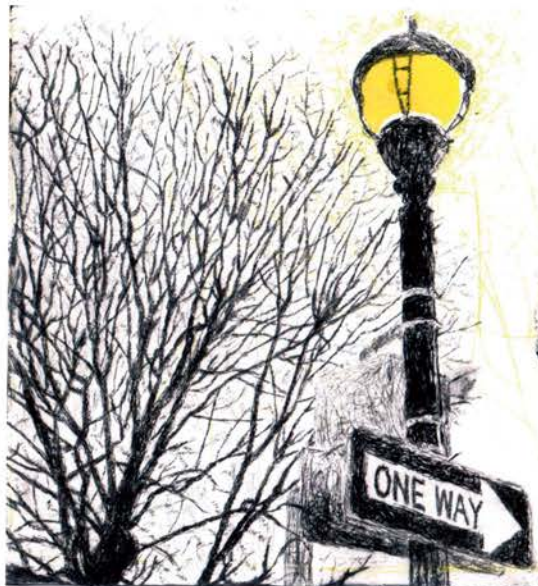
Ghosts of an Unforgiving Ocean

By Peter Morris

The bones of a thousand sailors reach upward from the depths
Mute testimony to the Graveyard of the Atlantic
Crews now hoisting sail on the Ghost Fleet of the Outer Banks
Five thousand ships perished, so many souls on board
Victims of battles old, battles new
Battles to come, will welcome new residents of the deep
Mankind's folly, wars continually, rumors of wars unending
Seaman and fishermen, too, beholden to hurricanes, rogue waves
Lie together as comrades, settled in Davy Jones' locker
I recall them as seafaring brothers, my own brother one of them,
Snatched by an angry ocean from the skies
Each of these men, women, children had names
Ray, Louise, Annie, Edward, George, Carroll...and John
They are missed now, but not as much as in embarkation
Many, they have been gone 100, 200, even centuries
Love makes time pass, time makes love pass...say some
No markers float atop the currents where the Ghost Fleet lies
"Full-speed ahead, hard to starboard!"
No gangplank greets these souls, no disembarkation
Timbers have rotted, steel becomes the ocean's environment
From these briny waters
No man will step ashore
No light in a window will beckon
These sailors and others know
Only God might bring them home
It's only through the Divine that sailors
Might cross oceans throughout eternity
Then home will be the sailors; home from the sea



Sierra Beane
A Heart of Many Colors
Intaglio Print



Grace Lackey
Light Post
Intaglio Print

Summer Solstice

By Amy Tilly

Nami the dog and I
Sat at the edge of the Atlantic
To witness the
Summer solstice sun sink.
8:24 p.m. was the appointed time,
According to the internet.
As the set time passed,
The color blossomed
Like a cast net
Flung then gathered back.
A gentle admonishment to
Human insistence on
Numbers and schedules
The need to make
Moments into measures.
An ironic 46 minutes later
As the color still lingered
But the beach darkened,
Nami and I made our way
Back to the boardwalk,
The sea breeze lifting
Our mermaid hair
In benediction.

to forget is a test

By Prairie Moon Dalton

i saw God in my lover
who brushed my mind with salvation
and the thought of being his.
bring me through the summer
we're as young as ever
beautiful boy, calculating smile
darling gleam in the eye
drag me to the bright lights
and pull out the prayers.
i'm dreaming of someday
but someday is yesterday
and gone is the laughter and play
and I'm no longer Mother Mary.



Jess Murphee
Hummingbird Glass
Acrylic



Lucci Murgolo
Self Portrait
Acrylic on Board

Hope in a Straw?

By Trina Curtis

Rose had suggested meeting at the Italian restaurant, Mama Lou's. Her co-worker assured her that it was a nice restaurant. The online reviews said they had great service and great food. It sounded like a safe place. Rose hadn't made much progress on her own in the romance department so her mother finally took matters into her own hands. She had signed her dear Rosie up for online dating. Tonight was the first date with Mr. Brock Shell. His profile was good, but his picture was even better. She wanted the evening to go smoothly and hoped he wouldn't notice her problem.

Brock Shell was an entrepreneur who spent most of his adult life building his business. He had little time to date and had never been in a serious relationship. Business was good now, so he decided it was time to meet a nice girl. He hoped to meet someone who was compassionate toward others. He would not be able to handle someone who was self-centered or was too needy. He thought Rose's picture was pretty and he was impressed with the community service projects she helped with.

It was getting close to 7 pm when Rose arrived at Mama Lou's. She chose a seat facing the door so she could catch Brock's attention and wave him over when he arrived. Rose looked around and noticed the bar was full of people and several tables needed to be bused. The smell of garlic and butter was wonderful. She tried to catch a glimpse of the entrees that other customers were eating.

Brock Shell waited for a parking spot to free up and glanced at his watch to find it was five minutes after 7 pm. He had hoped to be on time at least for the first date. A parking space freed up and Brock whipped his car in and parked. Grabbing his jacket, he pulled it on as he walked to the door of the restaurant.

As he entered the doors, the Italian smells drifted to his nostrils and he inhaled deeply. Suddenly realized how hungry he was. He looked around the room for Rose. She caught his eye and waved him over to her table. He sat down across from her and apologized for being late. The server dropped off a couple of menus and said, "I'll give you a few minutes to look over the menu."

Rose glanced at Brock over the top of her opened menu. *He is nice looking. I was afraid the picture online wasn't even his. What a relief.*

Brock fiddled with his menu trying to calm his nerves. *She is prettier than her picture. So far so good.*

She quickly looked back to her menu and made up her mind about what she was going to order. Brock handed his menu to the server as he approached and passed the other menu to him as well.

She said, "Shrimp scampi, salad with Italian dressing, and sweet tea please."

Brock smiled. "Make that two."

The waiter said, "Perfect. I'll be right out with your teas and salad."

The nervousness they felt was slowly ebbing away. They felt comfortable with each other even though few words had been spoken. The server quickly returned with two disposable foam cups full of iced tea. As he placed them on the table, he said, "I am so sorry that I can't properly serve your tea in glasses. The dishwasher chewed-up the last batch. I can't even offer you a straw because we ran out earlier with the rush. This is not the way we like to serve our customers. I'll have the

manager stop by as soon as possible to check with you. Our apologies.”

Rose sat panicked looking at the foam cup just inches from her right hand. She was mortified. She struggled against the desire to throw her napkin in her plate and leave. She looked around and saw the retreating back of the waiter and then looked to Brock who was questioning her with his gaze. He was trying to figure out what was wrong when he saw her look again at the foam cup that was holding her sweet tea. She had a strange look on her face and he realized she had not yet touched the cup. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out two crisply wrapped straws. He laid one on the table in front of Rose. Then he opened the other to put in his own cup.

“Rose. Did I tell you that I own a manufacturing company? We make drinking straws. I’d love for you to come look at it some time. I think you’d appreciate it.”

She had a smile of relief on her face and a slight twinkle in her eye when she said, “I think I’d like you to call me Rosie.”

Synesthesia

By Nical Eloranta

I inhale

Green

Her stale scent wraps my forlorn corpse like old
Christmas tree tinsel

Her arms draped around me with synthetic cheer

She mumbles her jingle into my ear

It is off tune and wiry

A cliché reminder of better years

It loops my head, her caroling breath

Her words, like glass globes, are hung from my chest

And, oh, her scent entrances, and dances in my head

Waltzing about in her best evergreen dress

Her fingers, which lace my back, are like snowflakes

Kissing my skin

But I am already frozen within

Aroused by a violating sensation

A tug, a fold, and a strip of tape to bind

She pulls her decorative paper over my torso

And ties a ribbon over my eyes

I become aware that I need to be shoved into a box

And wrapped up neatly as a prop

Saliva coats my lips like glue

A sickly sweet residue clings to my dry tongue

I lie beneath her rapturous tree

A beautiful display for show

But I am a rotting thing disguised in a bow

For my stench will reek

And I will grow more difficult to ignore

She is evergreen

I exhale it

Alas, my mother hates the color

And I hate Christmas a great deal more



Charlie Ostrom
Untitled
Monotype Print



Angela Ward
Moo
Silkscreen Print

The Pet

By Lella Lytle

You thrill to see me rise,
Me roll,
Me twitch.
I am unto you an experiment
under your protective glass,
a demonstration of action
and reaction.

I understand this need in you.
I saw it in my father
in cruel iterations
where I had to create
a surveillance net
around Absalon's kissing grounds
against the gander's kiss.

But what is this need in me
to surrender to your manipulations?
I will leap to the pedestal,
Paw the air,
Make a sound.
Any dance for your praise,
no degradation
because the peanut-munching crowd
is away (and your pleasure
my mainstay)

No eyes see me shrug
off the shackles of a century's struggle
to escape exhibition.
I am free to witness the raw
allure in me,
the animal thing unrestrained.



DeAnna Chester
Green Spider
Digital Photography

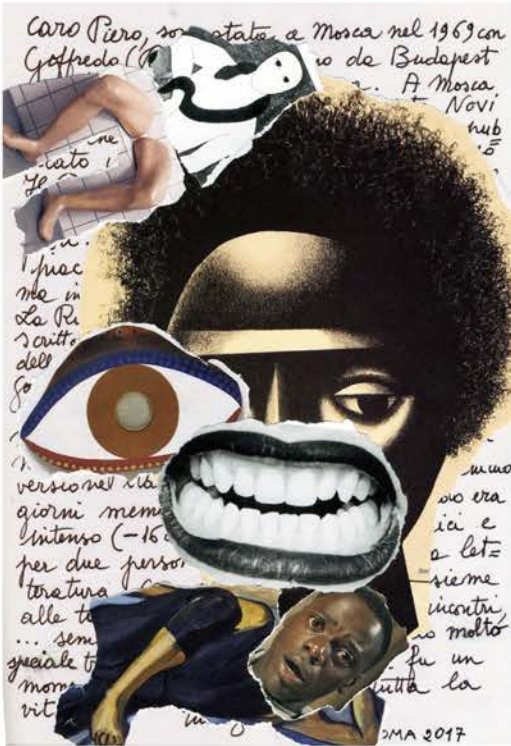


Andrew Reeves
Dog Shadow
Digital Photography

Lunch Box Transfer

By LB Sedlacek

It was stored exactly where I left it
more than 25 years ago
in the cabinet with the smallest door
the one beside the dishwasher.
The cabinet opened back and to
the side of the dishwasher
a cavernous space filled
with recycled milk jugs full of water
in case of emergency.
The square metal lunch box
with a matching thermos and a
plastic lid that doubled as a
soup or drink cup and a
metal arm bent in the middle
to keep the thermos in place.
The Hair Bear Bunch, a 70's
cartoon that sometimes airs in
reruns on the classic cartoon
channel. This passing of the
lunch box, to my nephew,
is like a truck stacked high
with crisp new wood palettes
kept in place with wide straps
or the truck with new glass sheets
fastened in a giant triangle
to keep them in place.
Their freight fresh and new
(recyclable in 25 years)
but my old lunch box with its
dents and scrapes so precious
because it could be re-used
and so precious because of
the memories still stored inside.



Sean Frindethie
The Struggle
Collage



Rebecca W. May
Go
Digital Media

Limbo

By David Moore

I was lost and cold.

My feet were bare, and snow had been packed down into hard, unforgiving ice that bit into my feet until I could no longer feel them. I was walking, but for the life of me, I couldn't remember why or where. Around me, trees had the last remnants of ice clinging to their lower branches, pointing down towards the ground, threatening to fall with the gentlest wind, but the air was still.

As I walked alongside the road, I scanned for headlights, but I saw none. It was dark, but the moon reflected off of the snow well enough to illuminate my surroundings. My nose was starting to feel numb, and my ears were stinging. I wanted to stop, but I kept moving. As I moved, I pondered where I was.

The road before me was straight, and no mile markers or signs appeared to give me guidance. I looked up, but the stars weren't there to guide me. I wasn't sure I could even guide myself by the stars, but their absence left an ache in my heart. Something wasn't right. I knew, deep in bones, that the twinkling lights should be above me, but they weren't. Like my shoes, it was something else that was missing. I tried to recall what had happened.

How did I get here? I asked myself, while far off, an icicle fell from a tree.

Where am I? Again, I found no answer waiting for me.

Who am I?

I stopped.

Oh, God. I can't remember who I am!

The temperature seemed to drop ten degrees, and I suddenly became aware that I was shivering. I started walking again, without purpose. If I didn't know who I was, did I even exist? Was I real? I could feel the cold, so that led me to believe I was.

"Hello?" I quietly posed the question to my surroundings, but nothing responded, not even an echo. My voice seemed to vanish into the woods, and what was worse, my own voice was unrecognizable to me. I began to experience fear.

Change came a few miles onward.

At that point, my entire body was numb, and I wasn't even sure if I was still walking. The trees all looked the same, so barren and lifeless, and the road never once curved in any direction. I kept my eyes straight ahead, focused on the road and nothing else. I didn't see the cabin until I had nearly passed it.

There, just to the right of the road, stood a log cabin, with windows full of light and smoke billowing from the chimney. When I stepped off the road, my feet crunched on leaves, and when I looked down, the snow was gone.

The woods had changed. The moon still sat high above me, but there were stars now, and though they weren't recognizable, they made me smile. Leaves were still hanging to the trees, and any evidence of the winter snow was gone. It was still cold, but not mercilessly so. I approached the cabin, climbing the steps and standing on the porch.

I went to knock on the door, but it was opened before my knuckles could wrap across the wood.

"Billie!" An old woman stood before me, positively beaming. She took me in her arms and squeezed tight, and I was too shocked to respond. The woman took a step back, still holding me at arms-length, surveying me.

“My, how you have grown! Come in, come in!” She opened the door for me and beckoned me in, urging me forward by waving her hand towards herself. I stepped inside, immediately hit with the warmth of the room. I had been near hypothermic moments before, but now I felt beads of sweat start to form on my forehead.

I turned and looked at the old woman. She was shorter than me, slightly stooped with age, but beneath her wrinkled face was the face of someone who had been very beautiful years ago. She wore a turquoise dress, accented with a pearl necklace across her neck. When she smiled, I got a very caring feeling, and my mind was put at ease,

“Billie?” I asked the woman, raising my eyebrows. How did this woman know me?

“Come now, Billie, you know me!” she responded.

“I’m afraid I don’t even know myself,” I admitted, scratching the back of my head. “Where am I?” I looked around the house, surveying the cabin.

The woman’s eyes twinkled, and she turned around and started walking into the foyer while saying, “Why, you’re in my house, Billie! Now come—you must be famished!”

I suddenly became aware of the painful ache in my stomach, and my stomach, angered, gave a loud rumble. The woman laughed, and disappeared through a doorway. When she had left my sight, I stopped to look around the place.

I stood in the living room. My feet were still bare, but were resting comfortably on a soft rug. It had obviously seen some use; the once vibrant reds and purples of the fabric had long since faded to nearly nothing. However, the rug wasn’t ripped or torn, simply well-loved. There were several overstuffed armchairs around me, and the air lingered with the scent of ginger. I’m sure my cheeks were rosy, because the hearth was blazing, sending an occasional hiss or pop from the logs that were slowly dying in the fireplace, sending smoke up through the chimney. On the mantle were several photographs of her and an old man, smiling and laughing with the old woman, who looked considerably younger than she did now. I was right; she had been beautiful. The man was looking lovingly at the woman, and she was smiling so wide. I was admiring a photograph of the couple on a ferris wheel when—

Crash! The sound of metal hitting the floor sounded with crescendo through the cabin.

“Everything okay?” I called out through the doorway, alarmed.

“Oh, I’m just getting old...” her voice floated into the living room, and the vague answer prompted investigation. I took a step into the kitchen and found the woman kneeling on the ground, where a metal tray had fallen to the floor, leaving sandwiches strewn across the room. She was trying to get them all up, but she was moving slowly, as if her movement were causing her pain. I knelt down on the floor with her, gathering the sandwiches that had fallen around us.

“Thank you, Billie,” the woman said, smiling up at me as I helped her up off of the floor. “I was going to make you sandwiches, but in my clumsiness I dropped them.”

My stomach growled very loudly and I felt the hunger deep within me, but I said, “Oh, you’re completely fine. I’m not that hungry.”

The woman’s eyes twinkled again, and I looked closely, and hidden behind the brown iris, sprinkled all around, were what looked like stars, shining towards me. She blinked, and they disappeared. She walked into the living room and sat in one of the armchairs, so I sat in the one opposite her, and she looked at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, smiling with embarrassment, “what’s your name? I don’t know what to call you.”

“Billie, don’t tell me that you’ve forgotten me!” the woman shook her finger at me playfully, but didn’t look hurt. “Everybody knows me!”

This woman’s cryptic answers were starting to get a bit tiresome, but I persisted nonetheless. “I’m afraid I don’t, ma’am.”

The woman smiled. “Just call me Carrie, sweetie.”

Relieved, I nodded. “Sure thing, Carrie.”

We sat in silence for a moment, and I listened to the fire blazing. I realized that the hunger I had felt earlier had abated completely. Odd.

“So, where are you going, Billie?” Carrie asked, slowly bringing her palms together and resting her chin on her knuckles in interest, as if she were catching up with me after a long time and wanted to hear every word.

“I-I’m really not sure, Carrie,” I said, stumbling over my words as the realization that I had no memory set in.

“Oh, well, if you were heading down the road, you must have been going somewhere. Everyone goes down this road eventually, but so few stop to visit. Some go on and find their way without stopping to say hello, and some never make it this far.”

“Everyone goes down this road? Does that mean—” I started, but she interrupted.

“Everyone comes at their own time, eventually, down the road.”

“How far does the road go?” I asked.

“That depends on how far you’re willing to walk.”

I looked at her blankly, and she continued.

“Some just wait on the road, hoping someone will pick them up. But it’s so cold outside, and they just sit there, never moving on.” Carrie’s eyes twinkled again, and I was reminded of the stars outside again. I didn’t miss the cold, but I missed the stars. This cabin was nice, but it didn’t seem like somewhere I could stay too long.

“I want to walk on, but I don’t know how long I’ll make it.” I admitted.

Carrie surveyed me for a long moment, with her head cocked to the side, as if she were considering something. “I have something for you, Billie, but I’ll need your help.” She pointed to a door in the hallway, and I got up and followed her to it. She opened the door and pointed to a box sitting up high on a shelf.

“It’s up there, but I’m afraid I can’t reach it. Can you help me?”

I reached up, but my fingertips just barely grazed the box. I gave one last heave and finally managed to grip the edges of the box, pulling it down to my chest with an oof!

I held the box and looked at her, but she just smiled and said, “Open it.”

The box was old and dusty, as if it had been sitting there for a long time. I could see where mildew had started to affect it. If this box was for me, how had Carrie known I was coming? Nevertheless, I pried the lid off of the box and—

There was a pair of nice, waterproof boots and some wool socks.

“You’ve been so nice to me, Billie, and I think that merits a reward,” Carrie smiled, leading me over to a chair to put the boots on. “So many stop by, but fewer and fewer are as nice as you were.”

“Thank you, Carrie!” I had put the boots on, and suddenly I was at the door, looking out towards the road. I looked back, and Carrie’s eyes were yet again twinkling.

“Just keep walking, Billie, and you’ll get where you’re going. Everyone does eventually. When the sun comes up, I believe you will have found your way. Stay safe.”

I tried to mutter my thanks again, but I was already on the road, and the cabin was behind me. I started walking again, my boots clunking on the road but keeping my feet perfectly warm. The stars were twinkling again, but this time the moon was starting to sink behind me. I had no idea where I was walking or how far I had gone, but that didn't seem to matter.

Eventually, the stars started to glow brighter.

The sun came up after a while.

I stopped walking, and the sunlight shone on me, filling me with a warmth like Carrie's fireplace, but intensified by a factor of ten. The warmth gave me a feeling of happiness, and as the sunlight filled me, I started to remember things: my family, my name, and my purpose. I finally knew where I was going, and why. It was time to move on.

As the sun fully rose, and I could see nothing but light, I smiled, and realized: I was no longer lost.

Appalachia on My Mind

By Amy Millette

My heart pulses a bit faster
My blood surges with the reminiscent
Memories of our Appalachian forefathers – fathers, mothers,
children that settled this land

They call to me from distant memories
Beg for me to remember their lives
The hardships they endured many years back
To never forget all they did to make these mountains home

Self-reliance and individual pride pressed them forward
Further and deeper within the heart of these hills
Turned them into subsistent farmers
Isolated from kin, yet, joined in a common vision

To make something of themselves, the land, their people
To tame the ground, unearth the rocks
Dig deep within the gray clayed soil
To never say never, to never quit

To fully respect a Sense of Place
A destiny embedded within their persevering Spirit
Listen, watch, learn from the gifts of Nature
How to live off the land and give back to Mother Earth

To spend days, weeks, immeasurable moments
Suspended between darkness and light
Caught in the hollers of these here hills
With the mere sustenance of hope as their sole companion

Who were these mountain ancestors?
What sheer madness sparked their passion?
Made them unrelenting in their pursuit
To rise early, toil long hours, day after day after day?

All these years now gone by, and yet
We too are drawn to these mountains
On a life quest pilgrimage toward discovery
To connect, to feel, to join as one
On a journey through the Appalachian Mind
To arrive in a place in time
Where the pure Sense of Place
Beckons us to hear the ancestral call of our people
“I Kin Ye – I Kin Ye.”

Carter, Forrest (1976). *The Education of Little Tree*. Albuquerque, N.M.: University of Mexico Press. “I Kin Ye, Bonnie Bee,” p. 32.



Mark Taylor
Clown
Intaglio



Aleshia Taylor
Culture
Monoprint

Obsession

By Prairie Moon Dalton

here comes another one
to transcend the ember existence
filled with thoughts
something new!
something to love!
crave something grand
an explanation for my time
running blindly
hands out
no stopping
grasping for meaning
me, I feel everything

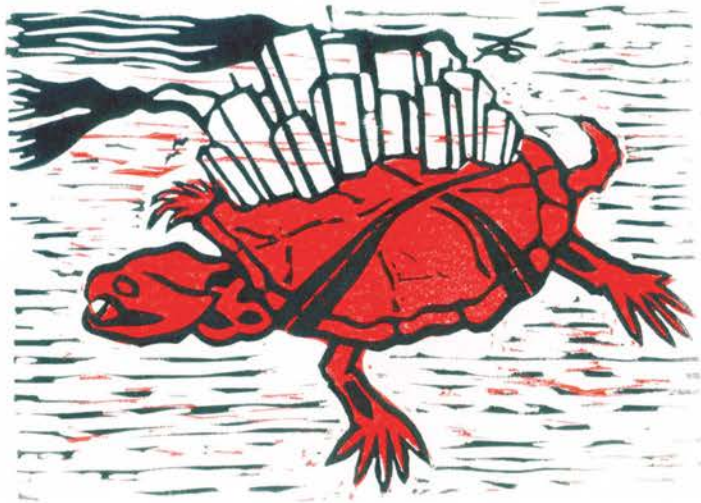
Cat Burglar

By Norma Carol McDade

He slipped into my bed as easily as a cat
wary, slow, eyes ever watchful
feral in his moves
hesitant in his manner
stalking, moving in, and then away,
slowly
seeking, probing, now bolder
padding, licking, deliberate stroking
and I, I waited, a non-entity in this encounter
and finally he came to me, and like a cat,
stole my breath away as if I was a baby
then he left as he came
taking nothing, leaving nothing
but for a faint scent and a paw print on my heart



Cindy Meissner
Red
Intaglio and Chine-Collé Print



Ryland Bates
Untitled
Relief Print

The Ballad of Bill Boone

By Norma Carol McDade

I went out west to find a man and man I
really tried.

He said he was a cowboy; he had a
cowboy stride.
He said he was a rancher, and raised cattle
on the side.
He lied, he lied, he lied.

We hiked into the wilderness, and spent
the night out on the range.
He said he loved me dearly,
and that he'd try to change.

He bugled like a big bull elk,
and when I asked him why, he said he was
a hunter, and a noted big game guide.
He lied, he lied, he lied.

He asked if I would marry,
and live in open spaces wide, and, against
my better judgement, "yes," I stupidly
replied.

A diamond graced my small left hand,
he said it was his mother's.
This same small ring, I found much later,
was worn by many others.
He lied.

The wedding was small- the cake was
gaudy, the champagne was cheap, and he
was naughty.
He hit on my friends, and told corny jokes.
The entire affair was a horrible hoax.
But we got tied!

He said he'd not beat me, and he'd never
be boring. What he failed to reveal, was
his habit of whoring.

He lied.
Nine days later I found him in bed
with a big boned cowgirl who looked grain
fed.
She stumbled about and tried to hide,
I cried, he lied.

He said he was sorry, and wanted to stay.
I forgave him once more,
I regret that to this day.
I tried to fit in, but his family was crazy.
His mom was a drunk and his dad was
lazy.
Oh they all got together and burned me a
blister,
and I swear to God he was screwing his
sister.

He left town with his cowgirl, back across
the great divide.
I followed close behind them, sword and
pistol by my side.
I got there before they did,
much to their chagrin.
I shot them both between the eyes,
now he lies with her and she lies with him.

The sheriff came, he saw, he sighed.
He ruled it murder-suicide.

I thought it out; I told my tale, no guilty
plea, no time in jail.

I told the sheriff I saw it all, she shot him
first as I recall.
Then, turned the gun and pulled the
trigger.

It never went to court, it never will be
tried.
By now you must have figured,
I lied, I lied, I lied.



Justis Day
Personalized Portrait #2
Digital Photography



Timothy James
Purple Woman
Digital Photography

We are Marble

By Matt McGuire

If this were the hall
of a ring decked king
and I was he
who wielded war
and granted fiefs,
I might hold you aloft
and shout
“See my son! Shield of my Days!”
But I am a poor man,
a mere Volkswagen shoveller of dust,
time and tree bark,
humble, paperback laden,
and we are not there
in the mists of a history
bound in leather, gilt in gold.
You and I, and your mother asleep
Cooing through
the blanket of her exhaustion
while an IV hums and Newton’s clock
ticks deliberate and merciless
my second chances away.
The past, now—my all is alive in you,
in me, we three
when I feel your skin
hot, sweet, and needy
against this chest of a man
rattling with smoke, labor and days.
I am—the true I, no longer a pauper
dreaming castles and lances,
no Fisher King
Grail thirsty and weak.
Strong, hale,
Gray and proud,
Once again I drink the wine of courage,
my serenity a carved colonnade fending
seasons with grace.
This night is fertile.
It is not finished.
Aran’s drape and warm blood courses
Between thee and me.
Sleep deeply, for the hard earth
waits patient and meek.
I will give battle to all
the second hands
and worried heartbeats.
We are marble, a dynasty of hopes,
though our clothes reek of coal.



Jordan Spears
Medusa
Relief Print



Sheridan Matthew Kahle
Icarus
Relief Print

Change is Different, Change is Good

By Kayla Weber

I used to be the Commander they knew as the Celestial Archangel. I had been instructed to lead a charge against the vile beings who crawl their way along the blackened filth of the earth, our brethren turned demons. I have no qualms with destroying what I find to be evil, but what is considered evil in my eyes may be extremely different than what other Archangels see as so. I want you to consider this; are demons really vile beings, deserving of immense hatred, or are they experiencing a freedom you never will?

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The sharp tip of my black feathered quill hit the parchment, delicately spreading the thin, midnight black ink to form the letters that made up my name and rank. The scratching sound the quill emitted from its journey across surface of the crisp parchment did nothing to calm my unusually irrational fear of commanding my subordinates, and neither did the incessant screeching laughter of a commander from outside. With every second those grating noises persisted, I became increasingly more annoyed, and my fist clenched around the top of the parchment, creating crinkles across its previously smooth surface.

To quickly end my time around those two horrendous sounds, I added the last calligraphic flourish to my inked name. A sigh of relief passed through my lips, which I noticed felt strangely thin and stretched, as if they had been out in the sun for an extended period of time but I thought nothing of it. I wanted to leave the small Signing Room as quickly as angelically possible, so I swiftly reinforced the supposed security the signed and crinkled parchment offered me by saying the words on it aloud.

“Celestial Archangel - Scarlett.”

Satisfied with the signature, I nodded, abruptly placing the quill pen back in its holder and hopping off of the wooden stool. Signing this parchment before every battle ensured myself and those under me that if we were in dire need of help on the field of battle, the other Archangels would intervene, bringing us back to the security of the heavens.

Before the parchment left my line of sight, something strange happened, which, coupled with the still continuing sounds of what now resembled maniacal laughter to my ears, put me further on edge. My Celestial signature blurred and writhed about on the parchment like the Serpent, whose home is now on the earth below us, adding and omitting letters, crafting new words.

Change is different, change is good.

Confusion and a hint of fear swept through me. I felt as I did when I flew through a dense cloud a few days prior, a choking sensation filling my throat as I inhaled too much of the moist atmosphere. However, this time there was no cloud, and therefore the air was the culprit.

I stumbled around the wooden stool I had been sitting on. This was the only piece of furniture in the small, stone Signing Room except for the square wooden table used solely for the signing of documents of value. The one painting in the room, proudly showcasing a dull meadow on the cold, gray wall opposite the door stared after my retreating figure as I dashed out into the bright sunlight of the heavens.

Upon reaching the open air, my hands flew up to shield my eyes from the intense sunlight bursting through the clouds. I scowled in annoyance at how abnormally bright the sun seemed, which thankfully caused me to forget about the insanity that was another Commander's grating laughter. Only the white, fluffy clouds brought me comfort, and a minimal amount at that, for they too soon developed inside my heart an animosity towards them. Everything here was set on these irritating clouds: the homes, the barracks, the Archangel school... I used to think the sight that was before me then, one full of the sun's warm rays and glorious fully clouds, was the best view in the heavens, but that day, it began to take on a different shape. The sun mocked me, hiding its warmth only from me while continuing to shower it upon the other angels. The clouds turned to a stormy gray and the wind picked up, swirling around me like a tornado.

I shook my head fiercely, trying to make sense of my completely changed mindset about the home I had loved so much. Looking down at the clouds below to spot my next stop on the way to the battlefield, I thought to myself, "Enough of this strangeness. I have angels to command in the forthcoming battle."

Leaning over the edge of the dark gray cloud, I spotted my destination a few cloud lengths down: the barracks. The barracks were where every group of angels was sent off with trumpets sounding in their wake when going into battle. That place, filled with swords, bow and arrows, and comrades was the final area of the heavens many angels saw. It used to pain me to think of how many angels, that stood around me before the battle began, would find their final resting place beneath a demon's sword in the earth below, but not this time. No thoughts of sorrow were in my mind as I stretched my elegant white wings, preparing to jump-and then realized that the tips of my white wings were beginning to take on a different hue: black.

I leaped off the cloud, plummeting towards the group of angels below, attempting to push my fear to the back of my mind without much success. Thoughts of everything strange that I had noticed, from my changed signature on holy parchment to the tips of my wings, whirled around inside my head. These thoughts persisted throughout the preparation phase, and I thought a few of the other Commanders noticed my changing wings. They said nothing though, and so I busied myself with strapping on my gleaming golden armor and quickly snagging my weapon of choice, a sharp two-handed sword that felt heavier than when I had last used it.

The farewell went faster than usual. The Supreme Commander directed a few words to each individual angelic soldier and murmured a brief prayer over each commander. When he reached me, I felt like turning away in disgust for some reason, but I faced him, opting to satisfy my hatred of my teacher of old by fiddling with my sword sheath attached to my waist. Two-handed swords were my favorite weapon to use in battle, and this particular one had saved my life so many times that I felt comforted with it by my side. Nothing would take that feeling away, not the battle trumpets sounding, or the drum beats pounding in my

ears. No matter what, I always had my two-handed sword.

When the trumpets echoed into silence and the drums ceased to reverberate through the heavens, I stepped up to the edge of the cloud, observing the world below. With my sharp eyesight, I saw demons watching us through the downpour beneath the clouds, awaiting bloodshed. They took on different forms, shifting between giants, hissing serpents, and bright red lambs with devil horns, as if calling us down to “play.” I stared into their bottomless black eyes and felt a twinge of pity for my long ago brethren that I was constantly forced to kill.

The next series of events were put on repeat before every battle. Michael’s resolute battle cry rang across the heavens and all commanders dove over the edge of the cloud, wings tucked in close to our sides to hasten the descent. Those beneath us in rank followed, emitting their own battle cries to strengthen their confidence. Strangely, during our fall, I remembered my first day amongst the other angels of war. The lyre’s gentle tune had meandered its way across the clouds, lavishly expressing the shared merriment between the angels. Golden goblets filled to the brim with various drinks and ornate mahogany tables piled high with exotic foods represented a lavish atmosphere one could enjoy nowhere but there. I enjoyed feasting in the large outdoor gazebo with the others, discussing topics from humorous activities we wanted to participate in, such as comedic plays, and tomorrow’s possibilities and uncertainties about the war. I had felt right at home.

We once danced in the heavens, the whole group of angels, and were all content with the power and status bestowed upon us by the Supreme Commander. Now, we were to dance not just in the clouds, but on the ground, separated, considered to be the pure angelic beings’ evil counterparts. Nothing good can last forever because change is different, but also good.

I reached the end of my memory as we slammed into the ground, creating elephant-sized craters in the soggy earth. Weapons drawn, we defended ourselves against the immediate onslaught of what my former commander once called “filthy degenerates” before becoming one of them himself. I dodged and sliced at the hordes, my past Commander still floating at the edge of my mind. I tried to focus on landing a killing blow on each and every one of the beings through the heavy downpour, but with every stroke, my two-handed sword sliced through the darkness, I became more and more frustrated and confused by my thoughts and actions of the day.

“Why do I keep thinking of that phrase on the parchment?!” I yelled as I swung my sword ferociously, as if that could answer my question.

I began to lose control of myself as the battle continued, feeling as if my blade were made purely of blood and was commanding me instead of the other way around. My rage increased as I continually missed fatal shots on demons, hitting extremities of pincers and tips of serpent tails instead, and then missing my targets altogether.

“What happened to all of my training and combat experience?!” I said, my loud shout cracking from fear. Sweat mixed with rain ran from my forehead to chin, dripping off my face to the river of red underneath my feet. “What’s –”

Suddenly, maniacal laughter reached my ears, sending a chill through my sweating body. I tried to speak over the laughter, to ask my staring soldiers where this insane

being was but found myself to be short on breath.

Then I realized that this laughter was coming from me.

Everything seemed to stand still as I sat down beside a large rock, armor clanging against its mineral surface. I barely registered the wetness of the landscape, laughing into the rain even more as a light lit my foggy brain. I knew what happened, why I was beginning to fall into step with my previous, now Fallen Commander. I had become angry at the simplicity of decisions in the heavens, of the way we have left the Fallen here to become fully immersed in the darkness without a second thought. It's not right. We should have DONE something, tried to save them from this fate!

“Only, what if this fate is the best one?”

I closed my eyes tightly, attempting to block the hoarse voice, the whisper that sounded louder than the surrounding battle cries and pleas of my comrades to stand back up and fight against this pull of evil:

“Your time is up, just like your Commander’s was. Come, my Scarlett, Celestial Spirit –” it spat those last two words – “join us. They’ve cast you aside like moldy bread. They don’t care about you, your life, your desires. The Supreme Commander doesn’t understand. Let go of that idiotic wonderland and follow me, your Commander, and your heart.”

I gasped. That was my Commander? His snicker began to fade away into the clashing of swords and ferocious yelling, making me think I had only heard voices in my head, that none of it was true. But at the prompting of the sinister voice, I could feel myself slipping away from the beauty of the heavens, away from the lively life I had once known, and embracing this new world of darkness, difference, and change.

“That’s what you wanted deep down, right, Scarlett? Change?” my inner self said.

I was not who my comrades had seen me to be, nor was I what I had thought of myself to be, a being of the heavens. I had fooled myself. I feel dirty, unclean, unsanctified before my comrades gazing at me in horror from their retreat back to the heavens. But... I like this new feeling. It’s... exhilarating, like I’ve just found the Fountain of Youth! I would never go back to that world of light, NEVER, do you hear me! It’s a restraining atmosphere, one unwilling to welcome the change that our friends, MY friends, the demons, have.

Wings fully black, thin lips stretched taut against bared fangs, I joined my commander in a shrieking frenzy, our version of laughter, as we taunted the dead angels scattered across the ground, covered in blood.

The words, what were they? Those words scrawled on the parchment in what seemed like a different dimension... Ah yes, here they are-

Change is different, change is good.

Reservation (Found poem)

By Isabella Bryant

In Des Moines, Iowa
My Father
plays the guitar like he's going to join a band
But reservation indians don't get chances
Choices, just poor
That's all we are
Feel that you
believing that you're
Destined to be poor
There's nothing you can do about it
Poverty
teaches you how to be poor, small, weak
He loved and trusted me
"I Love you" I said
He looked at me
Dad wasn't scared, he was relieved
But not me

From the book "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" by Sherman Alexie

Barbie Girl

By Isabella Bryant

You want me pretty
You want me new
fresh out of the box
accessories included
no imperfections to be seen
I won't move when you change me
won't cry when you twist my arm
All the silent whispers I will keep
When the fun fades you run away
I'm left in a wooden box
Used, A term that means
there is something wrong with this one
My imperfections made known
With a four-letter word
I'm not broken I promise
In fact, let's be honest
It's you
You who no longer feels new
So you have to rip open my packaging
and ruin me too



Joshua Slenker
Home
Digital Photography



Scott Garnes
Train
Digital Photography

The Wolves

By Stacey Price

The wolves first started to appear around two years ago. Giant beasts with gray and silvery hair, and teeth that could rip a girl like me apart easily. Beautiful creatures and just as dangerous, they were born by my subconscious to protect me from my past.

My childhood home used to haunt me in my dreams. At least once a week I would find myself standing there surrounded by blue, dirty, walls, and old worn out furniture. Mostly always the living room, or outside on the carport, filled with useless, rusty appliances and car parts. Sometimes I'd be in the old barn loft, or in the field around it, and sometimes in the massive expanse of woods that surrounded it all.

Either way, every dream experienced there in that long-abandoned farmhouse, or anywhere around it, would be chilling and eerie, sometimes frightening and horrific.

It wasn't long before I became aware of the symbolism. My childhood home was a spiritual metaphor for the darkness of my past, a past that I needed to move on from, but instead was haunted by it.

The dreams continued for quite some time until one dark night, I found myself there again. This time, however, was very different. The wind howled outside as a freezing blizzard raged around me. The house was even darker inside, older, the blue, dirty paint all chipped away, and there was no furniture... just people, people I had never met before. We were there, trapped, waiting for the blizzard to end so that we could all trek through the snow up the hill and through the woods to freedom.

I don't know why we were there or how we got there, only that a threat awaited us outside the walls of the house. Not of the blizzard that whistled around us, but something far deadlier... the wolves.

I was aware in my dream, of the absence of two men, men that had been torn apart and devoured by the beasts, the rest of us left waiting and afraid, clueless as to how we would get past them once the storm cleared.

A flashback of screams and bones cracking, low, deep growls and bloody teeth, would awaken me on the first few dreams, until one night it continued.

We were becoming restless and hungry. Someone had to try and sneak past the wolves, someone had to bring back help, or food. The healthiest of us drew straws. A tall man with cruel eyes held a fist full of them to me, and I, of course, drew one of the two short straws, along with a strong looking man with long hair and dressed in an old brown and tattered coat.

We peaked outside... no sign of the wolves. The blizzard was calmed enough to walk without being blinded by snow, and the more we approached the woods, the more the anticipation grew in us. Finally, we passed through the border of trees that lined the forest and when we heard the crack of a twig somewhere near us we

both stopped. Silence for one moment before a wolf flew by me, tackling the man to the ground. A shot fired from his rifle into the air as I could hear, even over the blizzard, his flesh tearing and above all, his screams. They echoed sharply, and the wind seemed to carry them through the air before wrapping them around me and holding me there in a frozen state of terror.

I remember feeling the man's helplessness, and wishing that I could run away, but I couldn't move. I was stuck there, watching him fade away into pieces.

Suddenly, the biggest wolf stepped out in front of me and I found myself face to face with him, his teeth bared and so close to me that I could feel the hot steam of his breath on my face. Still frozen with fear, the wolf continued to walk forward, causing me to fall backwards onto the snow and soon he was over me, his teeth still inches from my face. He growled a low, guttural, primal growl that was so deep I could feel it vibrate within my core, and just when I was sure my fate was the same as the man in the brown coat... the wolf spoke to me.

The wolf's voice filled my mind, as if by magic, and suddenly it was like the wolf and I were one. Empathically, he made me understand that those people back at my house and I must leave this place. He made me feel his intentions, and his desire was so strong that I was overwhelmed with urgency and desperation.

Despite this, however, my fear was gone. I was suddenly aware of the link between us, aware that this wolf would not hurt me, and that it was more than that, this wolf wanted to protect me.

The wolf stepped away from me and when I stood up out of the cold snow, he and the rest of them were gone...

I ran back to the house as fast as I could, trudging and falling with the excitement of knowing we, I, would soon be free.

I burst through the door and told my fellow prisoners of my experience, but instead of being met with joy and relief I was met with anger and criticism. It was impossible for a wolf to communicate with me in this way and even if it was true, it was a trap. Surely it was just a way to draw us all into a mass murder until we were nothing but corpses staining the snow beneath us. More than likely though, according to them, I was a coward, running back to safety while leaving my fallen friend behind as he screamed for my help.

I begged and pleaded for them to believe me but none of them would listen, and I was now deemed a traitor. They all decided it was time to escape, one way or another, and the tall man with cruel eyes began passing out rifles and anything that could be used as a weapon.

"Kill the wolves!" The tall man yelled out with fury. "Kill them all!"

"No! Please!" I protested with a deep, sad, yearning, but to no avail as they all piled out from the house into the snow. I ran out with them and heard the first shot fired somewhere ahead of me and then another, followed by screams and more bones cracking. More shots fired, more screams, those deep, vibrating, growls, and I found myself caught in the middle of a massacre, a war... a war with myself.

Soon, it was over, and the snow was crimson all around me. The bodies of every one of those people were lying about, torn apart like human rags, their eyes wide open and glazed over. The wolves, still great and beautiful beasts despite the blood on their fur and dripping from their mouths, all looked up at me from their victims and then stepped aside, revealing a path that led up the hill, a path that would take me from my past and into my present.

For one moment, I felt as if I couldn't bear to part with the wolves.

Again though, the empathic connection gave me that feeling of urgency. I felt from the biggest wolf that sense of protection, and almost heard within me his voice saying, "But you must."

He walked to me and nudged me, and when I didn't move he pushed me with his giant head, sending me off as they all walked with me up the trail, the giant one by my side.

Finally, I reached the end of the trail that wended through the woods and led from my old home to a creek. It was only a short distance from there that other people lived and it became more like civilization. I stopped, and I could see on the other side that the sun was shining, no snow, no darkness, just light, and I knew that warmth awaited me as soon as I crossed over.

I looked back at the wolves and there was one final empathic connection that made me understand I could never come back. That if I ever came back, they would stop me with whatever means necessary, and so with tears of both sadness and joy, I stepped over that line and turned to watch as they all walked back down the hill before disappearing into the white forest.

It was then that I awoke, and I cried big, fat tears that streamed down my face one after the other, and I was overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. I had lost something, and yet I had gained something as well. I was holding onto that place and that place was holding onto me. It would have never loosened its grip on me unless I let go first.

I still dream of it, only now I'm always on the other side of that creek, standing in the warmth of the sun, looking into the winter path longingly but knowing I can never cross over. Those people that lost their lives so long ago down there in that place were all me. They were all parts of me that needed to die. The house, the fields, the woods, all a part of my past that I needed to move on from, and finally, I was, I am, the wolves.

The mind is a beautiful and frightening thing that never ceases to amaze me. I couldn't move on with only the part of me that lies on the surface. And so, my mind divided me, divided me into facets of myself, into people and forests, blizzards and wolves. It separated me so that parts of me could die for the rest of me to live. My subconscious took the form of wolves, to do the dirty work so that the rest of me could walk away with clean hands. They, out of it all, still exist in me, watching, guarding that forbidden realm, protecting me from ever going back.



Melvin Nathaniel Greene
Directions
Digital Media



Grace Lackey
Paris
Digital Media

Unrequited

By Trina Curtis

There was a man she loved with a violent love,
and she spent much of her time thinking about his wife.

*What does she have that I don't have?
How can I take it from her?
How did she catch him? She must have tricked him.
How can I learn from her?*

Wife is tall of stature with faux nails and blond tendrils.
*I think I'll take them from her.
The less she has, the more I'll have.
He'll notice me like no other.*

*My love is deep. My love is strong.
I fight for what is mine.
I deserve his love. He owes me his love.
He'll wish he gave it sooner.*

The wife whom he loved, she loved him back.
*She will not make it long.
They thought they were safe since I went away.
Ha. Ha. They are so wrong.*

*I've been detained by walls and wraps.
I think they gave me twenty.
But plans have been made. Prices paid.
His arms shall soon be empty.*

There was a man she loved with a violent love,
and she spent much of her time thinking about his wife.



Stephanie O'Connor
Untitled
Intaglio Print



Aleshia Taylor
Self Portrait
Intaglio

Valladolid

By KJ Maj

We were another bus arriving on the way to Chichen Itza
stopping to stretch our legs on Yucatan soil;
to feel Mexico at its roots; its history.

I will always remember you, surrounded urgently
by tiny copper-skinned children, bright brown eyes
waving their little white doll dresses:
handmade huipils afire with multi-colored threaded blossoms.

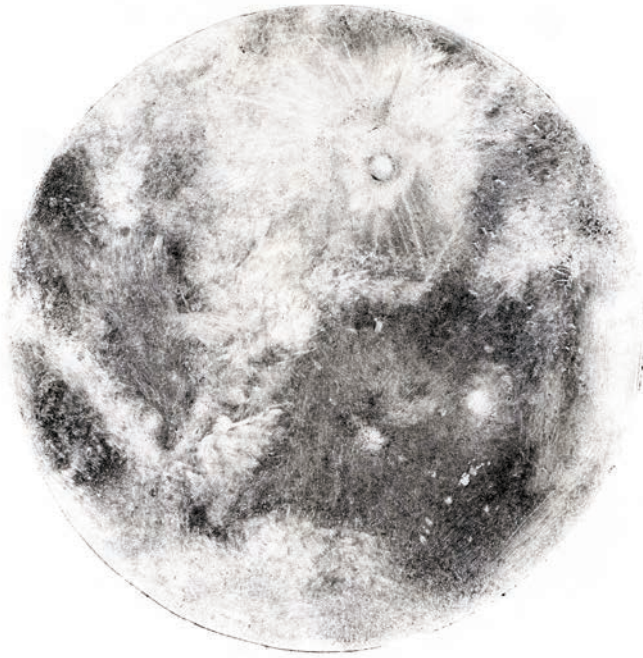
I will always remember me, trying to kindly say no,
no thank you as children ran up to wave and show what
“lady lady just one peso!” would buy.

Crossing the street, my back turned away from
towering San Bernardino Church, I entered the tree-surrounded
stone/iron fenced town park: inhabitants smiling, sitting
on white-painted iron benches chipped by Time, breathing in the
comforting sound of the immense fountain bowl within its center.

I turned and saw you, still surrounded by wide-eyed girls, boys,
reaching, reaching reaching out for your peso, straining to be seen:
you gave from your heart....not from ignorance
and they will race, race in front of Mother Church, to get
as many pesos as they possibly can this day
“Signora!” “Senior!” “Senorita!”

I will always remember Valladolid, Mexico
my chest tight, more from the excitement of being there than
sweltering June heat
my eyes wide, my Moment feeling unbelievable that I’m here, lungs
inhaling History, deliberately filling my Spirit, taking it all in this
stopping of Time.

I will always remember women and men, quiet as illusion,
sitting in the park, reaching hands of children,
you trying to take each child in.



Sheridan Matthew Kahle
Untitled
Monotype



Elise Osha
Untitled
Digital Photography

I've Been Losing

By Shelton White

It's so easy to find people who are broken and give in to the emotion that they're feeling and let their struggles define who they are, and it's so easy to find people who are optimistic and constantly try to do better for themselves but have never had to fight tooth and nail for what they want.

To find people -
who have fought, who have scraped along, who have known what it's like to be so close to giving in,
and giving up,
but despite all of that;
believe they can be who they want to be, and do what they're passionate about
- is next to impossible.

It never goes away.
The anxiety is literally a constant battle every single second that I'm awake, and I thought I had gotten so damn good at winning but lately...
Well.
Lately, I've been losing.

This enemy knows no logic,
it knows no truth,
and has no specific environment.
When you're happy, it taunts you,
laughs at you,
asks you how short lived it will be.
It claws at you
and pins you down
and spits in your face -
Asks you, "How long do you think you can keep improving before you fuck something up?"
It asks you, "How long can this fragile little light that we call optimism stand up to the onslaught of everything that hurts and bends, burns and breaks?"
"How long will the light stay on once the walls that hold it up are torn down and darkness swallows it?"

The answer is:

Not very long.

That's why you have to open the door and walk beyond those walls and face it head on.
You hit it before it grabs you,
and then you hit it some more.
You stomp its head in because you know that it would do the same thing to you and the ones that you love.
You pin it to the ground, but you don't kill it because... it can't die.
That's the advantage that it has over you.

You can win the fight over
and over
and over
and over again,
But it will always come back.

You can beat it every single day of your life,
and you will.
Just to show them that they're worth more than it is.

That the pain,
and the scars,
and the darkness
will never, ever stand up
to the love,
and the joy,
and the light

that exists between you and them.

Sufficient to the Day

By Amy Tilly

Shadow cat dances
Chasing moths on the deck
Then
Kitten gone.
Days pass
And circles grow wider
Of
Looking for small gray form
Knocking on neighbors' doors
Pondering my sufficiency
To meet commitments
To beings, large and small.

Sunday comes and
Sacred words shimmer in sanctuary air
Love
Abiding
Then knowledge seeps into heart well.
I may not be sufficient
(even for small gray cat)
But I do love
Abidingly.



Kate Cox
Go Ask Alice
Low-fire Ceramics



Stephen Burchette
Untitled
Low-fire Ceramics

The Best Defense

By David Moore

The air was still. The general's last words hung in the air, and no one dared to respond. Machines across the room hummed, but no other sounds penetrated the din.

"I'm not going to say it again, gentlemen," the general said, straightening his shoulders and looking around the room at the five others seated at the circular table. "We're going to war."

The youngest of those there, a man in his early thirties, pushed his glasses up onto his nose, looking uneasy. "Surely there's an alternative—"

"Yes, there's an alternative, Secretary. Death."

No one spoke again, and the air became tense. The general stayed silent again, looking every person in the eye. Finally, the man at the head of the table lifted his head from its lowered position, addressing everyone.

"If that's the way the general says it has to be, then so be it. We go to war."

Everyone sat back a bit in their chairs, the magnitude of what he had just said sinking in. At one end of the room, a large bank of computers sat, a military insignia rotating on each of their screens. The room had dozens more chairs, but their occupants were absent from this meeting.

"I suppose I'll contact Jameson, and see about getting a declaration of war drafted," a red-headed woman with narrow features spoke, eyes flitting to the man who had given the orders, "but it depends on what stance we're going to take on this, sir."

"Forget letting them know we're going to war. If we want to win, let's just launch a first strike! That'll get the point across!" A heavysset man in military uniform barked, pounding his fist down on the table.

An older man next to him nodded, the wrinkles on his forehead deepening. "Best we finish it all in one go, if you ask me."

"No one asked you, old-timer," the young bespectacled secretary butted in, glaring at the old man. "I think if we give them the opportunity for surrender, then they'll be reasonable. No need for bloodshed."

The general snorted, derision clear on his face. "If you think that the people we're dealing with are going to just lie down and surrender, you've got another thing coming. We've seen what these people can do. They're always fighting! Every single one of them has a bloodlust that is completely insatiable!"

"That's not true, general," the narrow-faced woman spoke up. "We've seen how far they've come in the fields of science and technology. Some of them devote their entire lives to the pursuit of knowledge."

"All that's a bunch of rubbish, Miss Stone." The heavysset man waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, narrowing his eyes. "For every leap they've made in the field of science, they've taken two backwards by turning their discoveries into weapons. These people have war in their genes, and no amount of the few exceptions will change that. If they're threatened, it won't matter how a few people feel. They'll retaliate." The man stopped for a moment, before adding, "With force."

The old man nodded once again in agreement, this time raising his frail frame a bit higher in his chair, addressing the leader. "That's true, sir. I've studied them for most of my life, and it's the reason I'm in this room right now. These folks are a resourceful bunch, and if we give them any idea of what we're doing, we'll regret it."

The leader nodded, taking what the man had said into consideration. He

placed his elbows on the table and put his index fingers on the bridge of his nose. There was stubble on his chin, as if he'd missed a night or two of sleep. Before he could speak, there was a knock, and a door across the room slid open.

In walked a short man in a sharp suit, hair askew. "Commander, we've got reports of something going on in enemy territory."

The leader turned sharply to face the man who had just spoken. "Do they suspect us?"

"As of now, we believe they haven't noticed us, sir."

"Then what's the issue, son?"

"They seem to be... er... fighting, sir." The young man scratched the side of his head, clearly unsure of how to continue.

"Among themselves? This is perfect!" The heavyset man stood up, looking at the leader expectantly. He turned to Miss Stone, a smug look on his face. "See, Miss Stone. Constantly squabbling. If we don't take them out, they'll do it themselves!"

The Commander stood up quickly, mind racing. He turned sharply and left those in the war room to their squabbles, brushing past the young man who'd brought them the news. He walked through the narrow hallways, the bulbs above providing barely enough light to see where he was placing his feet. Finally, he reached the large balcony, where he could stare through the glass and barely make out the enemy battlefield that was spread before him.

Somewhere over there, they were fighting. Those in the war room seemed to think that they were so much better than their enemy, but they couldn't handle a discussion like this without picking sides and arguing. It constantly wore on the leader, but he was the only one who could do this job, or at least that's what he told himself.

The dark view outside allowed him to partially see his reflection in the glass, and he was a bit shocked at the man staring back at him. Where was the man of his youth, who had dark, full hair and a strong physique? That man was long gone, he admitted, staring at the frail visage that remained. All these years, the constant stress and travel had taken a toll on him. He wondered if there would ever be a time when he got a full night's sleep again. As he was wallowing in his self-pity, he saw someone approaching behind him in the reflection.

"Had enough of the arguing, Miss Stone?" he remarked, not taking his eyes from the glass.

"If you hadn't included those men in the meeting, you wouldn't be sulking away right now," Miss Stone said, standing beside him and staring out at the enemy in the distance. "They're really not a barbaric people, sir. You have to know that."

"I know that more than anyone, Miss Stone, but we've seen them getting dangerously stronger with every passing moment, amassing weapons and pushing their limits. We can't let it continue. The general is right."

Miss Stone said nothing, but continued staring ahead. Like him, she had also lost almost every trace of her youth, her red hair the only reminder that there was once a happy, young, and carefree individual where she stood. "Innocent lives will be lost. Are you willing to be responsible for them?"

"I've been in charge of millions of lives, but I've yet to meet any one of them that's truly innocent. I'm sure it's the same for this bunch." He placed his hands behind his back, eyes shifting out of focus, staring at nothing.

"You know that's complete nonsense, Henry. What about the kids? What if they were your kids?" Miss Stone asked him, using his name to make things personal and remind him of their past.

"I'm doing this now so that it never happens to my kids, Beth. This is war; we

can't afford to think about anyone other than ourselves." He turned to face her, meeting her gaze.

"If we only think about ourselves, then we're just going to go from war to war! Dammit, man! Don't you understand?" Her voice rose, her cheeks flushing to a color that almost matched her hair.

"I understand, Beth!" He shouted back, such force behind it that spittle flew from his mouth. He'd realized his outburst, and he composed himself. "I understand," He said more softly.

Miss Stone just stared at him, obviously seeing his turmoil.

"If I don't do this now, Beth, they will do it later, but to us. We can't afford to give them a chance! We've been in enough wars already to see what happens to those that get attacked. We can't afford to be those people. We have to attack first. It's for the greater good."

Out of the window, they could see an explosion rise in the distance. Somewhere over there, the fighting had begun.

Miss Stone sighed, staring at Henry sadly, understanding. "There's nothing I can do to stop you, is there?"

"I'm afraid not, Beth. This is it." Henry turned away from the window, his face now back to the emotionless slab that it needed to be for what he was about to do next. He started to walk towards the command center, now full of dread and steely resolve.

"Take a last look at Earth, Beth. It's not going to be there much longer."

Outside of the window, Beth watched the planet, floating there, with explosions popping up on its surface. They had no idea that all this fighting was only making it worse. But as she thought about all the death that was going on down there, she thought that Henry might have had a point. Maybe they were getting too dangerous for their own good.

She turned and followed Henry into the command center of the spaceship, where the others would have gathered. Lives would be lost. Human lives, but what did that matter?

A quick farewell to Earth and its inhabitants, and then they opened fire.



Frances Nicholson
Wooden Teapot
Low-fire Ceramics



Frances Nicholson
Pitcher and Plate
Low-fire Ceramics

Crescent Moon

By Trina Curtis

Crescent

moon always
at his labor
gifting light and
shifting water. The
world grateful is.
The earth below with
placid waters hides the
shifting sands. The clouds
give laud and glory and
worship crescent moon.
By gentle caress and wispy
brush, the praise, it's just
begun. With misty breath,
the crescent moon gives birth
to stars of wonder. The earth
below withwith boulders grand,
receives its light with honor.
Glory be a dreamer here, on
tippy toes does stand. Upon
the crescent moon she stares
upon the land. A dreamer's
heart. A wistful soul. She
hopes upon a star. This
lady dreamer on her toes
doth wish upon a star.



Hannah Smart
Rob and Cigar
Low-fire Ceramics



Bethany Smith
Untitled
Low-fire Ceramics

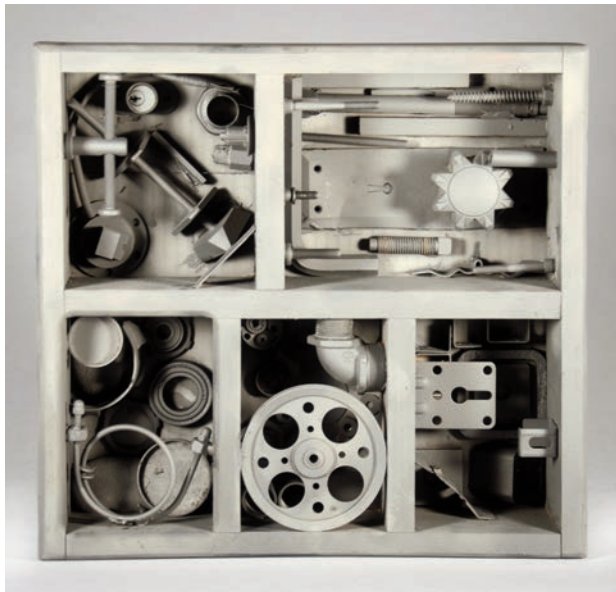
Little Girl

By Kendall Rickell

Little girl laughing, no worries in the world
Her innocent eyes, always wearing her pig-tails curled
little girl's mind full of wonder and creativity
always has a smile on her face, never projecting negativity
she dreams of being a rock star or a nurse
always bringing her teddy bear beside her in her pink plastic purse
she sees endless possibilities
little girl never doubted her abilities
she knew no boy could beat her in a race
little girl took on the world alone at a fast pace
but one day little girl grew up never wanting to look back
Little did she know she couldn't back track
she doubted herself and contained no strength
she would try to get somewhere but would only reach an arm's length
she was not confident and felt alone
she thought nothing could be done on her own
big girl missed the days she was fearless
she now wishes that she would be tearless
big girl grew and grew
only to find her dreams and wishes never became true
she wanted the drive she had when she was young
the pain and the heartbreaks hurt and stung
she lacked motivation and belief
big girl felt time was taken by a thief
little girl no more, now just simply a woman
she missed her teddy bear and small chair that was wooden
she missed the time when she thought she could rule the world
now she is stuck with frustration, so books she hurled
little girl thought she would do so much
but now big girl is suffering needing support from a crutch
the world molded the little girl and made her change
everything and everyone affected how she acts now which seems so strange
she used to never care what others thought
now the disease of perfection has been caught
big girl is angered by who she has turned into
she is done with the pressure, big girl is through
but when she turned around
she saw a photo laying face down
it was the little girl she once was smiling for the picture, never portraying a frown
little girl was her own person with hopes and dreams
big girl notices how much she's changed and can't hold back the constant streams
she felt she had failed little girl's wants and desires
she wants the world's pressure to stop and ceasefire
big girl looked at her once young self
takes a step back, and places her back on the shelf
she wonders what happened, what changed and why
she hurt for all the little girl's care free souls soon to die
she wants to stop it but knows there is no way
just to hope the next little girl will be able to grow old with laughter and never forget
how she
once used to play



Katie Webb
Baseball Bat
Low-Fire Ceramics



Ashley Barnett
Untitled
Assemblage



Yaakov Jacob Smith

The Typewriter

Ink and Wax

Awarded Cover Art for *Branches*, Volume 23



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