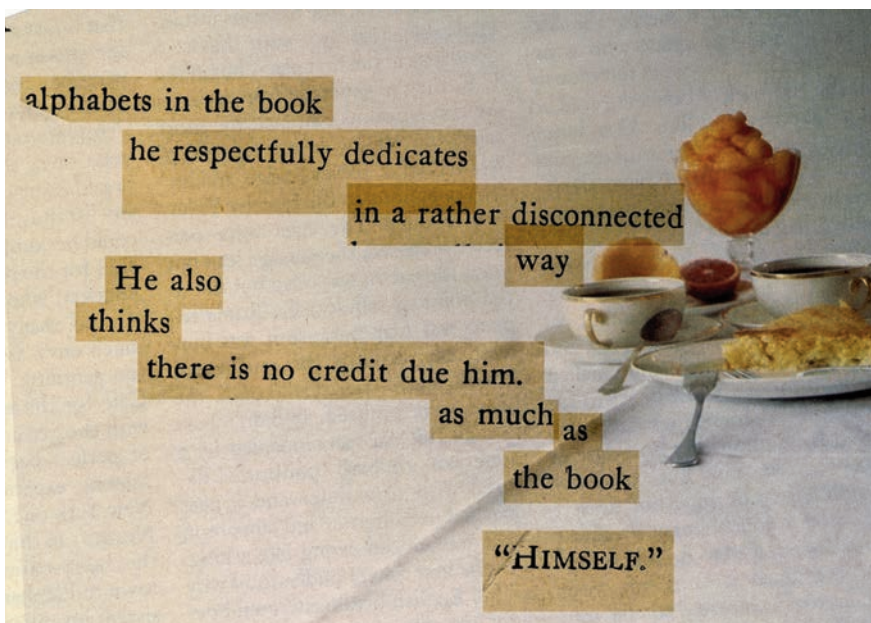
A still life photograph of a breakfast table. In the foreground, a white coffee cup with a gold rim sits on a saucer. To its right, a glass of orange juice is filled with a frothy top. In the background, another coffee cup and a plate of pancakes are visible. The scene is set on a light-colored surface.

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the book

Branches

Covid-19 Edition



Thomas Thielemann
Himself (found poem)

Acknowledgements

Art Editors

Laura Aultman

Thomas Thielemann

Literary Editors

Heather Barnett

Jessica Chapman

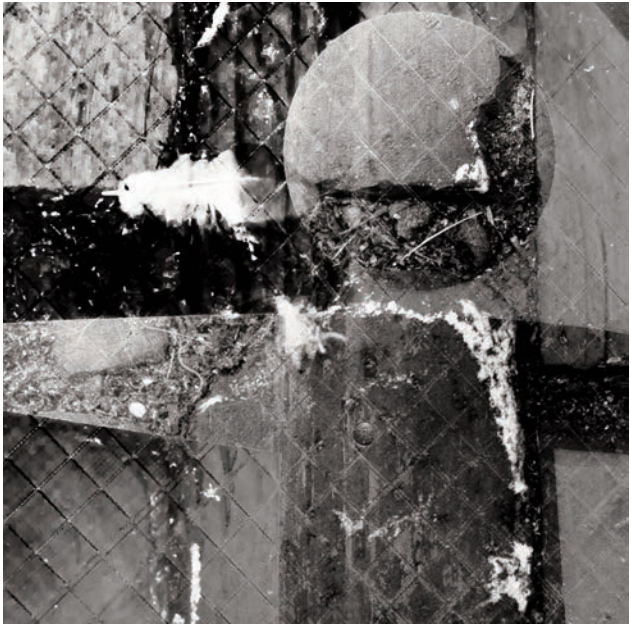
Emily Roberts

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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 24th edition of *Branches*, please visit our website at www.cccti.edu/branches.

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Martin Church
Of A Feather
Digital Media



Scott Brown
Black Face
Collage

City Girl in Love

By Laura Benton

The clouds didn't open at first
softly they breathed light
against her neck, sneezing
yellow into her window
demanding stimulation
This wasn't the first time she saw
patterns scoring the skyline

The girl finally notices
the glow of the clouds' dark
embers more perfect than bright
city lighting against black
(Why hold back this view?)

She had seen this before,
knew warmth on her shoulder
but these suspicious stars
lead her to a new bright,
to the dark beauty of angelic
lines, her hand hard on his chest
waiting for him to grip her

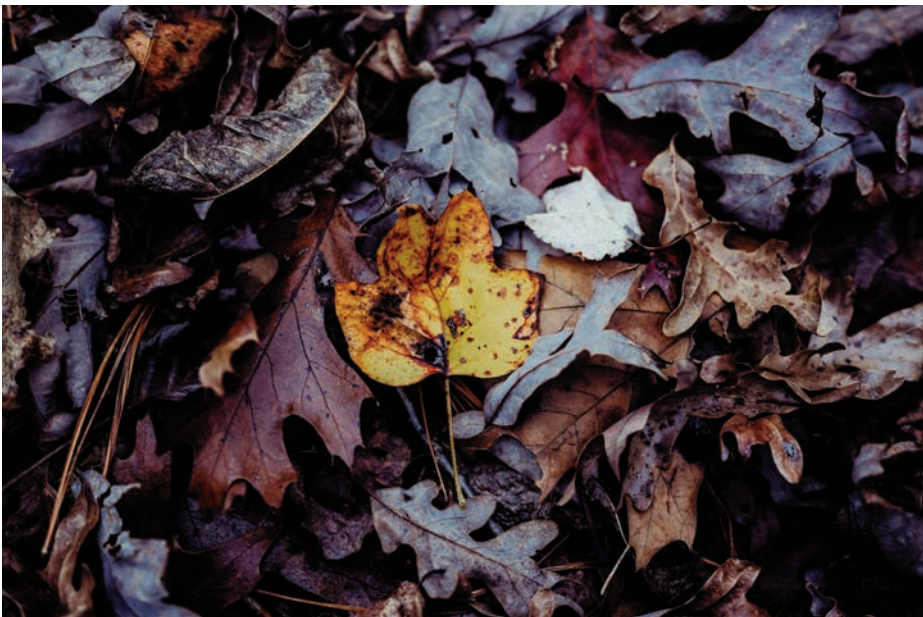


Maggie Flanigan

Deer Spine

Archival Print from 4x5 paper negative

Laura Aultman
Untitled
Eco Print



Kristin Harrison
Stand Out
Digital Photography

Blending With Love— A Grandmother Speaks Up for all Grandchildren

By Claudia Ward-Eller

“Mom, my new boyfriend was married before and he has a little girl.”

No big deal. People divorce all the time. It happens, so I look forward to meeting him and his daughter. But you have to understand—I’m from the South where you do not want to embarrass anybody or say the wrong thing. Plus, I come from a long line of worriers. A very long line. We want to do-the-right-thing-at-all-costs. No, more than ‘want to;’ we are dead set on finding a solution that will work. The kind of solution that requires staying up till 4 am kind of deal. That means I immediately start trying to figure out what to say and how to make him feel comfortable when we meet.

And especially: how do I treat his daughter?

What do I say to this tiny child? I want her to feel welcome and loved. None of that ‘step-grand-daughter’ bull. I have years of experience working and playing with children so this should be a snap, yet I’m insanely nervous to make sure she likes me and knows I like her.

The first time we meet, I get down on my knees and say “hello;” so far, so good. Pretty soon I’m chill enough to do what I do in the best Southern tradition—sing and tell stories. I belt out “Polly wolly doodle all dayyyyy...” and she looks at me like I’m insane. I start into “the itsy bitsy spider crawls up a water spout,” but when I clap my hands together for the “washed the spider out” part, she puckers up her face to cry. Great, I’ve terrorized my new little grand-daughter.

The next time I get to see her is about six months later. Once more, I break out the old song and dance routine. “Hello my honey, hello my baby, hellloooo my rag time gal...” Wait! She smiled. Just a tiny bit. It’s catnip to my fevered brain so onward I go, splashing through stories and poems and songs-songs-songs. I’m sweating all over, but it’s worth it when she hugs me as it’s time to leave.

Christmas. We all get together to celebrate my daughter’s engagement and upcoming wedding and the holidays. I’m outside taking care of some chore or other when they arrive so I come into the house after everybody. I enter to loud talking and laughter. Music in the background. Lots of people. A complete chaos of voices and sounds. Nobody pays attention to me. I could be the ‘itsy bitsy spider’ for all the interest anybody takes in my entrance.

Then I hear it, underneath all the noise and chattering sounds. “Grandmaaaaaa!,” a reedy little voice. Tiny three-year-old arms reach out from across the room. Her little face splits into a giant grin. I run to her and pick her up and swing her around. She alone, out of everyone, sees me. “Sing polly wolly,” she commands. I almost swoon with love.

And that’s why, two years later when we go to her preschool graduation, I have to do it. I search the auditorium. She’s seated across the room because of the unfriendliness between the two sides in the now-final divorce situation. I start praying and pray throughout the entire presentation. If an opening comes, I decide, I’ll take it. I have to see her.

Aha! The crowds part. She’s standing there.

I look into a face I recognize by the features. “Hi, I know you’re Sally’s Mom. I just wanted to introduce myself to you because I’ve met your little girl, and she’s wonderful. I know that you must be amazing to have such an amazing child. I’m delighted to get to know her.”

The familiar-shaped eyes curve into a wary smile. She murmurs something polite in return. We stand together for a few minutes, and then I see her look focus in on something. I follow her gaze and watch my daughter and her new husband hug Sally on the other side of the room.

The smile fades from her eyes and they grow cold and hard. I sense it’s time to leave, so with a “very nice to meet you,” I walk back across the great divide that separates the two groups.

Was it the right thing to do? To force Sally’s mother to meet me, the mother of the new wife? I realize I’m a person who really has no legal claim to the term ‘Grandma’. Why was I compelled to force a connection instead of letting the wall stand? Some people say I’m a busybody for butting in where it’s none of my concern. Other people think I’m overthinking the whole process. I just know that I refuse to buy into this forced separation. For my grand-daughter’s sake, that night, I reached out.

To their credit, my daughter and her husband accept my clumsy fumbling attempts to foster peace and love me without judging. They don’t get mad or frustrated at my country ways but smile and thank me for trying. And I sure see them both try, for Sally, to help her develop and deal with the issues that come from having two families. They keep an upbeat attitude as much as possible and little by little, good steps happen. Baby steps, maybe, but they happen. A semi-polite meeting. A shared laugh about the confusing traffic pattern at the new school. A group chat to coordinate the scheduling, the ongoing pick-ups and drop-offs.

I watch and see the growth and am proud of them. For how hard they fight. Not with words or fists, but with positive actions to help this little girl grow. And she's flowering, learning to spell and write and exploring how things work. She bounces on her small trampoline as she tells me about her latest adventure at school with her special friend.

She looks up at me and smiles. Her eyes sparkle and she throws back her head and laughs. At that moment, my heart turns in my chest. And that's when I know her real identity. Her place in my life. She's my grand-daughter of the heart. And will always be.



Thomas Thielemann
Mothers and Brothers
Platinum palladium print



Jennifer Carson
Who Will Remember?
Ceramic Stoneware



Jennifer Carson
Sustain
Ceramic Stoneware

Bright Nights and Dark Days

By Lindsay Barrick

The night John Prine died,
my hands were so thoroughly scrubbed they shone
pink as the super moon.

Lyrics I learned as a child
about tortured timber, stripped land, the “progress” of man,
kept me at the sink.

Earlier, I had laid my head
on my love’s chest at the weight of the news: again,
thousands more were gone.

With eyes shut and breath held,
I shuddered and wondered how often other contagions
pass and rage between us.

How many had been, would be,
transmitted through thoughtless word or hateful deed?
Are my hands clean?

Lenten questions threatened
to steal any sort of shaky peace, but healing and truth
rarely distance themselves.

In David’s arms, I was reminded
of beauty and goodness that remain, even - especially -
in these bright nights and dark days.



Jane Harrison
Yellow Mapscape
Collage



Jane Harrison
Green Mapscape
Collage

A Haiku About Teaching Art

By Thomas Thielemann

I ask van Gogh's ear
When you've heard it all before
Do you still listen?



Guy Myers III
ATA Poster 2020
Digital Montage



Maggie Flanigan
Parsley Tea
Archival Print from 4x5 paper negative



Paula Buff
Jellyfish
Digital Photography

Electrocution

By Brent Tomberlin

The sharp barbs in your email
Slice through me
Like the way a jagged, broken shard
Of glass scrapes across skin.

I bleed as well as any man

Of course, those stings came from your shocking fingers
Cutting at my conscious like
A knife through soft cake.

Brazen and burned, I wallow in the words

Pausing, in the great movie of life
To consider them. . . .

Pondering,
Searching each one for any truth

So the world can be better.



Diane Mazza
Grandfather's View
Digital Photography



Tara Gaskill
A Tranquil Masterpiece
Digital Photography



Luke Benton
Kinlochleven
Digital Photography

Mornings

By Thomas Thielemann

The sun comes creeping up over our back yard here
Sneaking across the grass,
Down the brick stairs and ivy,
Right into our bedroom window.

Our curtain glows with the excitement of the day to come
And gently leans over to wake us,
Slowly,
So that we may remember our dreams.

I move closer to find the warmth of your body
And it is not heat but love I find.
I can never pull you close enough to me
In these mornings.

We both struggle to fight the gravity of our cheap mattress
And the sleep that tries to keep our eyes shut.
When mine open and I'm holding you,
I find that the sun and the glowing curtain are right.

Those dreams about you weren't dreams at all,
And the heat and the love are all that matter
In these mornings
When I can't pull you close enough,
When the sun comes creeping in.



Allen Johnson
Granddad Bob's Barn
Acrylic



Scott Brown
For Henry
Bronze

Songs and Beer

By Laura Benton

Dad kept Coors Light in the garage fridge
he let us try it once, we begged
for that sip—cool, crisp, lost on us kids

Those days we wrestled him after work
His palms played dayyy-o, dayyyyy-o
on my belly. I giggled like my son does

when his stomach is my drum
I sing softly in his ear, wondering
if he'll remember my words

if I'll know him long enough
to buy him a drink or if I'll be
memories of sweet songs and beer



Laura Aultman
Untitled
Slump Glass



Barbara Coffey
Cobra Spirit
Mixed Media

Compared to You

By Thomas Thielemann

I lose my footing on old roads,
The ones I remember taking before you.

Leaning on the crutch of all those things I can't forget,
I drink so much liquor when you're away.

The words of Saint Thomas chime in
Crying for the shoulder of the love that left yesterday.

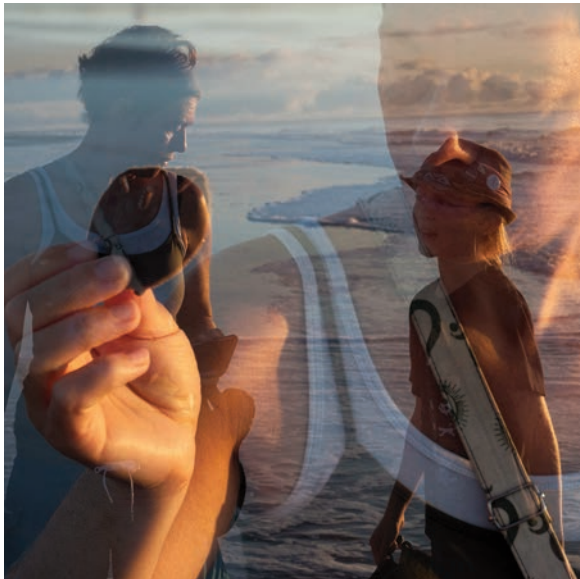
When fall comes, I see no reason for winter
And when you do, I see no reason for your leaving.

Still,
The sight of a good painting is nothing

Compared to you.



Bronda Jones
Untitled
Digital Photography



Martin Church
Carrie Hawk Tybee
Digital Media

Thanatos

By Bobby Hamby

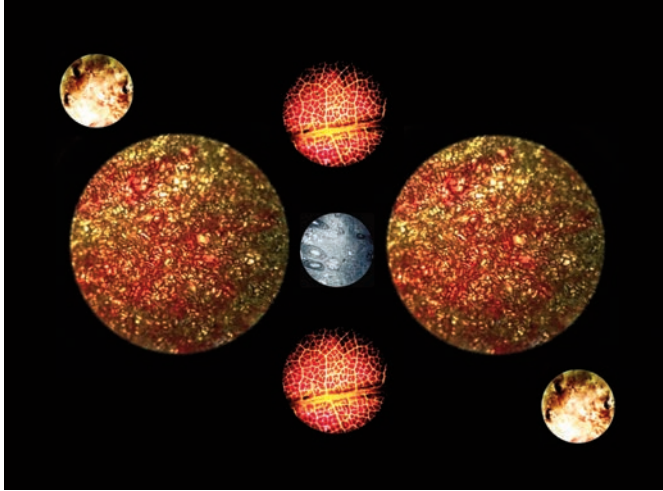
Replace the scythe
with a rod built for the ocean,
the black cowl
with a floppy khaki hat
replete with hooks
and shiny lures,

the hourglass
with a stem wound
savonnette,
a train engraved
on its hunter-case.

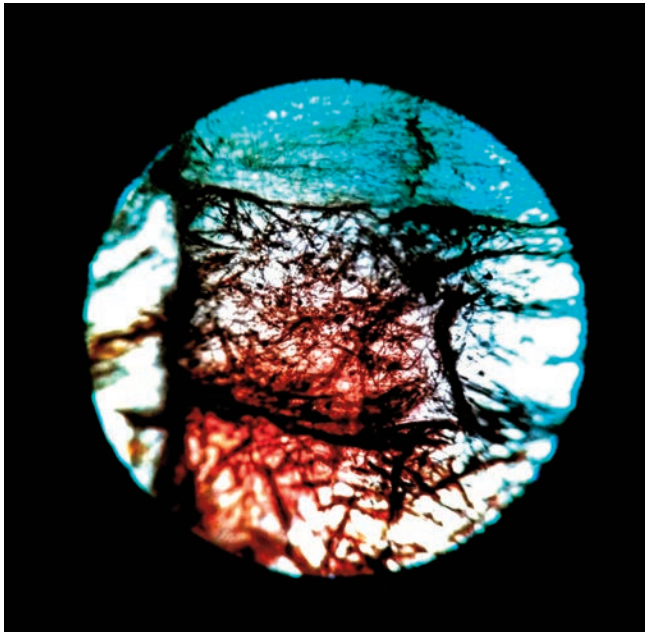
He is enjoying a light beer
while rolling a smoke
with the end of the universe
reflected
in mirrored sunglasses.

You're leaving a theater
after an early matinee on a Sunday
striding out onto rain-soaked sidewalks
into a world that has been muted
by your absence.

There are wet red leaves
plastered to the pavement
and a bathing blue and white bird,
rippling its feathers in the rain.



Josie Varela
Likeness 1.5
Digital Media



Josie Varela
Wasp's Nest
Digital Media

Pocket Change

By Laura Benton

Cold beer in a college town
on Tuesday nights where
young talent gladly plays
for pocket change

Chicken wings in week-old
lard any way you want em
says the boy working
for pocket change

Clean drinking water,
grains—everything a child
needs in a place waiting
for pocket change



Kelly Kowalski
The Favor
Digital Photography



Thomas Thielemann
Suit Coats
Mixed Media



Thomas Thielemann
Vernon
Platinum Palladium Print

alphabets in the book

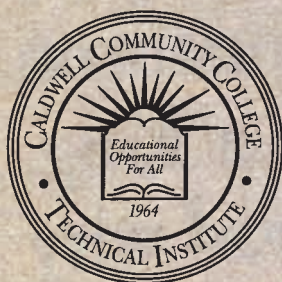
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as



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