

BRANCHES



Volume 16



Untitled
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Funding and other support for *Branches* was provided by the CCC&TI Foundation, the College Transfer Division, the English, Reading and Communications Department and the Fine Arts Department.

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Mirinda Beard
Chronological
intaglio print

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

Chain of Gold

By Ashley Wurth

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

On her hands and knees in a motel room with the sweaty stomach of a middle-aged truck driver resting on top of her buttocks, she thinks of him briefly.

Her golden god.

She is angry, bitter at the idea that he had escaped this fate, fell asleep peacefully, never again to wake. With each heave and subsequent groan, she wonders if he knew he was going to die that night, wonders if he was happy to see an end to the madness or if he simply couldn't ask for help through the choked fog of pills and cocaine.

If he could see her now, what would he think?

Better yet, had he lived to see what she has become, what would he have felt?

A twinge of guilt?

Sadness for the hard fall of a beautiful young girl?

Or would none of it surprise him, for he had known who she was all along?

The man behind her twists the thin black panties laced around her ankles as he pushes her head down into the heavily starched motel pillow. A mouthful of stiff polyester and the thrust that follows makes her remember why she's here. It's not to spite him, the golden god who died. It's to pay for the motel room, pay for the gas, pay for the bundle of dope. To pay to forget; forget the golden god and their dark haired daughter with the face of a porcelain doll. Forget the rusted car and the boyfriend waiting in it outside. Forget the nausea, the chills, the dope sickness. Most of all, to forget what she has let herself become.

Her golden god. Tall, broad shouldered, handsome. Hair the color of wheat, eyes like Caribbean ocean water. Smart, funny. Great parents. Three brothers. A family. A drug problem. A needle problem. A sex problem. A drinking problem. A girl problem. She can hear the truck driver panting, his hands gripping her ass cheeks as he nears the finish line, leaning in on her as he pumps faster, in and out, in and out. The elastic of her panties digging in to her ankles, rubbing against the tops of her feet as she braces herself, preparing for the final thrust and groan.

Would things be any different had he not died?

The truck driver lets out a final groan, the release tiring him, his body dead weight bearing down on her behind.

He rolls off of her, throwing a used condom on the rat shit littered floor of the motel room, another piece of trash enclosed in the four off white walls.

"Damn, you're good," he pants, his large black chest heaving up and down, lungs blindly searching for the breath that escapes with youth.

She fakes a schoolgirl giggle, intentionally high pitched in an attempt to sound sixteen in spite of her thirty years.

"I've never used an agency like this before," he tells her as he lights a cigarette and offers her one, extending the cheap teal and white pack in her direction.

Taking a cigarette, she grins and does her best southern lady, layering the sweetness of her country upbringing, summoning the power of her rural drawl, "You weren't so bad yourself. And you know, you could just call me instead of the agency. Let me give you my number."

There's no sense in having a pimp when you can pimp yourself.

He puts her personal number in his cell phone, searches for something to say as he wipes the sweat from his wrinkled brow and quickly surveys the room.

There are no words for this moment.

This is the part she hates the most. It's not sweaty sex with strangers or dirty motel rooms with stained sheets and blood sprayed walls. It's the awkward moments afterwards, the times when the men try to make conversation, not realizing that her mind has already left the room, is on the way to the dope dealer. She giggles and nods,

says “Yes” or “No,” all the while plotting out the phone call, counting down the minutes, meeting with the dope man on the corner of whatever side street he happens to be on at that moment.

Highly annoyed, she has to feign interest in whatever the man of the hour is saying, respond appropriately, accept each smack on the ass or kiss on the cheek as though she has nothing better to do, as though she still wants to be there.

Prostitution is a funny thing; no john truly believes that any escort or hooker is clean and drug free but no john wants to know he's paying to fuck a junkie.

She knows this and fakes it, pretending to be a single mom with bills to pay or a graduate student drowning in loans; she hasn't been a student or a mother for six years but sometimes those stories get her a ten to twenty dollar tip. Sometimes they get her funny looks. Most of the time, it simply gives the man less to worry about.

This particular john is struggling to make small talk, perhaps trying to be a gentleman in spite of the fact that he's paying her to be there, trying to pretend that a lady wears crotchless panties the color of midnight and doesn't mind being roughed up a little bit. Trying to pretend he courted her, bought her dinner, brought her flowers. Trying to pretend she actually wants to hear what he has to say as he stumbles through comments about the dollar store abstract print framed in golden plastic on the wall or the inaccuracy of the week's weather forecast. Trying to pretend they are both someone else.

“So, are you from around here?” he asks her as he puts his cigarette out in the small tin ashtray, a circle of old butts and cut corners.

In the mirror, she watches him pick his wedding ring up from the nightstand, sees the light reflected off of the golden band.

We were almost married.

“I'm from everywhere,” she tells him, trying to be coy while shaking off the memories of high school track meets and Beta club conferences a mere ten minutes down the interstate. Sitting cross-legged, naked on the bed, her long legs quiver just a little. She pulls her knees to her chest, hooking her elbows around them.

He loved these knees, the way their rounded points extended beyond the chin when drawn close, the knobiness childhood had left behind. A mother and daughter with the same knees.

He stands, looking around the dimly lit room for his clothes. Bending to pick his faded blue jeans up off the floor, he asks her where she grew up.

“Close by. And I wanted to be a doctor.”

A doctor doesn't handle the needles; the nurse does, shrouded in white. Nurses get paid a lot more to inject poison. Nurses can afford nicer hotel rooms. Nurses don't wear black panties; they would show underneath all that white. Maybe I should have aimed for nurse.

He takes his wallet from the worn back pocket of those faded Levi's, carefully counts out the bills. Smirking at her smartass response, he places the money on the bed before telling her how much he loves to hear a woman say the words, “*Leave the money on the dresser.*”

She laughs at his candid joke and politely tells him to do just that. He smiles at her as he dresses, wonders for a second what her story is. She doesn't want to share it, knows he can tell.

Still naked, she counts her money unashamedly in front of him, each bill moving from hand to palm quickly, precisely. The motel room, gas and dope, covered. Enough leftover for tomorrow's fix, dollar menu burgers, cheap cigarettes.

He's dressed by the time she looks up. He thanks her, grabs his keys, and mumbles something about calling her as he walks out the door, cigarette smoke following him into the humid piedmont air.

She lies back on the geometric bedspread, nylon threads scratching at her skin. She can see herself in the mirror, a generic hotel furniture scheme, mirror above the dresser with the television on top of it, facing the beds.

These places were made for fucking. Why else would you put the mirror in plain view of the bed?

As soon as his footsteps hit the concrete steps at the end of the open hallway, she jumps up, faded stretch marks luminescent in the dim light, breasts slightly swaying with the shift of weight. The bedspread becoming a faded memory, pushed to the back of her mind by every defense mechanism at her disposal.

You can never look back.

It was at this moment that she cried the first time; her boyfriend had to hold her afterwards, after the john had left her alone in a strange room to face the reality of the things she had just done, of the bruise on her ass and the carpet burn on her knobby knees, the soreness between her legs and inside of her heart. But she went right back to it, never mentioning to her boyfriend what happened inside of sleazy motel rooms again. He simply waited outside, listening to the radio, smoking cigarettes, occasionally fixing a shot underneath the neon lights of a hotel sign.

Love between junkies is a miraculous thing.

Love between junkies comes with a lot of sacrifice.

Love between junkies is a never-ending game of make believe.

She doesn't cry anymore, not since she began pretending that this was all worth it, that sex doesn't really mean anything anyway. She told herself this was the only way she could stay well enough to get her daughter back. Every time she did it was going to be the last time she would ever do it. She just had to get enough money to get enough dope to not get sick long enough to find a real job. Once she got a real job she could pay for her dope and, some day, a place for them to live.

If there is one thing heroin can teach you, it is how to lie to yourself.

Pulling her panties up, a lacy black barrier to the world outside, the crumbling wall behind which dirty little secrets are kept hidden and sins wiped clean, she goes to the window to motion her boyfriend up. He nods at her from the rusted green car, a hand-me-down Thunderbird from some uncle she's never met. He gets out of the car and she begins dressing, wriggling into her skin-tight, knock-off jeans excitedly, knowing that she is on her way to getting high.

Knowing you are about to get high is almost as good as getting high.

As she clasps her worn bra behind her back, the black lace fading to gray in splotches, she notices a pack of cigarettes lying on the hotel floor, unopened, the shiny cellophane smiling up at her, the teal beneath it contrasted by the burgundy carpet, the letters outlined in a sheer glimmer of gold.

Cigarettes are covered. The smile starts in the left corner of her lips, spreads across the faded red lipstick, reaches the right corner. There might just be enough money to buy her daughter something before she sees her this weekend, something that says:

I thought of you; you are not forgotten. I thought of your father, of his golden hair, the laughter in his eyes. I thought of our family.

The thought leaves as quickly as it entered her mind.



Zach Hypes
Humans Holding, Reaching
low-fire ceramics
Awarded first place by the visual arts editors of *Branches*.
(3-D Category)



Miss

By Katherine Abrams

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

It was another two weeks before
she realized;

after ten days of craving
banana peppers and buttered toast
the thought unfolded itself
at the Laundromat

and mid-fold she
folded onto the floor
with another woman's panties
in her hand.

I was already swimming low.
She knew I was a girl.
The dogs were all wild girls;
affectionate and devoted,
they never took their eyes off of her.

I had to be a girl.
Another man who always looked away
would have been all she could take.



Joseph Copeland
Untitled
encaustic

Math Poem – for Cheryl Reeves

By Amy Cortner

Equations glimmer across the page
like water through a beaver lodge.

Glyphs and figures
ancient as Araby
slim as the stripped trees
murmur in the voice of Pythagoras
guide the numbers, point them where to go
floating all factors towards the solution
as pointed branches float past the bank to build
the slender architecture of the stream.

The water murmurs, too.

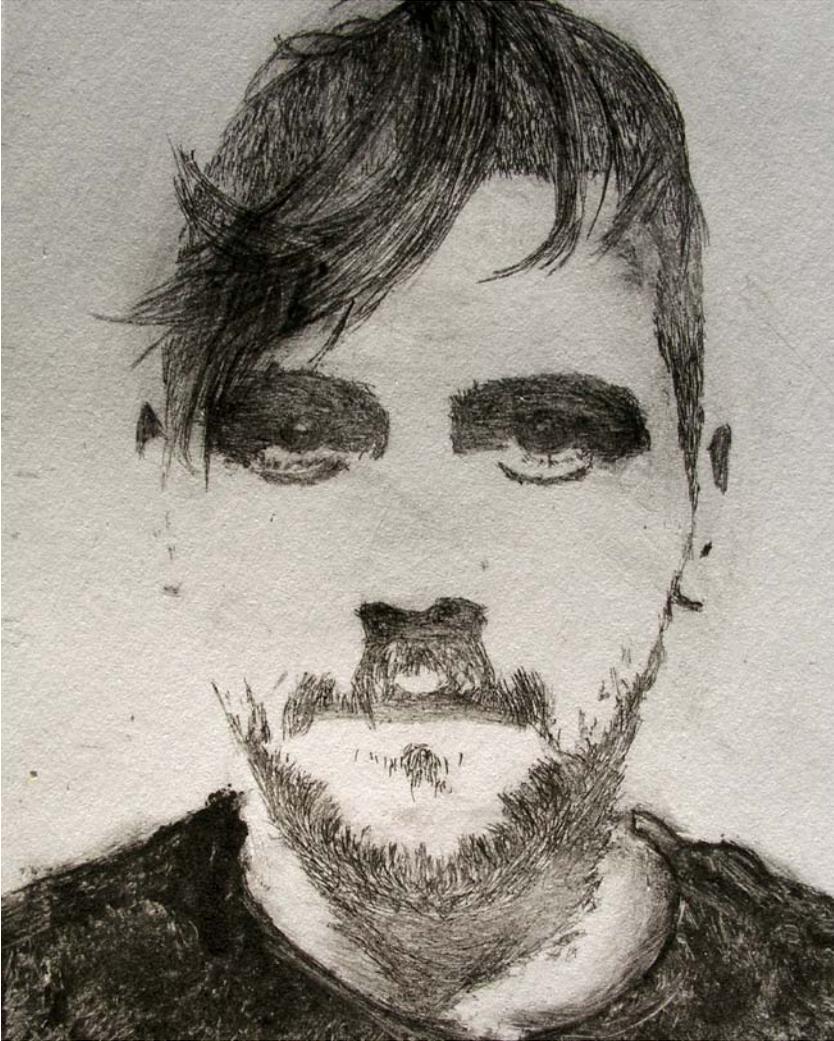
The beavers sit up
and slap the planes of the pool.

They are the fathers of Fibonacci.

They are the sisters and brothers of Hypatia, Da Vinci, Descartes.

They have constructed another proof
elegant in its lines
as any drawn with compass and protractor.

They will move on now to construct anew
as the mathematician moves on
through the riverscape of calculus
swimming in parabola and parallelogram
the numbers moving easily as breath
as smoothly as water
as naturally as the beavers.



Charles Grimes
Untitled
intaglio print

Moonlight

By Aja Bailey

Since we were very young the nightmares have come to take us,
our very bones terrified without our protective Sun.
But what if there was a dark protector watching over all
and it was the Sun that was the maleficent one?
The moonlight watches in silence, seeing our darkest days,
But we can truly trust the pale nightly friend because she is the mother of everyone
Including the monsters under our bed.

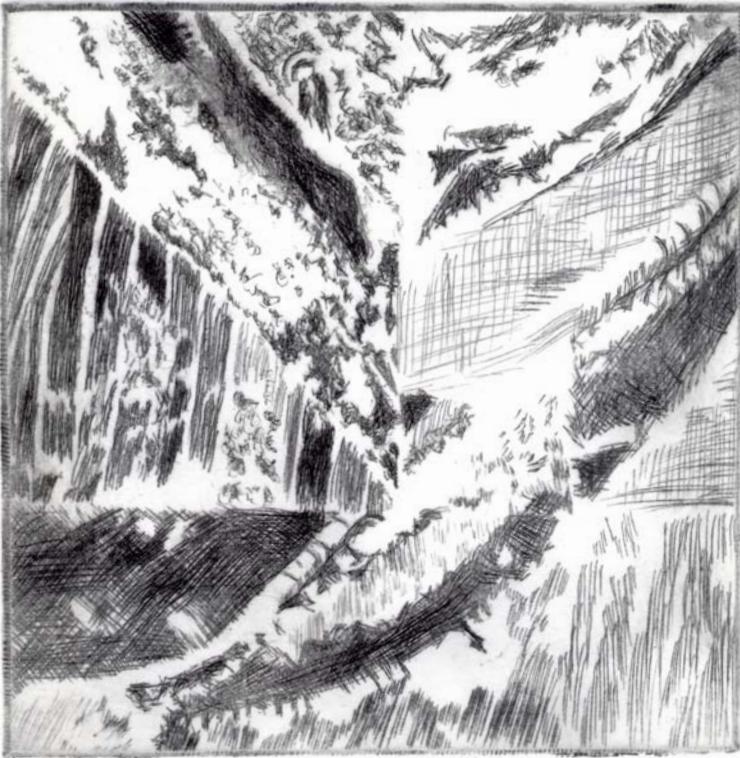
Through night by night she will change with us,
Her love the same to both the angels and demons.
The moonlight watches in silence, seeing our darkest days
But we can truly trust the pale nightly friend because she is the mother of everyone
Including the monsters under our bed.

In horror movies and love stories alike
The moon is the guiding force to all of our goals that night
My nightmares and dreams fall under the same light as
The moonlight watches in silence, seeing our darkest days
But we can truly trust the pale nightly friend because she is the mother of everyone
Including the monsters under our bed.

But every night must end and we are greeted with a maleficent sun.
Shining only on some and hiding others in its smug shadow
We wait patiently to show our fangs, waiting till night when
The moonlight watches in silence, seeing our darkest days
But we can truly trust the pale nightly friend because she is the mother of everyone
Including the monsters under our bed.



David Jones
Into the Void
encaustic



Tim Beler
Untitled
intaglio print

Paper Moon

By Nancy Posey

Boxed up for decades now, the picture lay
beneath dozens more, along with clippings,
postcards, tattered treasure-filled envelopes—
wedding invitations, old report cards,
a teaching certificate, tracing my people,
our people, all the way back before the turn
of the last century. The note on the back
confirmed my guess—my mother’s mother’s
parents—engaged, not yet married, perched
side by side on the lip of the crescent moon,
its face painted with a knowing smirk, set
against a starry handmade backdrop. How odd,
her somber expression, no trace of a smile,
as she sits beside her handsome beau, dapper
in his hat, boutonniere pinned to his suit lapel.
Could she have felt the premonition of loss,
her young husband who’d not live to love
the child he fathered before death struck?
I see for the first time in her face a look
identical to the one her daughter wore,
my grandmother, the burden maybe never
voiced, but haunting nonetheless: her birth
at such an inconvenient time, following
as scandalously close upon her father’s wake
as Hamlet’s frail mother’s wedding vows



Hallie Rogers
Dial Music
encaustic



Elizabeth Lowe
Play
encaustic

Frozen Nights

By Shasta Gragg

Walking in the night, with snow falling softly. An early snow - yellow leaves on mostly barren trees. Holding the hand of my friend, sometime lover. In my other hand, pages of sheet music. The snow - it's so bright. It turns the pages blue. A shade light enough to see the eighth notes and treble clefs. Wind pulls my hair over my eyes. I stare through the strands at his face, our hands. I feel free. Alive. I'm eighteen.

* * *

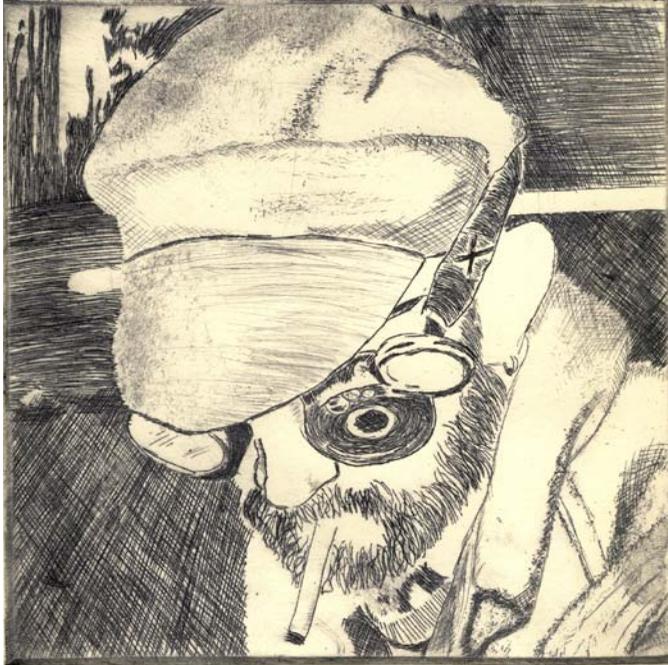
Oh, it's so cold. Just now old enough to walk the distance of four houses - from my Grandma's to mine. It's very dark. Wind scares me screaming through the mountains. I'm afraid of the dark but it feels grown up to be alone in this place. I've stepped through that wardrobe to Narnia. A wild cat, patches of fur missing, darts across the road in my path. I pretend she is a beaver, inviting me into her cozy nook for tea and cake. I feel like a fairy tale princess. I'm eight.

* * *

I slam the door shut behind me. Shouts are ringing in my ears. Every time it happens exactly the same way. I crunch through frozen snow, slipping when I reach the pavement. In my anger, I tromp hazardously forward. The stars are bright but I can't see them clearly. Cold wind makes my eyes water and the tears freeze on my burning cheeks. I'm hot with fury. I feel indignant, incensed. I'm thirty-one.

* * *

He shakes me awake. It's 2:00 a.m. I swim up through a dream. He grins above me. "Come out," he says. I fumble for clothes but he tosses me a robe and tells me to hurry. The witching hour, no one about. My slippers fill with slush as he drags me through the snow. The streetlight's glare illuminates our hushed world. In the middle of the street, he has written in giant letters: I LOVE YOU. My heart skips a beat. I feel unworthy. I'm twenty.



Kevin Hagan
Self-Protrait
intaglio print



Tim Beler
Knock Knock
intaglio print

The Pirate's Heart

By Eric Price

Endless horizon/ port to port we live our way/ freedom in the sails

You Have Died

By Katherine Abrams

You have died.

I know

because I saved your ashes
in our favorite
green-blue mason jar
with the dented lid.

I shake

them around
until the clink of calcium sounds
like rain.

A Riddle - for the Cracked Poetess

By Amy Cortner

A gossamer cathedral
Anointed of the sky
An archipelago of silk
To the precluded eye.

A net of nocent, blank intent
A spangle of the air
Whose ultimate detention
Gleams silent, unaware.



Christine Julia Knight
Lenoir Landscape
ink and watercolor

The Weddington

By Shasta Gragg

Established 1910

Gone with the Wind and Love Story and ET. Blue and green Greek key shag carpets floors and walls. King Kong - human sized - guards the room for ladies. Lobby will forever smell of buttered popcorn.

Empty for decades. A flash flood drowns a little boy under the stage.

Opens later for Freaky Fridays, a weekly concert series. A reason for bored small town teens to gather, attempt to be cool. The concerts, local groups going nowhere, slowly earn the labels boring, lame. Freaky Fridays fades away.

An ambitious pastor, filled with spirit fire, sees the stage, aisles of seats, projector and storage rooms. Spirit guy plants a church. Popular in downtown poverty. Speaking in tongues, falling on the floor. A girl is covered by the blood in full water submersion. A brother and sister's miracle becomes devastation when their father's imminent death comes to fruition. Crushed faith leads to church splitting fights, and controversies are all that appear abundant.

Another pastor, not so fire filled. A people pleaser in polo shirts and khakis. Tame music and dry sermons pull a different congregation. Outreach to the poor that called this home. A guy and a girl kiss, say "I do" in front of sixty of their friends and family. Baby dedication.

City grows bigger, wider. Only so much room in the narrow valley. A letter to the board of trustees, apologetic. We need the space, government buildings will be here. Find somewhere, anywhere, within two weeks.

Established 1910. Demolished 2010.



Wyn Stephens-Flo
Henry
assemblage, mixed media





Elizabeth Lowe
Antique Portrait 2
print



David Jones
Untitled
painting

Caregiver

By Vivian Hague Satterwhite

she
in the hush of shadowed rooms
responds
to a beckoning, palsied hand
leans near to hear
fragmented words

gives candy-colored pills
cool sips of water
watches
for rise/fall of a fragile chest
in sleep

Sunday, after church
relatives come cautiously
hover by the bed
speak in silken whispers

above sunken cheeks & closed eyes
touch the lined forehead
smooth
wispy silver curls

when they step away in silence
she walks them (dark suits
and pastel dresses) to the door
letting them out into light

she adjusts blinds
to deeper dimness
dabs alcohol across fevered skin
adds a satin pillow
tucks the embroidered sheet

as she eases from the room
a soft

thank you

follows like benediction



Elizabeth Pearson
Life's Journey
low-fire ceramic



Changes

By Stephanie Estep

The same conversation I'd had literally dozens of times found me again.

"You're graduating pretty soon, aren't you?"

Immediately, I launched into my much repeated spiel: "Yep, but I'm gonna be here next semester to do a couple of classes and then move on to Appalachian."

"Well, congratulations! I knew you'd make it." The man grinning at me was a sweetheart of a fatherly type. I had known him for close to ten years now, and he was genuinely happy for my success. Still, I had inwardly cringed at every second of the exchange.

What I hadn't really told anyone, and what I hadn't really let myself dwell on at all, was that I was terrified. The next step felt impossible. As I walked away from him with a smile, yet another well-wisher, I shifted my backpack more securely on my shoulder and made my way to biology, weaving through the throng of students that seemed much younger than I had ever felt.

I had grown up the youngest of five children. I had also been the only one to actually reach high school graduation. And while my parents had been pleased to see me walk across that stage, it hadn't been exactly earth shattering for them. They had never graduated themselves, and they felt they had done just fine without it. So why make a big deal about it with their own children?

I still remembered that last sprint of classes in high school, and the moment of tentatively asking my parents if I should look into college. My throat had closed almost completely over the words, and they came out more as a squeak than a question. "Do you think I should try for ODU... or something?" The fluorescents of the kitchen had suddenly become too bright, and I blinked against the rush of hotness in my face as my parents studied me where they stood.

My father's drunken response that night was almost kind. He clearly chose his words to be as gentle as he could make them. "Stephanie, you're kinda book smart, sure. You got your nose always stuck in some book, and you use those big words like you know what they mean. But you're not exactly what they would call street smart. You wouldn't make it at some big college. They'd eat you alive. What you need to do is get a job." My mother had stood across the counter from him; nodding wisely if exaggeratedly at every word, weaving where she stood, and I knew she wouldn't be vertical much longer. While I had expected this response, it still hurt to hear their opinion so baldly. Looking down and away from their searching gazes, I quickly made some excuse and beat a hasty retreat to my room. My parents had gone on with business as usual. Working all day, drinking themselves into a stupor at night, and I knew that my siblings followed this recipe. And I had wondered, is this it? Will this be my life?

Now I was graduating, yet again. Sitting in biology all of those insecurities crept back up on me as I tried to focus on the beloved Mr. Smith lecturing with typical enthusiasm on exotic species. Sure, I'd proven myself at Caldwell. I'd rediscovered a love for words, taken my classes seriously, and busted butt to keep my GPA up. But that small voice still whispered in my ear: You won't make it.

Even going to Caldwell had been a surprise to everyone in my life, me included. The moment of decision had come in the bathroom stall of a Wal-Mart. The burn of antiseptic and something less pleasant had been in my nose, as I stared at a plastic stick, watching it turn that familiar double blue line, while my three year old pounded down the tin door, demanding "Aren't ya done yet mama? I gotta pee too!"

My life had shifted suddenly in that moment. My husband and I were barely scraping by as it was. Raising our son might have been possible living one paycheck at a time.

But a new baby? It would be hopeless to provide the things that both of them would want and need eventually. Images had floated in my head, of clothes year after

year, birthdays, Christmases, weekly allowances, cars, college. I made three hundred dollars a week, selling overpriced sheets to women who would have never considered doing their own laundry. Would I still be working there in five, ten years? At this rate, the only answer could have been yes. School had been the only logical solution. As afraid I had been of going a new direction, I had resolved myself to simply go and try. And it had been the exact right thing to do.

After biology was over, I made my way to the computer lab. I passed several people I knew in the hall, some smiled in my direction; some didn't look my way at all. But I felt their condemnation all the same. Why haven't you moved on yet? I felt almost ashamed meeting glance after glance. Students and teachers alike, they all seemed to wonder the same thing. Why are you still here? I had to stifle the urge to tell a random passerby, I'm not ready yet! Don't make me leave!

By the time I made it the short distance to the computer lab, I felt as if I'd run a marathon. My face was clammy with sweat and I surreptitiously blotted my palms on my jeans. Sitting down at a spare computer, I heaved a sigh of weariness and tucked my backpack into the cubby. But the real work came when I pulled up an empty screen and punched in the home page for Appalachian State. This was my darkest secret. I had not applied yet. This was as far as I'd gotten every time I'd attempted. Because in my eyes, ASU is so big! The classes are huge- the teachers get swallowed up completely by the influx of students- I won't know anyone- and the whole of the college takes up something like half of downtown Boone.

Steadying my breath, I clicked on the icon for admissions. I would do this. If I had to sit here for the next two hours, I would do this. With resolve I carefully navigated my way through the web pages, and stepped into the unknown.

My Country Tis of Thee

By Lindsey Huskey

America the beautiful.
If you're ugly, she'll fix you.
If you're different, she'll assist
In your assimilation.

America the beautiful.
If you're poor, she'll hide you.
If you're upset with this world,
She'll medicate you.

America the beautiful.
Land of Self-Love.
Home of the Naive.
Stand behind her, or fall beneath her.

Salt

By Nancy Posey

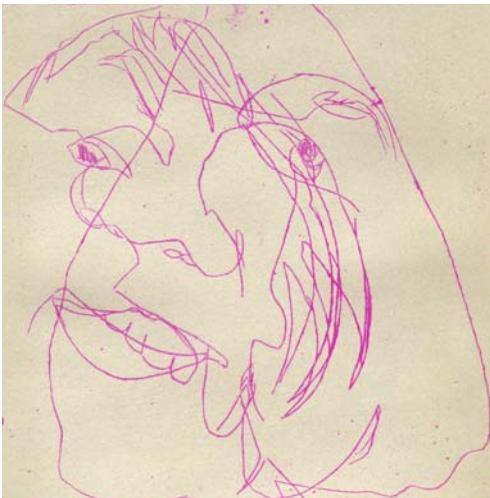
Remember Lot's wife, we're warned,
and I do, each time I leave those I love,
car packed, ready to drive east for hours,
time alone enough to let my mind work
overtime, wondering when the world
changed, when leaving home and kin
became so commonplace. Since I did so
myself, why do I feel the tug of invisible cords,
stronger than chains of DNA, pulling
me back? How could I not look back
in time to see the little ones still waving
from the window? Even without fire
raining down, I look back. How much
more torn must she have felt? Saving two
is little recompense for daughters left
behind with men who mocked warnings,
stubborn, haughty, heedless of her pleas.
When she looked back, as she turned
to salt, did one last glimpse satisfy?



Virginia Hendricks
Self-Portrait
prisma color



David Buckner
Self Portrait
intaglio print



Lisa Nance
Abstract Self-Portrait
intaglio print

Cinderella Story

By Candida Black

Moon sits high among the twinkling stars
Gown tail in the summer breeze
Twinkle toes fresh from an early bath
Twirling to see the flare of the gown in the shadow of the street lamp
A Momma's words floating on the air
"Don't spoil your bath or you'll have another"

A dance to the cricket's song
Chasing lightnin' bugs for the special glow
Small eyes close briefly to get a glimpse of the Cinderella ball to come
Spinning the gown tail, flared in the shadows like Cinderella's Gown

A Daddy's words flow into the night
Words dripping with anger and whiskey
Hand-shaped bruises upon Momma's face
Puddles of tears in every corner of the clapboard millhouse
Screen door slamming on squeaky hinges needing oil

Pages of a fairytale tucked inside her heart
Never thinking to ask her Momma why
Where was her Prince, adorned in gems?
Was Daddy ever a Prince?

Looking for the day her Prince will come
Whisking her away to a castle with no need to oil hinges
No puddles in the corners
Nor bruises upon her face

Instead still twirling
Back into the safety of night
Back to the lightnin' bugs and the cricket's song
Spinning, Twirling, twinkle in her Momma's eye
Back under the street lamp in Cinderella's Gown



Christine Julia Knight
Touch
assemblage, mixed media

Karen Yost
Matter of Chance
low-fire ceramic



Karen Yost
Wednesday Afternoon
low-fire ceramic

Looking for You

By Katie Worthington

I'm looking for you in the woods.
I hope to find you here.
New life forces its way through the naked branches
of the many starving trees.
Many of them are still hanging on
to last year's dead leaves.
They have an intricate decision to make,
to let go, and be free.
What happens if I can't find you,
Will I still be considered, me?

One lonesome leaf beseeched me
with its devout clinging might.
I thought I heard him whisper, "I'm not giving up.
Not without a fight.
The wind can whip and beat me.
The rain can cut and slash.
But I'll just keep hanging on
until peace I find, at last."

My heart cried out in desperation
for the eventual fate of his life.
I felt it was my duty to tell him
It's no good to live with such strife.
I looked up and said, "To be free,
you really must let go."
And plain as day, I heard him say,
"No."



Faisuly Scheurer
Untitled
soapstone



Wesley J. Mikiska
The Desert
soapstone

Verbum Sapiente Sat Est

By Nancy Posey

A word to the wise
is sufficient, she told us
over and over—in Latin:
verbum sapiente sat est—
but even in our native
language, we puzzled
at the words. How, after
all, did she expect anything
approaching wisdom from
sixth graders? At that age
we cultivated foolishness
like a bumper crop and
considered one word not
the least bit sufficient.

We wanted all the words
at our fingertips, skimming
through Roget's, Webster's,
and the class set of World Book
(complete except for the H volume,
no doubt a gift bestowed
by someone who couldn't bear
to throw them out.) She never
lost patience—well, rarely—
as she prodded us to exercise
the cerebral muscle at least
as much as the arms and
legs that took us leaping and
flailing onto the playground,
running back to her, standing
near the door, holding the
cowbell she used to summon
us back indoors when our
energy was spent. We begged
her to translate other phrases—
haste makes waste, he who hesitates
is lost—repeating them back to her
before running off to spout them
to fifth graders less wise than we.

Of Gizzards, Livermush and Cornbread

By Meredith Foster

Don't get me wrong, some of my best friends are northerners. However, sometimes a snowflake heads south and you just wish another Hurricane Hugo would come through and send him swirling back home. Such was the case the summer I turned ten. It all started because of a New York preacher named Lester Conway who came to town seemingly just to torment me.

Lester had come to minister at the church my family attended. He was the visiting youth pastor and he stayed in my parent's spare bedroom. Lester was tall, thin, and pale, and he suffered from a constant nasal drip that he said had only started since he came to North Carolina. We told him we thought he was allergic to the trees. He always insisted on helping with the dishes, but my father would take the dishes he had washed and put them to be sterilized in the dishwasher after Lester was gone for the day.

The problem with Lester was that he just didn't get Southern food. When my mother presented him with stewed gizzards over white rice, he declined. When we explained what fried livermush was, he wouldn't touch it. He wouldn't even consider grits. His biggest offense, though, was when my mother actually made the mistake of asking him to help make the cornbread one night for supper, and he actually reached for the sugar. Sugar! In cornbread? When I saw Lester trying to put sugar in the cornbread I knew it was time for him to go.

For reasons only he knew, I became Lester's special little project that summer.

"Come go for a walk with me," he would prod, just as I stretched out across the couch in the living room to watch *The Mickey Mouse Club*.

At first I gave him a pleading look, but he didn't feel sorry for me so I was stuck going with him.

"How much time do you spend riding your bike each day?" Lester would inquire. I was huffing and puffing too hard to answer him as my chubby legs struggled to keep up with him. All I could think of was how good an ocean water slush from Sonic would taste right then even with the resulting brain freeze headache. By the time my feet and back started to kill me, I had begun to view Lester as a Nazi commanding a death march. When we finally came home, my mother was finishing up the dishes, which was a tragedy for me since I knew my chance for a bowl of butter brickle ice cream was demolished. She didn't like us to mess up any more dishes once she cleaned up the kitchen. The thought of smooth cold creaminess and exotic hint of vanilla interspersed with bits of crunchy candy brickle was now a hopeless dream dashed by a skinny little preacher. It was too much. I was afraid our fried chicken dinners would be replaced by tofu and bean sprouts.

As proof that my fears were warranted, during Lester's next sermon at church he started out by asking, "Why are Americans so fat?" With both hands planted firmly on the podium he paused dramatically then said, "Because the first sin involved eating!" There was a general chuckle among the congregation of women in snug fitting polyester dresses and men in too tight ties.

"So what we all need," continued Lester, "is a 'truth shall set you free' from your car Sunday." I knew from the sound of it this would not be my day. I decided to call for help.

"He wants you to do what?" My Uncle John Lee acted incredulous when I told him. "Walk to church? In your good Sunday shoes?"

"Well the recommendation is to carry your dress shoes and wear shoes that are comfortable to walk in, like sneakers. What should I do, John Lee?" I asked.

He just smiled wryly and said, "Don't worry. We'll think of something."

I hurried through breakfast the morning of the walk. I told my parents, "I'm

planning on meeting John Lee this morning at his house. He said he would come to church with me since it is the special Sunday.”

My parents should have been suspicious since John Lee never went to church except for the time the Midnight Singers Gospel group came and that was just because the pianist was Anton Harper.

“Did you get them?” I asked when he opened the door to his house across the street from ours. He showed me the box with our little surprise in it. It was perfect.

It was Eulalie Ford’s face that I remember most from that Sunday morning. I wish I’d had a camera to take a picture of the look of pure terror and disbelief when she saw John Lee and me careening toward the crowd gathered in front of Ferguson Memorial Church.

The surprise, two pairs of ice blue roller skates, had been John Lee’s idea. He was amazingly good at rolling up and down the hills of Woodsway Street. He used his cane sort of the way a one armed skier would use a ski pole as he pushed himself along. The only other time I’d skated was when my mother let me go with my fourth grade class to the end of the year party. My stiff legs and wobbly body showed that I had no idea what I was doing. I skated more like a crazy drunk person as I swerved from one side of the road to the other.

By the church steps, the group of women wearing Keds and holding their high heels scrambled as they parted for us like the Red Sea.

“Child, what are you doing!” Eulalie screamed as I headed straight for her. I spun around, rolled backwards on the skates for a moment then fell on top of her as her hat flew off and rolled bizarrely on its brim across the parking lot.

“Izzy,” a familiar voice said. I looked up to see my mother standing over me. “Get up right now, your slip is showing.”

I had a feeling I wouldn’t be getting a slice of the fat free angel food cake she had made, but that was okay with me. Our surprise had been worth it. As my parents led me away, I looked back to see John Lee still in the skates leaning on his cane with a look of deep satisfaction on his face. I also saw Lester’s face curled in a sneer of frustration.

It wasn’t too long after that Lester headed back to New York City. I don’t know if it was because of what John Lee and I had done or not. Maybe it was the church pot luck that featured all you can eat bowls of chitlin’s and cornbread.



Wesley J. Mikiska
Vincenzo
clay



Whitney McDowell
Giovanni
low-fire ceramic



Gail Sharpe
Chips Acorn
low-fire ceramic

Sonnet 2

By Stacey Burchette

The mind is like the cold, frigid winter
If upon it a man only relies.
For sometimes it grows icy and bitter,
And by its harsh touch, the frail flower dies.
The heart is like summer's sweltering reign
As the sun oppresses with its bright ray.
For in excess it becomes nature's bane
And thus the frail flower withers away.
Emotionless does the critical mind grow
When it has not a balancing season.
The heart can become man's oppressive foe
Because it has not the mind's calm reason.
The wise man divides not these two apart:
The rational mind and the zealous heart

The Forbidden Fruit

By Cornell Glover

She is my unattainable temptation.
She is the very silhouette of beauty,
the very shadow of femininity.
She has a grace that the angels envy.
She has a style like no other.
Time moves to the rhythm of the sway in her walk.
She is my sweetest weakness.
Her mere presence even on the coldest day
gives off this warmth as if her soul
has wrapped its arms around me.
Her words take me for a ride
from the very peak of my imagination
to the very depths of my soul.
Even seeing her at her highest highs,
and her lowest lows,
makes me want her even more.
Her intelligence is undeniable,
her beauty is indescribable,
her perseverance is undefeatable,
her will is unbreakable.
She is my unattainable temptation, my sweetest weakness.
She is my forbidden fruit.



Alyvia McLean
Knotical
acrylic



Josh Mullane
Untitled 1
low-fire ceramic

Overcoming

By Brent Tomberlin

Twelve laps to the finish
Twenty one years ago
I fought that competitor off
Like I am fighting thoughts of you

In either case – I don't want to lose

The memory of the race burns in my soul
I remember the lesson it continues to teach me –
I draw on it like nature's rule
Now, just trying to follow

I am fighting the memory
Of your face – so beautiful – each day
Lashing out against the thoughts of you
Which paralyze me in fear and loneliness

There is no cause for me to feel this way for I am invisible to you

So, where does this pressure come from?
Some silent place I cannot open and retrieve
A dark corner
Where the memory of you hurts like a 500 yard freestyle – all out

Like those laps decreasing with pressure and time
Inching closer to the lane line in a splashing frenzy
Towards my opponent
Churchill said to 'Never Give Up' - and I was not about to

You are a tougher chore
For you are filled with a passion I would like to know
The forbidden substance of my immediate life
Which leaves me tight and breathless

Like turning at the wall to face the last 200 yards

At that moment the race was all possibility – as your
Smile and infectious laughter feels conquerable. . .
He edges me for a lap, then, I am in front
A tenacity I have never learned before or since guides me

I had cheers for each turn then
I wonder if anyone encourages me now
In this silent man-made struggle
Which knows no official or referee

Six laps to the end
I trained for glory land the last six months of 1989
That guy might beat me; yet,
I am not going to defeat myself

I want to say the same things when it comes to you
But I am immediately weak to attack the challenge
So, my mind flounders like a fish
Caught in a net I cannot yet escape from

The last few laps I cannot feel my body
Air escapes from my lungs like when I think of you
Time to grit down and finish – to push through
To leave the things which are behind

I finished the race half a life ago
Two decades removed – it leaves me with hope
Even if your waters
Travel away from me each day

This is a completely different set of pain
Nothing I can train for

Preparation cannot still a burdened heart



Christine Julia Knight
Love & Loss
assemblage, mixed media



Death by Assumption

By Stacey Burchette

The mind of man is prone to make conclusions based upon the evidence that his senses provide him with. This is one strength of reasoning that the human mind possesses. The human mind also tends to choose a single conclusion, and, consequently, that same mind refuses to consider other possible conclusions. This, however, is not always intentional. It is a part of man's nature to generally assume the worst of a given situation. The mind pieces together the individual segments of observation to build an overall view of a situation. These segments of observation, however, are not structured as puzzles are in that only one picture can be formed using the pieces. Not only can these segments be constructed in many different manners, but some combinations can prove to be disastrous.

The mind of Mr. Burchfield attempted to connect the segments of evidence that his senses had provided him with. The year 1957 had just been ushered in the week before. Mr. Burchfield feared that his business trip would interfere with the holiday festivities, but he was able to negotiate a later date. The very day after New Year's was the best he could get; spending the holidays with his fiancée was his top priority. The glossy black Mercury Monterey that Mr. Burchfield was driving slowed slightly as he depressed the accelerator. His mind was certainly not focused on the road; but rather, it was speeding much faster than the car he was driving. Paul felt as though he had a very close relationship with the love of his life. Rachel had never withheld any of her most intimate thoughts from him. He shared an open, trusting relationship with her. Her recent behavior, however, caused Paul to think that she was acting in a manner that differed from her usual behavior. She was now obviously more reserved than she ever was. Paul felt as though he was having to press her for even simple conversation. This was most unusual to Paul. People do not generally change their behavior without a weighty cause. Thus, Paul began searching his mind for that very weighty cause that would alter Rachel's disposition. This search for a cause was the exact thing that altered his very own disposition, unbeknownst to Paul himself. Man rarely knows himself as much as he fancies that he does; Paul Burchfield was not an exception.

Paul was not a man of a suspicious disposition; he had never felt any need to suspect his fiancée of any dishonesty before. He, at first, was slow to allow his mind to dwell long upon the idea of infidelity, but he could not restrain his thoughts from venturing into those dark crevices of apprehension. His wary mind had begun to change his very disposition, but the change was subtle. He didn't consider the fact that his mind was quickly beginning to assemble the segments that his senses were providing him. He was assembling the segments with haste. He did it in woeful, consequence-laden haste.

He suddenly was awakened from his thoughts by the screech of tires that had decelerated abruptly. Paul swerved to miss the vehicle and pulled his own over to the side of the road. His mind raced to quickly for him to attempt to give thought to any other activity. His mind begged his full attention, and he decided to give his mind the opportunity to race even further. His stomach began to ache with nausea as he began to dwell upon what could possibly be the reason as to why Rachel was so withdrawn. He allowed his thoughts to drift. His mind replayed the scene repeatedly, searing it into his mind. The argument betwixt the two right before he left had been their worst.

"I'll have to leave soon," Paul said.

Rachel was in the kitchen which was adjacent to the living room where Paul was sitting. "So, how long will you be out?" Rachel inquired.

"I can't say for sure, but it seems that I may be tied up for about two weeks with this," Paul replied.

Rachel walked into the living room; she was still drying her hands with a dish towel. "I hope your boss is considering you for the open position, you certainly are

working harder than the other candidates. You've not been promoted in ages it seems."

Paul could sense a hint of apathy in Rachel's voice. At least, what he interpreted as being apathy. He didn't dwell long upon it initially, for a simple variation in speech was not reason for much alarm. However, he couldn't help but to place some weight upon the petty observation.

"How will you occupy yourself in my absence?" Paul said jestingly. Rachel was somewhat slow to answer him.

"I'm sure I will find plenty to occupy myself with," Rachel replied while cutting her eyes toward the ground. Once again, the lack of eye contact shouldn't have raised much suspicion. Yet, Paul found himself struggling to suppress his apprehension.

"I can't but help noticing that you are conversing with me rather queerly. Do you have something on your mind?" Paul asked.

"No, of course not," Rachel quickly replied. She smiled and looked at Paul in his eyes. However, her laugh itself betrayed her uneasiness. Her smile was the very vestment of pretense.

"Are you sure your mind isn't burdened? I am not a psychologist, but I am still yet human. I can sense the underlying meaning of another's actions. I don't mean to accuse you, but I can sense that your mind is occupied with something," Paul said.

"Don't be absurd, Paul," Rachel said, wearing the same pretentious smile, and feigning a lighthearted laugh. "You were only correct in one of your statements."

"Which statement was that?" Paul inquired.

"You certainly are not a psychologist. You couldn't have read my mind any more incorrectly than you did!"

Paul didn't want to press the matter any further than he had to, but he didn't want to leave something unresolved. He couldn't bear the thought of being away for two weeks after he had left his fiancée on harsh terms. He was confronted with a two-edged sword. He could leave the matter unresolved, or he could attempt to discover the cause of her withdrawnness, and be left with the same poor results.

"You're not troubled with a certain act in the past, are you?" Paul cautiously ventured.

Rachel immediately showed apprehension upon her countenance.

"Paul, please! Don't bring that up." Rachel cried. "It was so long ago, it shouldn't worry us now. It's ancient history."

"Rachel, I fear that an event that took place a few weeks ago does not qualify as ancient history."

"I'm begging you, treat it as such. It was a decision made in haste. It shouldn't have any ill-effects now."

"I'm not trying to create discord between us. I merely saw that you weren't acting normal. I don't want to leave you on poor terms. I thought that if I could determine what was ailing your conscience, I could help you resolve your conflict."

"I don't have any conflict!" Rachel ejaculated. "My mind is at ease, I have nothing ailing me!"

Rachel's sudden outburst was unsettling to Paul. He stared silently at Rachel for a moment, for his tongue failed to form any words. His mind was blank for a moment. She was clearly troubled by something, and the fact that she was so determined to conceal it was, perhaps, the most unsettling matter above all. Paul looked into her eyes for a moment, and then he picked up his suitcase and briefcase, and then he walked out of the door without another word.

His mind returned to the present, sitting in a car on the side of the road. Paul's mind searched for an adjective to describe the emotions that were beginning to fill his mind. He sat motionless for a few moments while he stared at the steering wheel. Though the business meeting was supposed to last two weeks, the meetings went smoothly, and all the required conferencing was completed in only one.

He thought that he should be elated with returning to Rachel one week early, but that simply was not the case. He felt moderate anxiety as he thought about seeing her

for the first time after the brief, heated exchange that occurred a week earlier. He expected to receive a letter, or even a phone call from Rachel during the course of his meeting, but he had heard nothing from her. He feared that she was harboring a grudge, something that was not a part of her character. He especially feared that the minute argument (at least, Paul felt that the argument was minute) would interfere with their plans of matrimony in the very near future. The thoughts of matrimony brought his mind, once again, back to suspicions of infidelity.

Paul started the ignition on his vehicle, and drove back onto the road. He was determined to resolve this conflict immediately. The untreated, neglected wound often festers. If left untreated long enough, the wound could require the amputation of the limb. Being cut away from Rachel was troubling enough. Being cut away from her because of a mere disagreement was horrifying.

He pulled up into the driveway of his fiancée's house, and exited his car. He walked up to the door and prepared to knock, but he withdrew his closed hand at the last moment. He finally knocked and awaited a response. After a minute or so he knocked again. He opened the door, and walked inside, thinking that she might have possibly been asleep. As he walked through the house, he heard the dull roar of the car's motor. He walked back to the front door and looked through a window adjacent to it. He saw a car pull in to the driveway, he didn't recognize the vehicle. The passenger door opened and Rachel stepped out, blowing a kiss to the driver as she closed the door. Paul strained to see who was driving the car, but he couldn't determine who it was. He could determine, however, that the driver was certainly masculine. His mind took this last segment of information and connected it to the rest of his observations. His chain had been completed, and the links could only lead to one solution.

Paul's fear and apprehension immediately morphed into rage. He had been absolutely faithful to Rachel. She might have been promiscuous before, but he was the only object of her promiscuity. He was no longer enamored of her; he could no longer love her. This change of mind occurred in an instant.

Rachel immediately saw Paul's car in the driveway, and was elated at the thought of his early return from his business conference. She was sorrowful that he had departed with her on poor terms, and she only wanted to apologize for her outburst. Still yet, there was an issue that lay much more heavily upon her heart and mind than the argument they had. She pondered as to why he hadn't contacted her, but she also knew that she hadn't made an attempt to contact him either.

Paul had given a small .22 caliber pistol to Rachel a few months ago. She had moved out and was living on her own, and Paul felt that she needed some protection. He sprinted into the kitchen and removed the pistol from the top of the refrigerator. He stood flat against the wall in front of the door that led into the living room. Paul was determined to deal retribution. Paul checked the pistol's ammunition, which was full as he had advised her.

Rachel opened the door, and she walked through the living room, and then approached the kitchen. Paul's pulse raced wildly as she twisted the doorknob. Paul placed the gun behind his back and stepped up to the door as Rachel pushed it open.

"Oh!" Rachel exclaimed as Paul approached her. "What a pleasant surprise! I didn't expect you to return this early," Rachel elatedly said.

"Of course you didn't," Paul sneered.

Rachel's smile vanished. "What's wrong, Paul?"

"You've made your last mistake," Paul said calmly; his voice contradicted the absolute nervousness that arrested the rest of his body as he removed the pistol from behind his back and pulled the trigger.

"Dear God!" was all that managed to escape Rachel's lips before she fell limply to the floor.

Paul dropped the gun next to her body, and stood motionless. His mind couldn't comprehend the action that he had just committed. Rage mingled with shock coursed throughout his body as he looked upon Rachel's corpse. He looked around the

kitchen, and observed the blood splattered upon the white wall opposite from him. His attention was captured by a piece of paper that was lying upon the dining table. He walked over to the table and pick up what he found to be a letter which said:

I can't determine the most appropriate manner in approaching this matter. I fear that our past sins have finally found us out. Please, do not misinterpret what I am saying, I treasure our love above anything; but it seems that I must address this matter now, before it progresses any further. I have, for the last few days, been getting ill, and quite often at that. So, I decided to visit a physician to ensure that nothing was seriously wrong. This visit occurred a week or so before Christmas, and I wanted to share with you the results of it, but I didn't want to burden your mind before you left for business. I can't bear to keep it from you any longer, so I have decided to tell you through this letter. The physician informed me that I am pregnant. I know you could sense my uneasiness and apprehension, but I was, and still am, terrified of the implications that pregnancy brings. I am even more so terrified by the implications of a pregnancy that resulted from promiscuity. I debated with myself about telling you before you left, but after our argument, I felt it best to tell you when you return. My brother (I hope you can meet him soon) is going to drive me today to the doctor. I feel it necessary to consult him concerning what I should do to ensure a healthy child in nine months. I know that we will undoubtedly be looked down upon because of this, but I will not neglect our child because of it. This last week has passed so slowly, I anticipate your return next week.

With love,
Rachel

Paul dropped the letter. His stomach ached with nausea as he realized his grave mistake. He only could contemplate a single solution as he walked back to Rachel's body. His assumption would eventually claim three lives. He stooped down and picked up the pistol. Only a few moments later, his body fell next to Rachel's. His mind finally ceased to race as the hole in his temple drained crimson blood upon the tiles of the floor.

The Sundays of Little Jacob Peter Smith and Little Billy Next Door

By Peyton Hoyle

Little Jacob Peter Smith doesn't like Sundays.
For most it's just one day away from Mondays,
but for little Jacob Peter Smith, Sundays were just like Mondays,
for his family went to church in the early morn.
Why?
He doesn't know.
Little Billy next door doesn't have to go.
He doesn't have to get up at six.
He doesn't have to start early on the school day mix.
He doesn't have to shower; he's never nicely dressed.
Looking at Billy's life makes Jacob depressed.
Billy sleeps till ten; Billy shoots BBs at a can.
Billy spends his Sundays in the dirt,
Not wearing a nice, clean, pressed button up shirt.
While Jacob learns about Adam and Eve,
Billy is playing with his best friend Steve.
While Jacob was singing hymns about Jesus,
Billy is watching TV, munching on Cheez-its.
When Billy is playing in the pool,
Jacob is in boring old Sunday school!
But Jacob survives; he makes it through,
'Cause there's something Jacob knows that Billy never knew.
Little Jacob Peter Smith found the perk for waking up at six.
He found the good in having to sing.
He saw the great in Adam and Eve,
even though he doesn't get dirty and play with Steve.
At the end of the day both boys have reason to smile.
Jacob goes to bed knowing Billy is going to be jealous for a while.
Even though at the day's end Billy's smell makes his mom go "pew,"
little Jacob Peter Smith still gets the free gum under the church's pew.



Nicole Baiardi
Ye Olde Lovers Whiskey
low-fire ceramic



Eric Barlowe
With Open Arms
assemblage, mixed media



Michelle Bingham
Three Figures
assemblage, mixed media

My Best Friend

By Dolly Estevez

Peering under shield, her white blanket
Engulfed in years of dust,
I found a friend. Her warm, gentle face
Smiling before saying hello
The pathways into her souls were glistening,
Reflecting the lonely sun towering high above her frail frame.
They drew me in...without question, without demand.
No requirements.

Those pathways knew everything.
My every weakness, my doubts,
My past, my wonders, my dreams,
My feelings on the life and love...
She listened, understood, and knew what it all meant to me.

Her figure was tranquil and silent
As her brown orbs walked into mine,
Curing my hollow form.
No interruptions, no judgments.
The reassuring curve of her lips promised she'd stay at my side.

Out of nature, my hand reached out to this friend
To show her that I cared,
To pull her to my side and whisper
How grateful I am towards her,
How important she is to me,
How much I needed her.

The soft fingertips of my hand slowly crept their way down,
Our actions in perfect sync,
Only to find a happy tear in between our fingers.
I realized... she was real. She was true.
She was my best friend.

A gust of wind tugged at our hair slightly,
Ruffling the white blanket on the ground,
The one that shielded her beautiful frame
Inside the lonely, reflecting mirror.



Kevin Hagan
Church Yard
solar plate

The CodR

By Eric Everson

Instructions encoded.
Memory managed.
Security assured
Via vigorous vigilance.
Programming preeminence
Creates a concert of code.
Solid-state switches
Sending signals in time.
Elegant algorithms
Avoid annoying errors.
Input processed,
Output excellence
Parsimoniously produced.

Hyperfocus i-iv

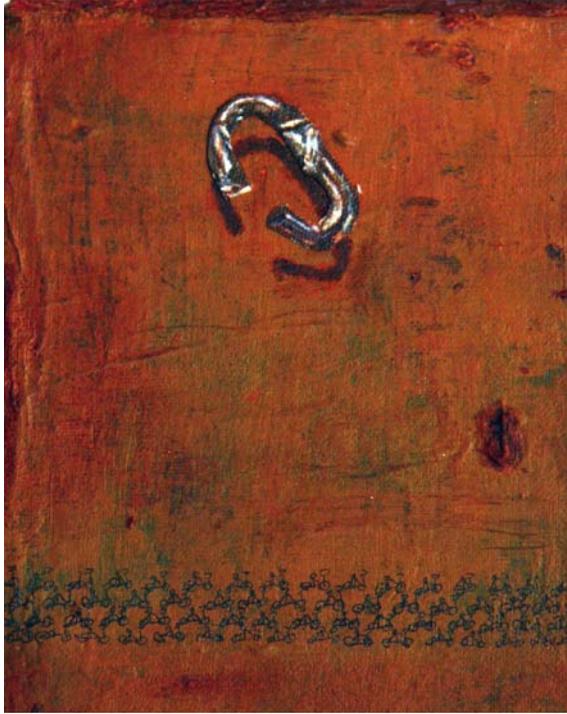
By Katherine Abrams

- i.
The cardinal nesting inches
from my bed tries daily
to wake me with the sun.
- ii.
I sleep past noon.
- iii.
Mold patterns weave the edge
of my lavender shower curtain
like handmade lace.
- iv.
He emails me everyday
in Times New Roman italic.
I'll never get tired of you.

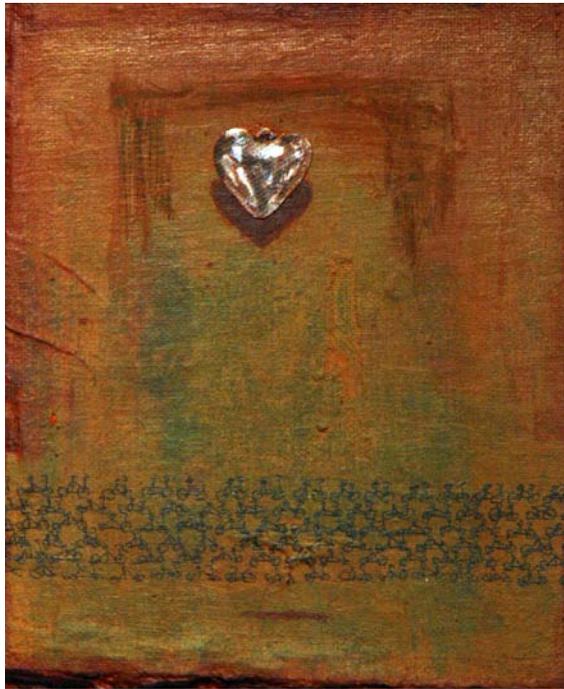
Love, Me

By Candida Black

Love, Me.
I am in here,
you just may not see.
But, if you look closely enough, you can find me.
You may think I don't have feelings,
but the opposite is true.
Listen with your heart, so I may hear "I Love You."
Most don't understand me, but only because they don't take the time.
Try to remember I'm still a person,
but autism has trapped my mind.



Chris Phillips
Persona
acrylic



Chris Phillips
Shadow
acrylic

Awarded cover art for *Branches*, volume 17