



# Branches

volume twenty-six

## In Memoriam: Alicia Hartley



This year's edition is dedicated to the memory of CCC&TI colleague Alicia Hartley. Alicia served for many years as a Library Technician on CCC&TI's Caldwell Campus and passed away unexpectedly in September. She was an avid reader, literature enthusiast and supporter of the arts.



Sarah Stewart  
*Mutated Freshwater*  
Silkscreen

# Acknowledgments

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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 26th edition of *Branches*, please visit our website at [www.cccti.edu/branches](http://www.cccti.edu/branches).

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Storm Miller

*Nymph*

Digital Photography

Awarded First Place by the Visual Arts Editors  
(2-D Category)



# Heavenbound Innocents

By Peter Morris

This poem was awarded first place in poetry by the literary editors of *Branches*.

Amerie and Eliahana missed their school bus  
Yesterday  
As did Annabell, Jose, and Xavier  
These third and fourth grade students  
All rode to undefined locations  
In hearses  
They were joined by 14 other elementary school students  
Two teachers  
And untold numbers of shocked, grieving, and sobbing  
Mothers, fathers, grandparents, and friends  
Innocents, they are now heavenbound  
No longer homebound residents of Texas  
They will join more than two dozen first graders  
And teachers, killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School  
Ten years ago  
Their names included Dawn, Rachael, Anna, and Mary  
“When in God’s name will we stand up to the gun lobby!”  
Demanded our nation’s president.  
Like pleas echoed by Americans from coast-to-coast  
“Again...it’s happened again!”  
“The worst school tragedy in United States history!”  
Media organizations screamed...incorrectly  
Sadly, that dubious distinction belongs to Bath Elementary  
In Lansing, Michigan, circa 1927  
There, in an unbelievable occurrence, a school board  
Official, angry at other member’s decisions  
Dynamited a gymnasium filled with students and teachers  
Killing 38 children and adults  
Decades later, in 2007, at Virginia Technical College  
Thirty-two students were slaughtered  
Denied futures, courtesy of another disgruntled student  
Of course, we’re highlighting only school shootings  
By teenage thugs with easily-purchased military weapons  
Lest we forget, there’s also Columbine and Parkland schools  
And many, many lesser acknowledged mass murders  
Not to mention hundreds of other generalized body counts  
ANNUALLY in America!  
Slaughters of children and those who watch over them  
When will it all end?  
When will parents be able to send their children off  
To school, in the morning?  
With full expectation they will arrive home at day’s end?  
While nations the world over kill their populace  
And those of neighboring allies  
Through wars, political unrest, religious hostilities,  
Forced starvation and genocides of all descriptions  
It is the United States of America which leads all other nations  
In grade school slaughters of innocent children



Kwame Crawford  
*Contentment*

Low-Fire Ceramics

Awarded First Place by the Visual Arts Editors  
(3-D Category)



# The Homework Goblin

By Dustin Bass

This story was awarded first place in prose by the literary editors of *Branches*.

“Perhaps if you used a bit of that colorful imagination in your assignments,” she said, “your grades would fare much better than they do, Mr. Meredith.” Dropping the stack of essays on an old attaché case she continued, “I’ll have no more of this goblin business. I won’t indulge in ravenous dogs with a taste for midterms, or young siblings making snowflakes, or the tragic death of yet a seventh grandfather. You are adults now. You are in college. Act like it.”

With that, Katherine Block fell into her chair and took out a red pen. The lecture had been but twenty minutes, collecting papers a moment, and her fury but seconds. In the blurred area above her spectacles, she could see the sulking shoulders of her semester long headache. “You have forty minutes Mr. Meredith. Hand me the assignment by the end of class and I’ll only deduct twenty points.” His gauzy frame frantically flipped open his binder. Katherine took the papers from atop the attaché case and sat them in front of her, tapping the desktop twice with her pen.

Katherine had enough to deal with without a bag of excuses from lazy students. She was in the middle of finishing up her thesis for her Ph. D. Fifty pages to go in a two-hundred-page exploration of teenage psychology, and she felt like she could write a thousand more, and here her students couldn’t be bothered to write two. In her youth, her instructors would have been far less lenient. However, she would make no mistake today, and grade all the essays before class let out. She would prove to Mr. Meredith and all her students what a willing hand and a striving mind were capable of.

However, there had been no exaggeration in her words before. If anywhere on Earth there was indeed a blackhole of imagination, it was in the writing of papers for school. Week after week, semester after semester, year after year, she filled her attaché case with dull and lazy assignments. Truly, how many ways can one person say the same thing a different way? How many ways could she alter the same assignment on the same material and not make it boring? How many papers could a student write for multiple classes without losing steam completely? It was a constant struggle for them both.

Now, here she sat with the essays in front of her the red pen flying, swiping, circling like the blade of a swordsman hacking at misspellings, incorrect grammar, and of course vague ideas going nowhere. It was an easy opponent. A mannequin covered in graffiti that offered no resistance. It was the most interesting thing about the homework. Everyone fails in their own spectacular ways. Everyone triumphs in their eventual rewrites.

She finished grading all thirty-five papers in twenty minutes. It wasn’t her best record, but far from her worst. She put the papers in the attaché case, and took out a one-inch binder, and flipped through it until she reached page one hundred and twenty-three.

Now the real opponent had arrived. Goliath had come down to David. Alexander came charging with his army. Sun Tzu knew all her tricks better than she did. Here at the battlefield of her thesis she would need to be more cruel with her pen. She must spill the red ink cautiously and carefully to make sure she would make it through this battle and continue the war. A war whose victory was a mere few weeks away.

“The audacity,” she thought, “imagine me here surrounded by all these

enemies and I tell my king that a goblin had descended on me mid-combat and cost me a thousand men.” She shook her head. She circled a word she had misspelled two days ago. “Pyrhhic.” It was a word she had corrected a thousand times on countless papers. “Such a funny word” she thought “And here even I have marred it.”

Before she knew it, there were five minutes left in class. The restless students were fidgeting in their chairs. Mr. Meredith, however, was still sweating over his classwork. She had finished the proofreading of her thesis and put it away in the attaché case along with the essays. As she started to close the case, she saw the glint off the metal of her flash drive inside. After class she would go get a coffee downstairs, then go to her office, correct her partially completed thesis, and then print out two copies. One for her and one for her professor.

“Alright class. I graded your papers. I’ll put the grades online later tonight and hand your essays back tomorrow. I also corrected my thesis. I expect everyone to have read pages ninety-seven to one hundred and twenty-seven by tomorrow, and I expect you to have answered the five questions at the back of the chapter.”

With that, everyone rushed out of the room as fast as possible. Mr. Meredith ran sheepishly to her desk, placed his essay face down, and managed to get out the door before a few of his classmates who had started a bit earlier.

Fascinatingly, the paper was pretty well written. She gave him a ninety. Then she subtracted the twenty points making it seventy. She stuffed both the paper and pen into her case and stood ready to go, the memory of a warm coffee enticing her tired steps.

In the hall, she saw she was alone. A usual, but not unwelcome occurrence. She preferred the few moments of quiet she could get away from her busier days. It was much like the coffee, a luxury that teachers were permitted to enjoy. As she began down the hall, she lost herself in her own thoughts of student past where she too was guilty of late assignments and poor excuses.

Suddenly, a loud wail echoed through the hallway like that of a beast in pain or in pleasure. She felt a hard slam from above ripping the attaché case from her arm. In a daze, on the ground, breathless, she shook her head and saw the strange shape before her.

Its limbs were long and inhuman like twisted mop handles, its flesh was sickly and gaunt, the long damaged black hair clung to its wet skull like frayed wires. The papers from the attaché case hovered on the air like new year confetti. Reaching for the binder the thing ripped it out and wailed again. Its spindly fingers clutched the flash drive jamming it into its leathery lips. With a spark, the flash drive snapped in two, and in a few crunches, it was gone down the bulging throat of the beast. It looked back at Katherine Block over its shoulder. The pure yellow ring of its eye fixed on her like that of a hawk, and then it was gone. The echoes of its wail painted the hall, before it entered the stairwell. Inside the door, it leapt upward and never came down.

In all the excitement, she hadn’t noticed till a moment later that one of the essays had landed on her knees. The signature stood out in her mind like a monument forever. Her trembling fingers reached for the leaflet of paper as she quietly read it in her mind. Sig - Jack W. Meredith.

# Requisite for Love

By Jacqueline Illich

At heart, I have always been a helpless romantic,  
my soul is a garden not yet tended  
but begging to flourish.  
My flesh is a quilt made of undelivered love letters  
reeking of longing;  
not for a kiss but for someone or something to adore.  
grown-out hair in hopes it'll get caught in a love story  
arms extended trying to catch feelings  
a stomach as an open cage ready to store butterflies

I yearn for the idea of love so deeply that it is nearly debilitating  
finding myself late at night saying vows instead of prayers  
pretending to lift my veil each morning as I crawl out of bed  
singing "here comes the Bride" as I brush my teeth  
and do my hair  
and shower...  
thinking of ways to propose as I drive  
and wondering what it's like to receive such a feeling

loving myself is not a consequence I'm ready to face,  
but I will take action to do so  
I will pack soil in my ears each night before I go to bed  
to deafen me from the self-criticism  
I will plow the sheets and leave the sheers on the bedside table  
I will water my roots and plant seeds under my pillows  
I will ensure that flowers will grow here



Paige Keefer  
*JB*  
Acrylic  
Honorable Mention  
(2-D Category)



Sarah Stewart  
*Bag*  
Low-Fire Ceramics  
Honorable Mention  
(2-D Category)



Lea Calloway  
*Schneider's Bakery*  
Intaglio  
Honorable Mention  
(2-D Category)

# Little Red's Retail Ragnarök: The Wolf Awakens Hunted Hounds

By Lyric Larson

Red's ravenous rummaging wreaks revenge.  
Her hunters hound our hungry, helpless hairs.  
We stall slowly from the sinister stench.  
Our craven coats caressed by haughty heirs.  
The sweet small girls are a sorcerer's sham,  
Craven crews cover their conceited charade.  
Ruthless reds reveal primordial madame.  
Burgundy hoods bury the brooding maids.  
Fall far from your fears, oh friends of Fenrir.  
Gathered are we in withered wary woods.  
Furrowed furs shall fling from fatal frontiers.  
Abdicate friends to avenge brotherhood.  
Their shawls will wash over in wrath's rich red,  
The factory reeks of our former heads.



Asael Lopez  
*Despair*  
Color Pencil  
Honorable Mention  
(2-D Category)



Lillian Adams  
*Miss Kitty*  
Foam, Faux Fur, Mixed Media  
Honorable Mention  
(3-D Category)



Radha Ananda  
*Octopus Cylinder*  
Low-Fire Ceramics  
Honorable Mention  
(3-D Category)



# Grandpa

By Laura Grace Yount

The song “I Wish Grandpas Never Died” on the radio.  
The night before you ended up passing  
My one and only grandpa filled the space for many.  
You were my support, my love and my reason to smile  
September 24, 2022 is the day you joined our Lord  
22 years of having you in my life were the best  
Learning how to read and write and learning how to ride a bicycle,  
Learning to drive a car and buy one of my own with you.  
Purple and red roses on your casket and then tears filled my eyes,  
A feeling I will never forget as we laid you to rest  
Hugs from people I didn’t know who loved and respected you too.  
Hugs and kisses from my mom and dad as your casket went into the ground.  
We ate spaghetti and salad as we talked about your life.  
Many of the memories I heard about you  
made me feel so much better that you are at peace.  
All of the memories, hugs, pictures of you that I will cherish forever  
Thank you for everything you did for me on earth  
Thank you for everything you’re doing for me as you watch over me.  
The sunset and sunshine will always make me think of you  
I’ll always cherish every moment I had and spent with you.  
Forever and always,  
Your sweet girl, Grace





Asael Lopez  
*Loneliness*  
Color Pencil



Jessica Teeters  
*Homage*  
Silkscreen

# Plant Impossible Gardens

By Nancy Onsrud

About four years ago, my mother started  
her own garden. it had always been her  
biggest aspiration, to have something of her own.  
something that was hers and hers alone.  
for much of my life, i have wanted to be  
just like mom. i have perceived my  
mother to be as selfless as selfless can be.  
an archetype of bravery and resilience,  
a joan of arc type of woman.  
my mom is not afraid of anything.  
she's not afraid of anything when she is ankle deep  
in soil, overalls cuffed and sleeves bunched on her  
grass-stained elbows. in this state, she plants her very  
best impossible garden with impossible dreams  
taking root just as much as her tomatoes and cilantro.  
my mom is a fixer, always has been. she was the first to  
pick me up from the ground when i fell off my very first  
bike. when my brother had his first heartbreak  
my mother was the first to hold him through the tears.  
something alters your brain chemistry when your mother  
holds you like this. all of her unconditional love and  
resilience and strength pours out into you.  
it makes you feel like you could plant an impossible garden too.  
my mother's impossible garden was an escape  
from what she did not understand  
when she was in her impossible garden  
she didn't have to think about my father's words  
or  
the gaping spaces my brother left behind  
or  
the disappointments i caused by not being  
her garden of impossibilities she never got to see  
but she's always there, when i come home from school  
i always see her there  
i see her there with grass stains,  
heavy shoulders,  
and the mixture of disdain and  
feigned excitement upon her furrowed brow  
"welcome home, honey" woven into baited breath.  
my biggest hope is that one day, i can turn into  
her impossible garden  
i can turn into all the opportunities she was denied  
maybe then, she will look at me with accomplishment  
just like she does with her garden



Brooke LaPiana  
*Pear*  
Acrylic



Adrian Yates  
*Soda Shoppe*  
Acrylic

# A Photo Not Taken

By Alabama McClellan

There are many memories I have that I desperately wished had been captured by a photograph. It's honestly hard to say what memory sticks out most. I suppose a photo I would take is of the time I had to run in the middle of night towards my aunt's house with hopes that she would be home so I could call the police on my dad. My mom and dad had got into an intense fight because she had caught him cheating on her. My dad had smashed the house phone into about a million pieces after landing several blows against my mom and throwing my older sister against the wall because he knew that mom would try calling the police after he had started hitting her. She pleaded to me to run as fast as could to her sister's house which was about a mile away. I took off out of the house, past my father who was shouting at me to stay put. I ran up the driveway and reached the end of it when I heard my father's truck crank up, the engine roaring, and the tires spinning in the gravel. I knew he was going to try to stop me so I did the only thing I could think to do, and it was to dive off the road and into the tree line. I was an overweight twelve-year old, but I was running as hard and as fast as my legs could carry me through thick woods and briars in near complete darkness. I remember turning around and seeing his headlights cutting through the woods like a searchlight. That's what I would take the picture of. Me silhouetted along with several trees in the beams of those truck lights. He sped past and took off up the road towards the main highway and I stumbled through the forest. I eventually made it to my aunt's house, and with gut wrenching defeat, she wasn't home. I wanted to take the main highway back to my house as it would have been faster. Unfortunately, my adrenaline had long since wore off, and I could feel every cut scrape and bruise on my body. I really had no choice but to go back through the woods as I knew my dad would be patrolling the road looking for me. Right as I got back into the underbrush, however, I heard a car driving up into the driveway. I turned and almost walked out of the woods when I stopped dead in my tracks because it wasn't my aunt who had pulled up. It was my dad. I immediately bolted through the woods and I felt like I was being hunted, fumbling through damp leaves and sharp twigs, slamming into tree trunks and tripping over vines. I somehow managed to stumble onto a trail where me and my sister used to play when we were younger. I made it back to the house fairly quickly, and luckily, my dad wasn't there yet. His sister had showed up and was telling my mom that getting the police involved would be a bad idea because my dad was already on probation. My mom eventually got a hold of my aunt using my dad's sister's phone and we left. My mom and my dad split, and we went and lived with family members for a while. Bouncing from relative to relative.

That night was the end of my childhood, and I think that would make one hell of a picture.





Randy Tinsley  
*Ink Punk*  
Relief Cut



Jada Childress  
*Elvis Presley*  
Relief Cut

# Stand

By Betty Carlisle

Stand strong, stand tall,  
And let's not ever let it fall.  
We want to give our thanks,  
From here to the Outer Banks.

For all who tried,  
For all who cried,  
For all who fought,  
For all who died,  
And for everyone who was on our side.

For those whose bodies came back torn,  
And for those whose hearts are still in mourn,  
And for those who helped make the ammunition,  
Let us now give them our recognition.

Whether you're red, white, yellow, or black,  
We thank God for sending you back.  
Now, may we all take each other by the hand,  
And together we shall stand,  
Stand proud, stand true, to make this world a better place,  
For everyone, of the red white, and blue.



Daniela Euceda  
*The Blue Room*  
Collage



CJ Yopp  
*Homage to Basquiat*  
Mixed Media



Emma Furr  
*Paint Tubes*  
Acrylic



# A Pound of Flesh

By Stefanie Hutcheson

For every pound that I lose, I wonder.  
I wonder if that pound has a name, such as yours.  
For you see, all this weight that I carry around is because of you and you and you.

I didn't get fat overnight and I won't get skinny overnight.  
It's going to take a lot of pain.  
It's going to take a lot of self-control to not revert back to those bad habits where when I couldn't have your love and affection, I could at least have a potato chip or a bowl of ice cream or a chocolate bar or some pizza.

As the weight falls off of me, I think about these things.  
I think about you.  
If a pound of flesh is lost every time I give up my anger and my heart and my disappointment and my disillusion about you and you and you,  
Then how many pounds will I lose?  
How many ounces of weight that I was never meant to bear will finally be off of me?  
How will my load be lightened without the extra burden of this unwanted heaviness that is here because I couldn't love myself enough since you didn't love me any?

A pound of flesh; an eye for an eye.  
Where does the extra weight disappear to?  
One day I was curious and I looked it up and found out that the fat becomes water and mixes into your circulation until it's lost as urine, tears, sweat, and other bodily fluids.  
Who knew?

Who knew those tears of anguish were washing away the weight of you and you and you?  
Who knew the fat was carried away from excising you through my walks in the heat of the day,  
Or from trying to drink away your memory, to flush you out of my system?

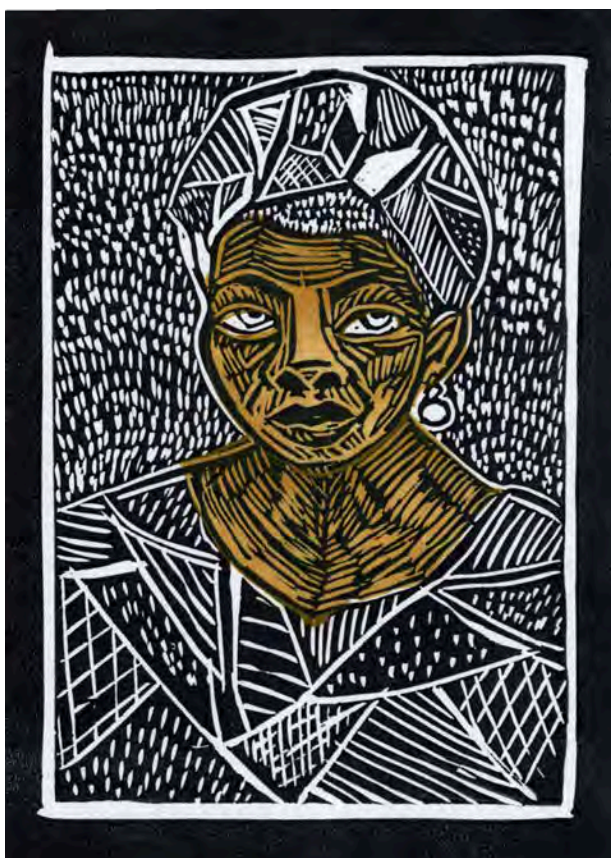
I also read that most of the extra weight is lost through carbon dioxide, which means when you breathe out, you're actually burning calories.

It kind of makes sense.  
I sigh a lot. I sigh when I think of you and you and you.  
I hold my breath, try to restrain the tears and the fears and the mixed emotions that I feel when I'm around you.  
I breathe heavily in your presence, unable to catch my breath. All I can do is pant and repress my heart.

So, yes, pounds of flesh: leave my body.  
Take away the hurts from you and you and you.  
Make my load lighter, my heart sweeter, my mind clearer.

When it's all said and done and the pounds have been lost, I wonder;

I wonder about this new and improved model of me.  
How long will it be until others come along and make me feel heavy, helpless,  
and hurt again?  
I wonder how many more pounds of flesh will be gained and lost because of you,  
you, and you.



Madison Haas  
*Maya*  
Relief Cut

# 1979 A Moment Behind the Mill

By John Buford

A Moment  
A Boy  
A Hawk  
A Field  
And Youth  
Sweet fleeting youth.  
All fused and present.  
Beautifully unaware of the magic moment.  
Is it Zen or Christ or . . . ?  
Who cares!  
It was a moment and it was beautiful.  
The red tipped wings.  
The waving grass.  
The wandering complexity, at peace.  
Harmony,  
Harmony without thought.  
Another moment.  
Waverly-Pretense  
Middle income homes  
Starting at 40 to 60 thousand  
The Hawk is gone  
Probably dead, hopefully moved on  
Only to where?  
The boy is still wandering  
Only with less youth, only to where  
But the field  
The field



Calimae Vestey  
*Can You Smell the Lilies?*  
Acrylic



Robin Delp  
*Untitled*  
Acrylic

# Unhurt Me, God

By Stefanie Hutcherson

Unhurt me, God.  
I am so tired  
Tired of the constant stabs to my heart.  
Yeah, sometimes it is so expected that I don't really feel the pain  
Or is it that I am so used to the jabs  
That I have become desensitized to the pricks?

Unhurt me, God.  
I'm dying more each day.  
Each time I am in her presence  
I hold my breath  
Trying not to flinch  
Trying not to brace myself for the impending blow  
Thinking that somehow if I preplan for the pain  
Somehow it won't hurt as much.

Unhurt me, God.  
I'm not meant to carry this load  
I'm not meant to buckle  
I'm not meant to bleed from the wounds that keep tearing me apart.

Unhurt me, God.  
There's little of me left.  
I'm not supposed to be made of ice  
My heart isn't supposed to fear  
To hate  
To be immune to life.

Unhurt me, God.  
She's not supposed to despise me.  
So, God?  
Unhurt her, too  
Take her angst  
Her loathing  
Her bitterness.  
If You have to,  
Put her hurts on me  
Even though if we'd both just stop  
Stop hurting each other  
Stop assuming, presuming, and exhuming  
Perhaps then, God,  
We could unhurt You.



Paige Keefer  
*Bugs*  
Relief Cut



Kwame Crawford  
*Fungi Nocturne*  
Monotype



# Arken

By Lyric Larson

At this point, it has grown quite hard for Arken to tell a.m. from p.m. For the past seven years, Arken has surveyed an Ohioan boneyard. Twice a day, Arken waits patiently between the crusted walls and rusted windows of the company's hallowed garage. Each day, twice a day, Arken hunkers beneath his cardboard desk, scratching stickers and stains off of old scraps of metal, waiting for that old ticking clock to strike 1:23. The malformed needles scratching their way around the clock are always seven minutes behind. Arken's cat, Scotch, waits behind him, perched on a pile of old magazines. Arken knows that muddied mechanical guts await his daily and nightly tread through the boneyard. Arken picked up his final paycheck on Tuesday, November 14th...

## **The proceeding events from the perspective of Arken:**

I waited begrudgingly, readying my flashlight and belt to venture into the boneyard. "Don't worry Arken, you'll be promoted soon! Just keep up the hard work!" Jon wouldn't know hard work if it bit him in the ass. The clock droned ever onward, engraving my eternal impatience into the glass. I searched the eight-by-twelve-foot space, searching for the garage door controller. That damn cat, where did you... Scotch stood, contorting his back into a violent C shape. Underneath his left paws, I could see the garage door controller peering out. With a grunt, I grabbed the controller, pausing to pat Scotch's head. His neck tumbled with each pat. Maybe I'm the reason he's kinda got a funky shape to him... I strapped my boots on just as the final "Screeeeee" chimed out from the clock. "Welp, guess this is it; stay toasty Scotch," I said, pressing the worn green button on my controller.

"vrrrrmm, crunchhhh, whirrrr, creeeaaakk," the door sounded, shaking the crusted mud and decay off the sides. "I'll fix it, don't you worry Arken. I've got a guy coming in next week, he's just gotta take care of his kids first. You are a valued employee" That was seven years ago Jon. The repair man coulda sent half of them off to college by now. It was a wet and crispy 33°F outside.

Come on, fucckkkkk. The water around my ankles seeped through my wooly socks right onto the meat of my foot. The water desperately clung to my body heat, sapping it out to avoid a frozen death. I felt bad for the water, I couldn't imagine being frozen here too.

My feet sloshed through the goops and goos spread across this Ohioan junkyard. I could smell the heaters unfreezing the manure in the cattle factory nearby. I sloshed on, greeting every hallowed vehicle with the same "engh." I came across my favorite vehicle, a '67 first-edition Chevy Nova. Man, if I ever owned a hunk of gold like that, I wouldn't let it fade outta glory... certainly not in some crummy boneyard. A masterpiece like this deserves a proper burial.

I had passed that car so many times in the past. Most of the vehicles around here deserved more upkeep than they got, but this was my baby. I've spent hours upon hours daydreaming about riding that thing out of here.



“Boneyard employees must abide by their contracts! Employees may not purchase any vehicles on the property. It would not be fair to give you guys priority over the public” What customers? Most of these heaps have been here longer than me. Jon won’t notice a little Nova out of place... hell, he wouldn’t notice if the whole yard went up in flames. He never drops by here anyhow.

I pulled a flask out of my inner pocket and took a swig, then another, and then another. I stumbled onward. I dredged my way through the rest of my rounds, barely looking up to look at what I was checking. It’s after midnight... no one comes here after midnight. I eventually made it back to the garage.

“vrrrrmm, crunchhhh, whirrrr, creeeaaakk,” the door sounded, shaking the crusted mud and decay off the sides. I stumbled inside, kicking my boots into a nearby pile of nuts and bolts. Great, drunk before the end of my shift again... oh well. At this point, most common sense had been reasoned away by the warm and fuzzy comforts of cherry vodka. I grabbed a gas can sitting in the corner of the room, winked at Scotch, and stumbled out the door.

The boneyard was silent, the vehicular shells stared at me anxiously as I dredged my way through the trenches once more. The open garage illuminated the path right to the ‘67 Chevy Nova’s resting place. With another big swig, I cast the gas can into the air, spinning it faster than a Tommy Bridge curveball. Gasoline clouded the air, overpowering the methane stench from the nearby meat factory. The vehicles cried out their complaints, but I didn’t listen.

A Viking’s funeral for you, Chevy! Jon can suck my frozen right toe if he has a problem with it. Let’s get your tank filled one last time.

The car, now fully engulfed, stared at me with the most pitiful headlights. “Not like this Arken... not like this...” I began to sob, throwing my form onto his gas-stained fiberglass shell. I felt the fibers wearing off from acidic rain tear through my Carhartt coat.

“Hey! What are you doing Arken?” a strange voice echoed through the boneyard. I turned, peering straight into the garage’s white light. A shadowy figure drew nearer. “You know the rules, no messing with the merchandise. Vehicles are for the customers.”

Jon? No, that can’t be him. He wouldn’t come here. It’s the middle of the night. Where is his coat?

The Chevy started to grow warmer, his form slightly vibrating. I felt the gasoline toddle around the Chevy’s frame. I stood in front of the vehicle, hopefully guarding him against sight. Jon was now feet away from me.

“You heard me, I said, move on! I know you want that promotion” Jon sternly said, teeth grimacing behind his fake smile. Yeah right, promotion my ass.

Jon reached his hand out. “Come on now, just take my hand and we will walk back to your abandoned post, no questions asked.” I stayed.

“Jon... just doing my job.. What’s with the third degree?”

Jon looked deeply offended, fire teaming behind his eyes.

“You know what, Arken...” he trailed off fingers twiddling through his pockets. What’s he looking for?

“I have been looking for a reason to come down here; you really shouldn’t violate company policy. I mean, sure, touching a vehicle is one thing, so is leaving a garage door open...” Jon turned back to the garage; a smile stretched across his cheeks, twitching against his earlobes. “But letting squatters into the boneyard is the biggest no-no, feline or not.”

Scotch.

The Chevy revved, shaking more gasoline into my coat. Jon doesn’t seem to notice.

The water from earlier started to freeze around my ankles.

“I’m not leaving, I need the money Jon... I’m trapped here... nowhere to go... I need a vehicle... I can’t get away.”

Jon just laughed, shaking his head. I could see droplets of mud flinging out of his dastardly down coat. He reached back into his pocket, revealing a small metal key.

“Listen Arken, you’re really reaching here. Boss man said to keep you here until you got suspicious...seems like you are growing a little too fond of the vehicles. It’s about time we automate this place anyhow; I reckon the technology is less likely to stir anything back up.” Jon walked closer to me, pointing the key at my chest.

My drunken form fell back into the Chevy. The Chevy revved.

“We simply can’t have people touching the machinery. Look what you’ve done! This Nova has gotten all flustered,” Jon pointed at the Chevy, noting the ice melting around it. “I am gonna cut you a deal Arken. I’m a reasonable man, so might say far too reasonable..”

Jon trailed off, looking over at a nearby Mustang. “If you aren’t gone by the time I return, I’ll put one right between your eyes,” Jon mouthed “pew,” angling his right thumb and pointer finger to look like a gun.

With that, he just walked off. I didn’t see where he went, I didn’t really care. The hell? He’s gonna... what? Why? Why is he here...? What?

The Chevy began to purr at me, nuzzling up against my thigh. I felt the heat of the Chevy’s engine growing as the purrs became much more persistent. “gRrRrr,” the Chevy proclaimed, somehow driving forwards. You know what, fine! Yep, cars move... Cars talk... Jon threatens... I might die...

“Not like this Arken... not like this...” the Chevy pleaded with me again. I couldn’t say no to his big sad eyes. I climbed inside, gripping the steering wheel between my frozen fingers. The smell of gasoline clouded my senses, the methane scent long forgotten.

I drove... I drove? I drove.

I busted that '67 Chevy Nova right through the decrepit walls of that damn office. I leapt out of the car, drunkenly darting around the room to find the garage door remote. There it is, right on Scotch's usual perch. Where are you... damn cat... damn cat...? Scotch...? The Chevy purred, nuzzling my leg.

Scotch was gone.

Everything was going blurry, I could hardly hear, I could hardly see, I could hardly stand.

The Chevy muffler roared as I closed the garage door. I climbed back inside, hardly able to breathe, and began talking to the Chevy. We talked for hours, minutes even... seconds? Did we talk?

Don't worry, it won't end like this. It's me and you now, we'll get out... just need to... need to... "vrrrrmm, crunchhhh, whirrrr, creeaaaakk," the door sounded, shaking the crusted mud and decay off the sides. Foggy exhaust trickled through the growing crack of the garage door. Groggily, I looked at the Chevy's steering wheel. You and I, we choose how we go out... Nothing is gonna change th-

"Bang-"

My forehead started to pool into my lap, right on the Chevy's cherry red seats.

Not like this...

"Jon..." The Chevy started rumbling louder, roaring out into the boneyard.

I reached into my inner pocket, pulling out a match. "Scree!!" The match emblazoned, spreading its tiny sparks into roaring flames, fully engulfing the vehicle. I cackled with delight as my garage prison went up in flames. I started seeing pure red skulls flying out of the vehicular shells nearby, clouding around Jon. I cackled harder. My '67 Chevy Nova was now fully inflamed, practically roaring with delight. Neither one of us could see Jon, but I knew where he was.

"Hey Jon," I shouted into the marbled horizon. The blood from my forehead now fully soaked my form,

"I'm taking my final paycheck."

As I lost consciousness, my foot landed like a brick on the gas.

For the first real time, my '67 Chevy Nova smiled and drove into the sunrise with a bang.

# As Sure as the Stars Shine

By John Buford

Let not the days that I trotted the forest floor bring you pain.

For as sure as the stars shine and the sun brings a new day,  
you and I will always be together.

Relinquish me to the realm of memories where I am young again.

My lungs fill with fresh air, and I move through the forest as a  
spirit in the kingdom of animals.



Chandler Dixon  
*Reupholstered*  
Intaglio with Chine-Collie



Joseph Davis  
*E.N. Ink 1*  
Digital Photography

# The Legend of Jack Beane

By Betty Carlisle

Jack Beane, being the only trapper in Mt. Chickery's small village town, was happier now than he had been in years. No longer was he being stared at, feared, and looked upon as a lonely, tall, ugly-faced old man that he was to the villagers since the passing of his wife and son. Feeling needed and spoken to by anyone from the small village was something that never happened and came as quite a shock to the lonely old trapper known as Jack Beane. He was happy to help in the hunting for the small three-year-old child for Mrs. Landon. Presumably, the child had gotten lost within the old rundown mine on the far east side of the town of Mt. Chickery. Mrs. Landon, who had served as the town's treasurer for as long as Jack could remember, along with a few of the elders of the village, had made the long treacherous trip up the mountain to Jack Beane's old shack, sitting on top of Mt. Chickery. They were all scared of Jack Beane because of his looks, his tall slinky body, his gruff voice, and his dark soul-searching eyes that seemed to be looking straight into your soul. But they all also knew Jack was the only one who knew every inch of the old mine and the land surrounding the whereabouts of the missing child better than anyone else ever could. Fear overtook the elders, and Mrs. Landon, as they reached the top of the old weather-beaten path-like road that led to the home of Jack Beane on Mt. Chickery to ask the old trapper for his help in finding the missing child.

Jack was tending to one of his many traps when he heard the footsteps, then the fearful voices of the elders and Mrs. Landon. Visitors were so unusual and unexpected that it shocked him back into reality when he came around the corner of his old cabin and saw the elders of the village and a tearful Mrs. Landon on his rickety doorstep. They all took a few steps back when a big deep booming voice rattled the silence, his voice echoing for miles. Jack wasn't an ignorant man by no means and knew that whatever it was that brought the townsfolk to his door-step had to be very important. After the situation was explained to Jack, he agreed to help in the search for the missing child. He didn't waste pleasantries or anything of the sort. Jack knew enough about the old mine to know the child had very little time left before she lost all oxygen inside the mine. Jack knew he had to act fast if he was to save the child from a most likely death.

Jack hurriedly reached the old mine in record time. As he entered the old mine shaft, he heard a tearful and hysterical voice. He didn't know exactly who the voice and tears belonged to at first because his mind was set on the missing child. He then looked and saw the face of Mrs. Landon. Jack instantly felt sorry for her, as he heard her tearful plea, "Oh please find my little Beth for me, Mr. Beane." Jack turned around, keeping his own tearful face well hidden from her view, and softly told her he would do his best. He entered the old mine shaft, and about halfway inside the old mine toward the mining carts, he heard the small crying voice of the child called little Beth. He followed the sound of the child's voice, and as he thrust his huge bear-like hands further and deeper into the old mining cart, he felt the small hand of the child called little Beth. He clasped his hand over hers, as he was all the while pulling her almost lifeless body out of the old mining cart.

He finally, and tearfully, lifted the child out and into the loving arms of her mother. Jack quickly grabbed the oxygen mask he had brought with him and placed it on the dirty tear-streaked face of the small child. Everyone thanked Jack, and with him being a man of very few words, he didn't stick around long enough to hear all the cheering from the townsfolk at his finding the small child still breathing and alive. He slowly packed up his tools, and as he started to walk toward home, he felt a small tug on his overalls' pants leg. He followed to where the tug came from and looked into the tearful, happy face of the small child whose life he had just saved. The child motioned for him to bend over, and when he did, the child placed a tear-stained kiss upon his cheek. Jack returned her kindness with a kiss on her forehead. He quickly said his goodbyes and invited them all to visit him, knowing it probably would never happen.

As Jack made the long treacherous trip back up toward his lonely home on top of Mt. Chickery, he took a small shortcut through a small patch of woods, that led him to the small crick where he always used for his bathing needs, and washed the coal and dirt from the old mine off his hands and face, then traveled the rest of the way home. As Jack walked up the lonely, quiet mountain, he allowed his mind to think back to the last time he felt tears in his eyes, as well as his heart, and with cries that sounded like a wounded animal, he stopped at his porch and sat and cried, scorning at God above for taking his wife and son from him. He realized, at that moment, that he hadn't gotten over their passing, nor the way they both died. All at once, Jack heard someone or something walking a few feet from him. He looked toward where the sound was coming from and was shocked by what he saw. Jack Beane's old dog, Trigger, was standing not more than two feet from him.

Jack let his emotions take over as he ran to his old dog Trigger. Trigger was excited to see his old pal Jack, and ran and jumped into the arms of his beloved owner. Jack was finally happier than he had been in the years since the passing of his family. He had thought he would probably never see old Trigger again in this life. Jack now knew all was going to be different and that he was going to make it. No longer alone on this mountain he had called home since as far back as he could remember.

Later that night, after the sun had set and the quietness enveloped the land and air, like a warm smile envelopes one's heart, Jack sat in his old rocking chair on his front porch. He said a silent prayer for God to help him keep his Trigger safe and for bringing the old dog back home to him again. As Jack sat there in deep thought, he could hear the clashing of the animal traps he had set, and their loud screeches as the animals lay dying. The sounds echoing in the stillness and quietness of the night, throughout the land, and down toward the village below the mountain he called home. His beloved home on top of Mt. Chickery. As he sat there thinking about the day's events, and the return of his beloved dog Trigger, he felt at ease, knowing his wife and son would be proud of him for the life he had saved, and the respect he had earned from the townsfolk. All was well again in the life of Jack Beane, and his old faithful dog Trigger.



# You, Found

By Peter Morris

I know you; I have long known you  
We, you and I, have known, and loved  
Since time immemorial  
I've traveled so many places  
Been a sojourner across continents  
Searching, but never expecting, to find, you  
And then, as the song was sung  
With deepened voice  
There you were, just out of reach  
Your silky black hair  
Dark, penetrating eyes  
Red lips parting, half smiling  
Playfully as is your way  
As the tenor sang of uplifting winds  
You looked out of the crowd  
Standing on the sidewalk amongst  
Ordinary people  
Was it in Ireland, Scotland?  
One of the many countries where  
Street performers entice  
Among so many faces, yours stood out  
Beyond beautiful  
Chiseled elegance  
Glowing yet subdued  
The breeze spoke of flowers  
Scents of your loveliness  
Oh my God, how long have we been apart?  
I am here, where are you?  
Has our time come...and gone?  
Or, locked in unfilled dreams  
Now taken the form of reality  
We have known, and searched, for each other  
For years? For decades? For centuries?

I reach out  
Can you sense my closeness?  
Are we only to touch through the memories?  
Of recognition of kinship  
Or, become one in mind, body, spirit  
And soul?



Remy Saesee  
*Rat*  
Intaglio



Ava Russell  
*My Backyard*  
Monoprint

# Skin of the Sky

By LB Sedlacek

What happens if you plan for your funeral, but you don't die? You get all the paperwork set up and in place expecting to go from birth to living to the end, but then the unexpected happens. You get sick and stay alive.

Gene Beck stared at the screen closing his eyes imagining the text in his head. He blinked a few times. The words scrambled and scrolled.

He bit his lip. Snapped his fingers suddenly scrunching an image of a cigarette. He enjoyed the pleasures of smoking without any of the mess, no side effects either.

“I can't get the order right. Something's missing. Maybe?”

He leaned back in his floating chair. It could move up, down and sideways.

His cube was in a corner. There was a view of what was left of the Queen City except there was no royalty that ever lived here. The city was miles and miles of cubed high-rise construction, a paper Mache of buildings pasted together any way they'd fit.

The population had doubled, then tripled. The skyline looked like a huge giclee of itself. The only art in his assigned Tangleland office space was a print of Charlotte, NC from the 20s. The 2020s.

Gene's job was to make their new Bio app – the Life Care app – look valuable, like fine art. He was also assigned to make the human interface appear as if it could be sculpted to suit each user individually. His thoughts on it were that an art thief would have better luck trading skins.

Skin is essential. These days, boosting skin has never been easier.

A ticker for a new smoothing treatment flickered past his eyes. He imagined the product in his living space (also a cube in a high rise but with locking doors and a shower). It would be there when he got home. He imagined the company library.

Pages of text poured into his thoughts. Next search was for images. Pictures of skin.

His research dropped well over into his designated meal break time. He replicated a sandwich, hot tea and toffee and rode the glass escalator to the bottom floor. He was in-between the flurry and motion of co-workers who'd already scattered off for their food options.

No one usually left their high-rise world during the work day. Enter then exit for the day, whether it be shift end or for some other reason.

His mind was itchy. His fingers clawed at pumped in filtered air.

He hit the red button. The glass doors slid into pockets on either side.

He walked into the front gardens with an outdoor living room, trees growing through sidewalks and light bouncing off each shiny surface.

None of it was real. Fabricated. Manufactured. Made to fit the work location or the limited world view of employees and their managers from the factory floor to the corporate world to the restaurant or small business.

Gene threw his blue tie over his shoulder. He pulled his hair into a ponytail. It flopped against his back in all its gray glory.

He scampered off the sidewalk. He stepped in the grass. It was a dark shade of green and brown blends.

He sat on the grass. Then lay back in it. His clothes were illusions. Stains easily removed and nonexistent.

Above him the sun shone. A constant. Noticeable but not.

His mind was sleep-deprived. If he was a driver (and that occupation hadn't been assigned to him so he wasn't), he might have driven off the road into a ditch.

He closed his eyes. He stayed still and didn't move. The buzzing on his back, then his wrist woke him up. These days, no one really slept. It was more productive to work around the clock except when eating.

His heart was racing. His watch alarm going off. He was overheated. And, he had turned blue.

Once there was a TV show and figurines of blue characters – quite popular. His brain coughed up a man in England with blue skin – his hue caused by drinking too much mercury. (Remember the silver bubble we all played with anyway?)

Gene Beck was blue. His art skin was blue.

He knew the warnings by heart. Don't leave the cube.

When everyone carried a cube (back then known as a cell phone) visuals oozed from the screens. They were wrapped around the phone.

Pictures were giant along the highways. Photos were wrapped up on poles. Some of them were mailed with a handwritten address and a tiny piece of paper you stamped or licked.

He tasted his skin. "Salty." His voice was deep. It usually startled him cause no one needed to speak anymore.

His break was over. He should return to the cube, he thought.

His feet wouldn't move. He removed his shoes – his blue toes flexed into the green grass.

My skin is sky. He had it. The new ad slogan.

His skin was sky. And his.

He moved further into the field – taking steps away from the high rise. He could see a small pond glimmering in the distance.

People sat around it having picnics. Kids tossed balls back and forth.

Above him a skyboard flashed advertisements that would meld seamlessly into one's social media onto moving transportation (the self-driving cars and subway, self-flying planes) and onto any and every electronic surface you might come across in a day finally landing in the mind. Today's dreams were always of consumables.

Gene's ads were all the same. Had been for most of his time and thoughts. Get better skin in one week. No questions asked. Guaranteed. Peel back layers and enjoy fresh views and the fresh eyes on you.

Sit back and sip. We deliver under day or night sky. You will look 100% brand new.

Gene plucked at his skin. He was on layer fifteen or sixteen.

Like the masters, he'd been painted over. He was a canvas of skin. And currently his skin would stay the color of sky until he decided to try on something new.



Alex Krusiewig  
*The Spirit of Lights*  
Digital Photography

Lea Calloway  
*Untitled*  
Digital Photography



Ashlyn Jennings  
*Iridescent Skates*  
Digital Photography



# Entertain Your Inner Child

By Nancy Onsrud

when i was a little girl, i could not  
wait to grow up.  
but the more i unravel about adulthood  
the more i find myself gravitating  
to the simple stories of my childhood  
many are my favorites,  
dorothy, snow white, ariel,  
and many more  
of all of these, peter pan sticks with me the most  
when i was little, i thought the idea  
of never wanting to grow up was absurd.  
who wouldn't want to grow up?  
growing up was a dream!  
i could go to bed whenever i wanted,  
watch as much tv as i wanted, and  
eat all the lunchables in the world!  
when you were a grown up, no one  
told you what to do.  
but as my life has progressed  
and i have grown up  
i have an inkling of a feeling  
that staying a child forever  
wouldn't have been so bad  
my mother quit her job to raise her  
children  
my father devoted every waking  
moment to making sure his child  
was happy  
healthy and  
safe.  
but problems arise when children  
are no longer children.  
it's easy to support a child,  
how could you not support a child?  
but what happens when that child  
grows up into someone you hate?  
will you still love them then?  
what happens when they need  
a helping hand?  
what happens when the helping hand  
is no longer a scuffed up knee or  
a sick day of kleenex and cough syrup  
what happens when they grow up  
and you don't like them?  
when they failed to become  
the perfect image that you instructed  
them to be?

they will look in mirrors with disgust  
they will listen for footsteps  
they will pierce their ears  
they will learn they aren't as  
crazy as you made them feel  
they will go searching  
for years  
and years  
and years  
trying to find the person with  
capacity to listen.  
but they will also  
swing on abandoned swing sets  
go back for seconds  
get excited on christmas eve  
splash into sidewalk puddles  
put stickers on e v e r y t h i n g  
laugh too loudly  
color on the walls  
watch their favorite disney movie  
and cry  
and cry  
and cry  
not because they are sad  
quite the contrary  
but because they can enjoy it  
more than they ever could  
because no one ever said  
you had to grow up in order  
to become an adult.  
growing up is overrated  
but also a society driven desire  
in the midst of all of this -  
don't forget your inner child  
for they surely have not forgotten you.  
check in on them, make sure  
they're eating enough  
getting plenty of naps  
and most importantly  
never let them forget that they are  
not forgotten  
that they matter  
and they are okay  
just the way they are



Trinitie Drew  
*Untitled*  
Digital Photography



Gabriela Donaire  
*Untitled*  
Digital Photography

# Sam

By Stefanie Hutcheson

“Come on, Sam. We’ve got a meeting to get to.”

Sam’s ears perked up. He loved it when they got to leave the office and go out in the field. He especially loved it when they’d go somewhere that little kids were. ‘Course, he also immensely enjoyed going to the nursing homes. Those folks usually gave him some sort of cookie that they’d saved for him.

You wouldn’t know it from a casual glance, but Sam was the kind of fella that people told their secrets to. Maybe it was his eyes that oozed compassion and understanding. Never--not ever--would you see judgment come from Sam. Unh unh. Whatever was whispered to him stayed between the teller and the told.

And then there was the element of a higher compassion. Sam didn’t offer words of advice. He didn’t try to convince you what you did was right or wrong. He didn’t condemn you or reprove you if you confessed your ugliest, meanest, most wicked thoughts. He just listened. He allowed your tears to flow on to him. A time or two he even cried himself. Nose quivering as he commiserated with your pain, still not interrupting your grief, Sam would nestle closer to you, and just let you be.

As Keith continued to load their things, Sam watched him and put those higher-level thinking skills to the test. Keith’s voice had a certain sadness in it. Usually, he was the easy-going sort but this time, he had the edge that Sam had heard before. Too many times before, if the truth be told.

Sam remembered the week they had gone to Texas. The kids had loved him and lined up to see him. So many of them wanted to spend time alone with him, and he gladly stayed after hours so that none were neglected. A few didn’t really seem to take to him and that was okay. He understood. He just smiled at them and assured them with his eyes that if they changed their minds, he’d be there for them.

Sam sighed. So many stories were whispered to him. A little girl named Lacey told of being so scared that she peed her pants. Looking at him with shame in her eyes, Sam had given her a lick and let her know it was okay. She’d held onto him for a long time, running her fingers through his fur, and reliving those terrifying moments when she and her classmates were huddled together in the closet.

Later, when it was Jesse’s turn, Sam literally curled up in his lap. Jesse didn’t say a word. He couldn’t. His trauma was so deep that words would not ever explain the constant angst he lived with, wondering each time he left his classroom if a shooter would be out in the hall, gun aimed at him, and each time a loud noise occurred--such as a book dropping or a door slamming--Jesse would begin rocking himself back and forth, trying to self-soothe. Sam had actually gone to Jesse’s house because he wasn’t able to return to school lately. Poor kid, Sam

thought. Just last week, Keith had read him another letter from Jesse. They both mourned as they went through the pile of notes sent to them on a weekly basis.

Looking over at Keith, Sam pulled himself out of his reverie. Shaking himself and grabbing his bag of tools with his teeth, Sam meandered over to the Jeep. Looking questioningly at Keith, he saw the answer in his eyes. This was not going to be a training exercise. Not this time, Keith shook his head, apologetically. They both sighed, wished it could be, and jumped into the front seat. As always, Keith bowed his head and Sam lowered his. He reached over, put his paw on top of Keith's hand as Keith prayed for the strength they'd need to bring comfort to these folks in Nashville. With an intentional shake, both sat up straight. Keith gave Sam a brusque handclap on his back.

“Ready, big guy?”

Sam wagged his tail in response. What else could he do? After all, this was his job.

# Bonding

By John Buford

I know what bonding is.  
The bonding of two lives.  
A dog and a man.  
The right dog. The right man.  
A man can place his hands  
on a dog's head and neck.  
They can feel the force of the wind,  
And the power of the great rivers  
On Earth. The bitter cold  
Of the arctic and the heat of the desert.  
They know their place there.



Alabama McClellan  
*New Beginnings*  
Digital Photography



Zak Abboud  
*The Burning World*  
Digital Collage



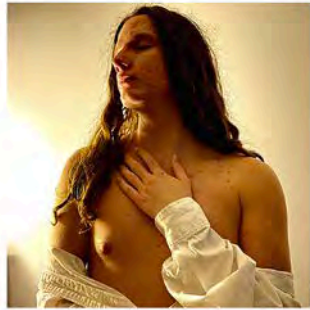
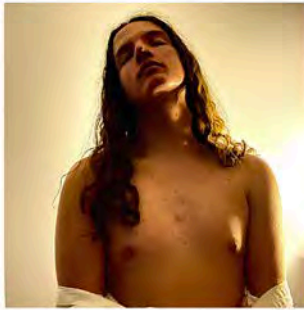
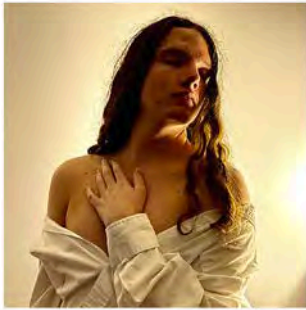
Hannah Barnett  
*Tranquil*  
Digital Photography



# A Ballad of Beautiful Romance

By Emma Furr

A handful of flowers  
White silk bows  
The blue sky, gold veined clouds  
A beautiful bunch of violets,  
So charming.  
There was something so beautiful,  
Yes,  
A Boy and a Girl  
Beautifully in love.



Chandler Dixon  
*Postmodern Madonna*  
Digital Photography



Billy McGee  
*Untitled*  
Fused Glass



Cindy Meissner  
*Listen*  
Plaster



Barbara Coffey  
*Kousa Dogwood*  
Bead and Wire



Makayleigh Hendrix  
*Crochet Bandit*  
Knitting



Jayne Greene  
*Flowers for Vincent*  
Digital Photography  
Awarded Cover Art for *Branches*, Volume 27





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