



Branches

volume twenty-one

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Taxi
Acrylic

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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 22nd edition of *Branches*, please visit our website at www.ccti.edu/branches.

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Melissa Anderson
Hope
Acrylic
Awarded First Place
(2-D Category)

Purchase Price

By Holly Michaels

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

They called it a half-hearted attempt,
because they did not understand the art
of practice.

I tried death on for size
like a designer sweater,
admired his soft touch against my skin,
admired the way he bunched up around my middle.

I wore him,
on parade
like a runway model,
allowed everyone to see
that I could sport the latest trend
as well as them.

And so I window-shopped my mortality,
trying to find the perfect cut,
the perfect shade
for mourner's dismay.
I preferred the emerald green.

I liked the way it fit me,
snuggly.

I practiced,
knowing that buyer's remorse would not come
for me.
Not for me,
for one who knows the neck, the sleeves,
one who knows
what it is like to fall in love
with the thick darkness.

They called this a half-hearted attempt,
but checkout comes
for everyone.



Stephen Burchette
Classic Tyrannosaurus Rex
Polymer Clay
Awarded First Place
(3-D Category)



A Pause in War

By David Moore

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

The wind whistled ominously through the momentarily silent night of Dublin, Ireland, and I, the young boy crouched in an alley, waited, listening. I was young, no older than fourteen years, and was much too thin for my age. Dark hair cascaded close to my eyes, and my ragged clothing told the tale of homelessness. My gaunt face held the story of infrequent meals, and my eyes told of much darker experiences. It was evident that I was living a hard life: much too hard for a boy so young.

The brisk air rippled when gunshots rose out of the darkness and shouted out somewhere in the distance. Return fire bristled, and the night was no longer silent. Thankful for the noise, I took a quick peek around the corner of the alley, but saw no men of war, Republican or Free-State. Relieved, I slid among the shadows of the trees by the River Liffey, hoping the sound of flowing water and the gunshots combined would mask the crisp sounds of breaking twigs as my feet lightly descended on them. I glanced through the trees at the approaching sun on the horizon, and cursed myself for moving so slowly. Quickening my pace, I set off towards the O'Connell Bridge, guarded on both ends by Free-State soldiers in watchtowers ten feet above. Stopping behind a towering oak tree, I caught my breath. Trying to flatten myself as much as possible, I started to crawl across the ground, moving in a diagonal pattern away from the soldier's eyes.

Without so much as a hiccup, I made it across the bridge, not once spotted by either of the guards. It was evident that I'd done this many times over. Getting slowly to my feet, I glanced back at the watchtowers. The guards were vigilant, but not overly so. Smiling at my fortune, I slipped through several of the filthiest streets and alleyways of Dublin before meandering onto a sidewalk. Looking both ways, I hunched my shoulders and crept into an alley beside the old bakery, where a figure immediately rushed into me and tackled me to the ground.

"I thought you'd died!" came the shrill but hushed voice of a young blonde-headed girl, no older than five years-old, hugging me tightly. I patted the girl's head and, after a quick glance over my shoulder, led her deeper into the alley where we sat down.

"It's okay, Grace," I murmured, smiling broadly at my little sister. I pulled a warm, fresh loaf of bread from my pocket and held it out to her.

"Wha—how—Oh, Sean!" Grace exclaimed, hugging me tightly again so that her blonde curls flounced around her head as she giggled. "A whole loaf, all for us!"

"We've got to make it last a while," I warned, my mouth watering at the bread in my hands waiting, beckoning, to be eaten. My stomach growled loudly, so loudly that I had to check to make sure we weren't heard. Using all the self-control I had, I pulled two small pieces away from the loaf, and handed the bigger of the two to Grace. She too looked like she'd like to swallow her small piece whole, but we both took slow, careful bites, not wanting to risk the food coming back up again.

After we'd finished eating, I stored the rest of our food in the safest place possible: Grace's coat pocket. We retreated farther back into the alley, where we crawled into our home—an old firewood box—and huddled together, trying to keep warm. Grace, happy and content for the night, drifted off to sleep quickly, sadly familiar with the never-ceasing gunshots. I, however, couldn't get to sleep.

Careful not to disturb my sister, I climbed out of the box and put the lid partway on, wanting to block the light from the box when dawn arrived. I walked to the edge of the alleyway, almost taking an absent-minded step onto the street before stopping myself. Peeking around the corner I shivered, but not because of the cold. The gunfire had paused for one of its longer moments, and the fear of the unknown startled me. Then, not far to my left, two gunshots sounded, one after the other. A shot was fired in return, followed by the sound of gun dropping onto stone.

I paused, unsure of what to do about the violence so close by. Looking towards the back of the alley where my sister slept, I knew the right thing to do would be to stay put; investigating could only get me hurt. But when another shot rang out, this time followed by the sound of a gun falling on stone at a great speed, I started moving. I crossed the street and followed the shadows until I was in between two old factory buildings, both facing one another. On the ground, not twenty yards from me, lay a Republican soldier's cap and rifle. In the gutter beside me, I noticed a dead woman. The woman was old, maybe her mid-sixties. I wondered what she'd done to deserve to end up dead in the gutter.

When a sudden movement caught my eye, I crouched low. Above me, on the roof of one of the factory buildings, a sniper stood up, grinning into the darkness. As I pondered the meaning of this, I saw the shining revolver sneak over the parapet of the roof of the house behind him, pointed at the sniper. I wanted to call out, but I wasn't sure who the enemy was. In war, I thought bitterly, the only enemy is the war itself. So I watched as the revolver fired and met its mark, watched as the other sniper fell to the street with a clatter, yet did nothing about it. I was just about to turn and leave when I heard a muffled curse from above, and the sound of metal hitting stone and then a bullet being fired into the air. I ducked, but I needn't do so; the bullet's aim had been much higher than I was. From above came the sound of nervous and relieved laughter, which made my hair stand on end.

Sensing danger, I ducked into the nearest alley and watched as the sniper came out of the house right beside me, walking a little crooked and crouching funny. This man had obviously been drinking, which I knew was dangerous. I watched as the sniper recklessly ran across the street, narrowly avoiding machine gun fire, before throwing himself down next to the dead sniper. I watched with curiosity as the first sniper let out a wail of anguish and staggered backwards, away from the man who he had killed. Mindlessly, he staggered back onto the street, where machine guns immediately tore through the man, leaving him dead on the street.

Looking in the direction of the guns fearfully, I started to creep back towards my alley. Halfway there, I heard a gunshot, from the same direction as my alley. Fear pumped through my system, and I raced through the streets and alleys until I saw a tall figure racing out of my alley, shining revolver in hand. Sprinting to the end of the alley, I found my sister curled against the ground, blood pooling where she lay. I picked her up into his arms. With fluttering eyes, she looked up at me.

"They...wanted..." her voice drifted off, and I noticed her breathing was shallow.

"What? Who did this? What did they want?" Tears were streaming down my face now, but I did nothing to stop it. I just held my sister tighter in my arms, watching the life drain out of her, hoping desperately that a miracle would arrive.

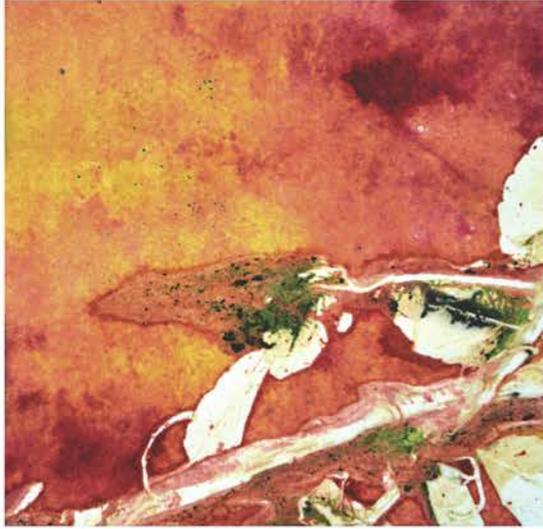
"...wanted... the bread." Her eyes closed, and she went limp.

My screams penetrated the night sky, so loud that for a moment, Dublin listened, feeling the anguish and pain in the screams of the innocent. Then gunshots ripped through the air, and the war resumed.

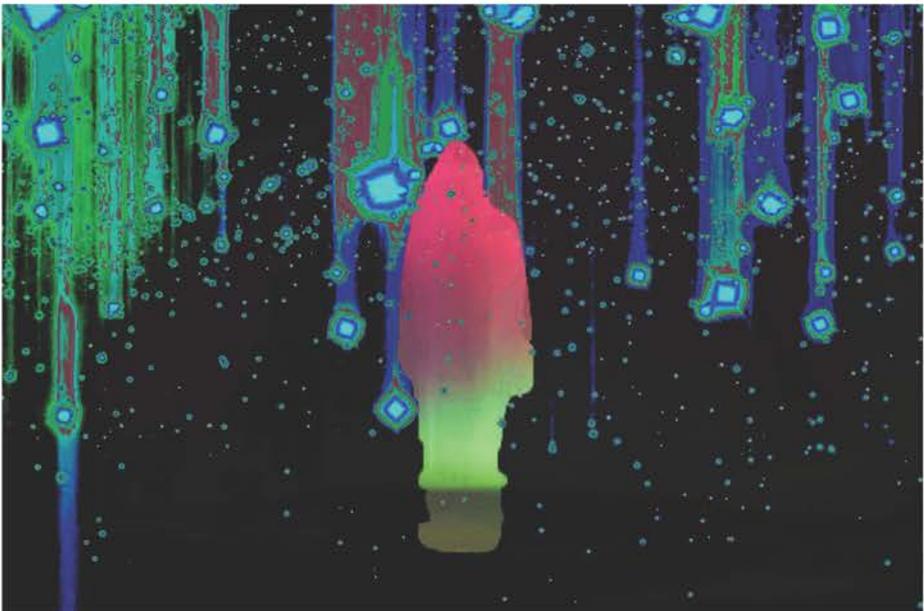
December Gloaming

By Amy Tilly

I sit
On the torn-off truck toolbox
Of a rolled truck on highway 105
Beside the man who just crawled out.
He answers the EMT's questions
Then, bemused, shakes his head and trembles,
Perhaps pondering his turn of Fortune's wheel.
Hand patting his knee,
I think
Of unwrapped presents, ungraded papers, and
Of my daddy dropped
To the court
Between the arc of a thrown tennis ball and the swing of his racquet,
26 years ago this December 20th.
Then
I remember
To revel in the present,
In this moment, sitting on a toolbox in the middle of 105,
Beside an extant stranger
While the wolves of worry
Pad the perimeter
Of the emergency vehicle's floodlight.



Jane Kyle
Splendid Flowers
Monotype

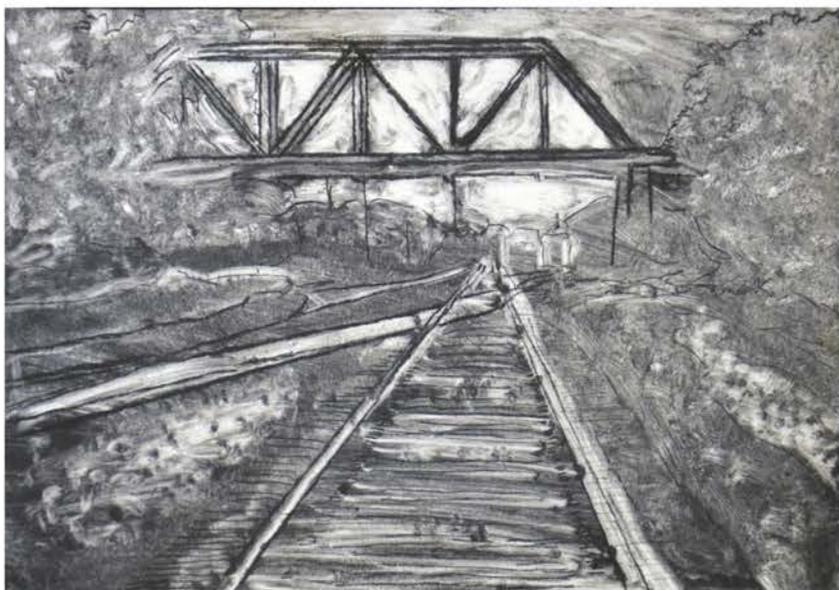


Tristen Michael Fitzpatrick
Shadow
Digital Media

Adam and Eve

By Phoebe Greene

Am I a good person, Adam? You are the only good person, Eve. That's a lot of responsibility, Adam. You carry it with grace, Eve. Do you love me, Adam? What do you mean, Eve? I don't know, Adam. Then it must not matter Eve. If I had, scales, would you see me still Adam? Why are you asking me this Eve? I feel like it, Adam. Why do you have to feel like that, Eve? How can you not, Adam? Are your scales the color of the green and the growing of the gardens, Eve? No, they are the colors of heaven, Adam. Are the colors of the gardens not of heaven, Eve? I have yet to pick a flower as beautiful as a sunrise, Adam. Why do you pick the flowers, Eve? Because I cannot pick a sunset, Adam. Do you no longer enjoy the sunrises with me, Eve? Are you happy, Adam? How could I not be happy, Eve? I don't know, but, I don't think I am, Adam. But we are one, and I am happy, Eve. How can we be one if we are two, Adam? Why must you question everything, Eve? Why must you accept everything, Adam? Because everything is perfect, Eve. Do you think I am perfect, Adam? We are made in God's image, Eve. Is an image as perfect as a reality, Adam? I think you are perfect, Eve. Then why does my heart sing when I think of the forbidden fruit, Adam? It is a test, Eve. Do you think God is testing himself, Adam? I cannot know, Eve. We could know, Adam. Are you not satisfied with perfection, Eve? Do you think God's heart sings when he thinks of forbidden things, Adam? Nothing is forbidden to him, Eve. Does his heart sing at all then, Adam? Surely he must know song if he has created birds that are made of it, Eve. I think you are sure of too much, Adam. I am worried about you, Eve. How can you worry about perfection, Adam? I will cut down that tree if it burdens you so, Eve. Why do you pick flowers, Adam? I pick flowers for you, Eve. Will you pick fruit for me as well, Adam? I think I do love you, Eve. Do lovers not share with one another, Adam? We are the only lovers, Eve. I think lovers shall share their fruit with one another, Adam. Why do you ask this of me, Eve? Why am I made to be perfect, Adam? Can you not forget the fruit, Eve? I will not, Adam. Do you love me, Eve? Perhaps I will know afterwards, Adam. Perhaps, Eve. Will you try it with me, Adam? Can we watch the sunset first, Eve? I want to know the sunset, Adam. Isn't the point not to know, Eve? How do we know until we know, Adam? I don't know Eve. I need to know, Adam. I know you do, Eve. I think I love you, Adam. I love you, Eve.



Bethany Smith
Bridge
Intaglio



Sierra Beane
Bicycle
Intaglio

Silent Sentinel

By Amy Millette

Chance upon a Great Blue Heron
in some remote swamp-like land
and you will see how he occupies
his space in pure solitary existence.

No other herons nearby,
just this one, single soul,
fishing for his supper
in a marsh field bog.

Where toads and silver-streaked minnows
hide from his steady gaze
among cattail woven tubers
thick beneath the surface of a murky, clouded pool.

His cautious, wary golden eyes
forever on high alert
seek out the least sign of movement
that might alter his silent trek.

Come too close to the Great Blue Heron
watch him twitch his S-curved neck
detect your approaching presence
crouch low to the water in camouflage grey.

Without any hesitation
he will launch forcefully into the air
six-foot wing span, tip to tip,
take flight from the once still waters.

Hollow leg bones float weightless
behind the bulk of his pear shaped feature
across the reflecting waterway
in search of another refuge – far from mankind.



Scott Ganes
Three Musical Amigos
Collage and Mixed Media



Delane Costner Mitchell
Collage of the Dreamer
Collage

Reaching Beyond

By Sharon Howard

In a derelict house amid the dense palmetto bush at the far edge of a Caribbean cay, a ceiba tree grows through the busted plank floor of a back room where the last hurricane shattered the roof. The ceiba is bare, a blank slate of inestimable branches, twisted, distorted and beautiful, that push against—occasionally through—constricting walls, and reach toward immeasurable heights to snag the frayed strings of space and time.

At the base of the tree, resting against the grey-green buttress between the knees of roots, a fur-wrapped woman awakens from a half-remembered dream. Not a mere dream, a nightmare—her life. She pushes to her feet, shivers and pulls her mink coat tighter, but shivers all the more even as a warm breeze caresses her pale face. She shrugs the coat to the mildewed, splintered floor.

The woman attempts to step away from the tree; her high pointed heels teeter and sink into the exposed sand-soil. She kicks off her shoes to make a careful circuit of the once-upon-a-time home, seeking a way out. Beyond the busted windows and the battered pine walls there is nothing but a dense barrier of saw-blade shrubbery—sharp and impenetrable. Above her looms the crown of boundless limbs stretched wide and high with artful naked grace. Brown vines cascade through the devastated roof brushing the top of her black, knotted hair. The only way out of this scrub-brush prison is up.

She chooses the thickest vine and climbs. Her tight skirt restricts her. The woman drops back down, strips it off, and resumes her climb. Upon the first branch, she crawls to where it meets the bole, careful to avoid the scatter of conical thorns. She cannot see around the trunk. It would take five or six of her, arms outstretched, to circle the tree. But she is only one. The woman continues to reach out and climb, vine by vine, limb by limb, through the tiered framework toward the clear sky beyond. She stumbles and slips from time to time, always afraid she will lose her way up, not find within reach the necessary next vine or next branch. The thorns are few upon this ancient tree, yet now and then a hand or foot encounters one. She leaves a trail of blood. Halfway up she pauses. The branches she has climbed are no longer bare, but alive with circlets of sanguine blooms along the spiral path she has ascended.

Above her the sky dims. The breeze streaks gray clouds across the blue. It rains. A soft, soaking and cleansing rain. Her silk blouse clings to her; she feels it restrict her breath. The woman removes the blouse, and everything else, and lets it all fall. She's left with only a string of pink pearls that tap against her collarbone. A gift from her mother when she turned thirteen. A burst of a memory. It threatens to draw her back. But she will not go.

She climbs.

Near the top the woman rests, tucked in the crook of a branch that fits her wide hips. The rain stops, but the sky is still dim. She sways with the wind, perched on the edge of night. A bird descends—pheasant-like but large as a mythical dragon, gold and crimson feathered, with fire at its wingtips. It lands on the branch above her.

“I have come to take you home,” the firebird says.

“Where is home?”

“Where do you want it to be?”

Ceiba flowers and orchids now fill the whole of the tree, along with large, brown capsules of fruit. The vines have turned a vernal green, there are leaves. Birds flutter in and out of the canopy—flycatchers, toucans, and others she cannot name. Lizards creep everywhere. A three-toed sloth hangs upside down by his claws. Nearby a red-eye, orange-legged tree frog leaps into a pool within a cupped leaf of an aerial plant. Halfway down the trunk, a white-faced monkey gazes back at her while continuing to feed. Further up an ocelot stretches upon a narrow branch ignoring her.

“Home is me,” she says. “But who am I? What is my name?”

“What do you want it to be?”

She gazes into the twilight sky, barren and vast. The woman removes her strand of pearls, unthreads them and holds them a moment in her palm. Then she flings them, hard as she can, toward the sky. At first, nothing; then the sky blackens and one by one white-pink bursts of light wink down at her.

She leans back and smiles at the artistry of her stars.

Whoever it is that I am—I will be.”

Armed only with this new essential truth, she climbs onto the firebird’s back and nestles amid its countless colored feathers.

“Fly me to my stars,” she says. “I will paint them the hues of the rainbow and every shade between and beyond.”

She plucks the brightest yellow feather from the bird’s back and sharpens the quill point with her teeth. “I will need a pointed pen to name them—and myself—into life.”

The quill’s feathered end burns with a golden flame.

“I will need light.”

Never Goodbye

By Isabella Bryant

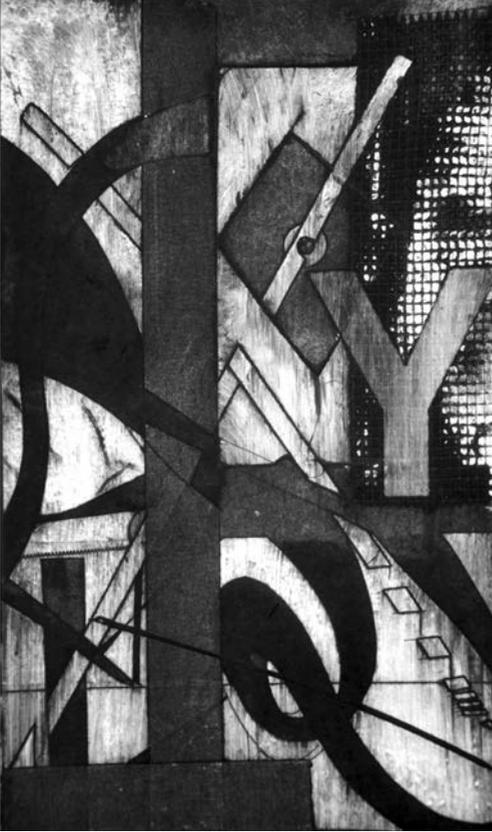
Tears that feel like acid roll
Death takes its heavy toll
Pain racks our chest, leaving us perplexed
When we think of what comes next
The only hope we have left
Until our last fighting breath
Is the bright light to the other side
Covered in fields so wide
So to my good friend
I will see you again
Now I know for sure why
People say see you later, never goodbye

*Dedicated to an amazing friend James Cannon (Buddy).
See you later.*

#Charlotte

By Holly Michaels

ashes to ashes, dust to dust
the death of us, of hope, of trust
consumed by fear, voices unheard
they speak with fire instead of words.



Charlie Ostrom
Black & Mild
Collagraph



Alexa Cavas
Untitled
Collage

Big

By Patricia Maynard

Secretariat's heart weighed twenty-two pounds.

Not that I am often compared to a triple crown winning racehorse,
but I myself have the blessings and burdens of a big heart,
which I frequently wear on the outside
as if I weren't more than my feelings.

Sometimes I let it follow along behind me;
it's been stepped on more than once.
Occasionally it gets heavy
(fear and anger are looking for lodgment)
and I have to sweep it out with a tiny heart broom,
opening all the windows.

Invisible silver strings
connect my heart to the ones I love,
strung across the globe and the heavens
like electric lines.
On good days, I hum.

My hard spots are mostly limited
to preachers who talk of hell,
and politicians who talk of blame,
although I am wary of the mean and the smug
and rarely let them in.

I like to think of the dynamo
in the chest of that magnificent animal
and marvel at the illusion
that a heart can be weighed.



Chris Dula
Autumn at Bass Lake
Digital Photography



Joshua Slenker
City Lights
Digital Photography

Arise, My Daughter

By Sabrina Oliver

She lay in the dust at His feet
Clothes were dirty and torn;
Her body bruised and weak
She cried, "To go on, I can't no more."

An emptiness filled her soul
Fear and pain took hold;
She longed to be made whole
To have a heart of heavenly gold.

But each time she tried, she fell
Crawling along the ground;
She went to the Living Well
Hoping freedom would be found.

The Master full of love and mercy
With gentle voice, He whispered;
"Don't cry, my daughter, you're worthy
I know your story; you're delivered.

"Arise, shake thyself from the dust
Put on My strength; you're redeemed;
Fall into My arms and just trust
I love you; you're highly esteemed.

"You are not the mistakes you've made
Your name is not "Broken;"
It's not "unworthy, doubt, or afraid"
You are My beautiful token.

"I have given you My Name
Joy, Faith, Love and Peace;
You're free, made whole, no blame
Surrender to Me, I Am your identity.

"My righteousness is freely given
I have comforted you, My daughter;
Thy God reigneth, you're forgiven
Arise, rejoice, I am your Father.

"Sin no more has dominion over you
Your past is behind you for a reason;
Give Me your heart; I'll make it new
I'll hold you and prepare you for Heaven.

"I have redeemed you; you're Mine
Victory is already given from Me;
You are beautiful, your heart I'll refine
Arise, my Daughter and just believe."



Melissa Anderson
Schism
Collage



Ryland Bates
Perspective
Collage

In the Midst of the Storm

By Gina Story

The wind was howling when Grace Fortune waddled through the doors of Grand Strand Regional Medical Center. She was 16, alone, and two days past her due date. There was a hurricane bearing down on Myrtle Beach, S.C., the worst in years. For most expectant mothers, having a baby during a hurricane would be one of the most horrible things imaginable but for Grace it seemed right – somehow appropriate for her situation – and she was actually looking forward to the experience.

She carried her small overnight bag with her to the receptionist at the Emergency Room desk. The woman looked exhausted; no doubt the ER had been busy with people injured trying to prepare for the storm. Most of the people on the east side of the Intercostal Waterway had evacuated, but Grace had no place to go and had planned to wait the storm out in her small efficiency apartment. After a restless night of sleep, her water broke as she was pouring her bowl of Fruit Loops. Now she was in a wheel chair headed to the maternity ward, where she would ride out the storm and give birth to her child.

Grace was just getting settled in her room when a nurse came in to get her vitals and check the status of her labor.

“Hi honey, I’m Stella. You’ll be seeing me the rest of the night and probably tomorrow too, since it looks like this storm’s got us both stuck here. How are you feeling?”

“I’m Grace. I’m doing ok; it’s not as bad as I thought it would be yet.”

“Good, keep thinking positive. Who’s with you today?” Stella asked as she looked around the obviously empty room.

“Nobody. I came alone, but I won’t leave that way,” Grace said laughing and patting her large round belly.

“Grace, are you sure you don’t want me to call somebody for you? This isn’t going to be something you want to do by yourself,” Stella asked, concerned.

“That’s ok; you’d be shocked what I can do by myself. Besides, there’s nobody to call anyway,” Grace replied with all the seriousness due someone in her situation.

“Ok, well you just let me know if you need anything at all. Let’s get your vitals now,” Stella said, but she was still concerned.

A few minutes later, Grace clicked on the television hanging from the wall as Stella left the room and headed toward the nurses station. As she settled down in her chair to make notes on Graces’ chart, Stella couldn’t help but feel sorry for the little girl getting ready to become a mother in the room just a few feet away. She knew it was going to be a long night for Grace and she wanted so badly to do something to comfort the girl who was obviously putting on a brave face for everyone around her.

It was in that moment that Stella’s friend Gladys walked up. Gladys was an older woman and head of housekeeping at the hospital.

“I just can’t leave her in there by herself all night,” Stella sighed after telling Gladys all she knew about Grace. “And I’ve got too many patients to do more than check in on her every hour or so.”

“I’ll come back and sit with her as much as I can”, Gladys said, feeling for both Stella and Grace. “I’ve been through births with my sisters and my daughter, maybe I can be her family for the night.”

“That would be great. Do you want me to introduce you?” Stella asked.

“No, I’ll go in alone. I’ll use my old lady guilt and make her feel sorry for me,” Gladys joked.

Gladys lightly tapped on the door to the room and heard Grace call, “Come in.”

“Hey there, I’m Gladys. I just wanted to check on your room and make sure you had everything you need.”

“Everything’s good,” Grace said with a smile that faded as a contraction hit a little

harder than she expected.

“Breathe, sweetie. You just gotta keep breathing. Do you mind if I sit for a while? My feet are killing me,” Gladys asked.

Grace nodded as the contraction began to lose its grip on her enlarged belly.

“I’m Grace. Do you have to work all night?”

“Yep, I do,” Gladys said. “I always find one patient that doesn’t mind me coming in and hiding out in their room from time to time. Do you mind?”

“No. The company would be nice, but it might get a little busy in here in a bit.”

Grace tried to smile, but she was already getting tired of the contractions.

“I’m not worried about that. I’ve got four girls and a boy at home and two grandkids, and I was there when they all made their way into the world,” Gladys said.

“How old are your kids?” Grace wanted to know.

“They’re all grown now. My baby boy is 19, and my girls are spread from 28 to 21. My grands are 6 and 1 from my oldest daughter.” Gladys rattled off like it was old hat.

“So, do you know what you’re going to have?”

“No.”

“Well what do you want?” Gladys questioned.

“I don’t really know. I’ve been so busy trying to figure out how to put food in our mouths I haven’t given much thought to whether it will be a boy or girl,” Grace said, honestly. “I guess a girl would be easier. I know how to be a girl, so I’ve got that covered.”

Gladys laughed. “I can see the logic there, but don’t worry about it. As long as you give it plenty of love, that’s the main thing.”

“I’ve got plenty of love to give it,” Grace said, and then her voice began to trail off. “But I do wish there was someone else around to love it too.”

“Grace, where are your parents?”

“They don’t want anything to do with me or the baby. My daddy’s a preacher and I ruined him and momma’s reputation. Now they can’t hold their heads up in church, so I left home. Maybe after I’ve been gone a while, people will forget.”

“People don’t forget, Grace,” Gladys said with a lifetime of wisdom. “They either learn to live with it or they don’t, but they don’t forget and don’t you forget either. You remember when your baby’s your age and does something you don’t like what your parents did, and you do the opposite. Everything’s a learning experience, but I’m guessing you already know that.”

“Yeah, I guess being pregnant when you’re 16 gives you a different outlook on things.”

“I’m guessing you’re as strong-headed as you are smart,” Gladys said.

Grace smiled again and Gladys knew exactly where she would spend her night. That little girl had won her heart because she reminded her so much of herself at that age – pregnancy and all.

It was about then that Gladys pager went off. “Well, I’ve gotta run. I’ll see you in a little bit, if you’re sure that’s still ok.”

Gladys knew when Grace smiled back that they both felt like they had found a kindred spirit.

“I’d really like that,” Grace said.

Gladys winked at Stella as she passed the nurses station. “I’ll be back.”

It was about 30 minutes later when Gladys slipped back into Grace’s room. Stella was there with the doctor, and Grace’s legs were up in stirrups. Gladys slipped quietly around the doctor’s back and went to stand by Grace’s head.

“How ya doing, Grace?” Gladys asked.

“Ok, I guess,” she said and reached for Gladys’s hand. Gladys gave her hand a squeeze and waited for the doctor to get done with his exam.

“Well Grace,” the doctor said, “It looks like you’re about three centimeters dilated and if I had my guess your baby will get here about the same time as the hurricane. Now you let Stella know if your contractions get a lot worse and you want something for the pain, OK?”

“I’m not going to use any pain medication. Women have been giving birth without it for centuries, and I’m tough,” Grace said with conviction. Stella shot Gladys a look over Grace’s head, and Gladys just smiled and shook her head.

The doctor made his exit, followed by Stella. Grace and Gladys were once again alone.

Gladys helped Grace slide back into a comfortable position on her bed and fluffed her pillows just like she would have for one her family members and then settled back into the chair next to Grace’s bed.

“So do you have any name ideas?” Gladys wanted to know.

“Not yet; I’ll wait and see what the baby looks like and maybe something will just come to me,” Grace said, wondering if that’s how it would really happen.

“Not a bad idea,” Gladys said. “but make sure before you make a final decision, you write out the baby’s initials to make sure it doesn’t spell anything.”

“Huh,” Grace mused. “I never thought of that.”

“I was born Gladys Althea Simmons.”

Grace laughed for a second and then grabbed the bed rail as a contraction came.

Gladys took this chance to make a valuable point.

“Grace, I know you said you didn’t want any pain medicine, but I’ve done it both ways, and I have to say I’d rethink that.”

“Maybe you’re right, but I can tough it out for a while longer. I want to remember this as much as I can because I never want to do it again,” Grace declared.

“I felt that way once too,” Gladys said dropping her head. “Grace, I want to tell you a secret, something that not many people know. My 28 year-old daughter isn’t really my oldest child. I had a son, when I was your age. I gave him to my parents to raise as my brother, but after a few years of watching him grow up and hearing him call someone else mommy – I just couldn’t take it anymore. So, I came here thinking I’d find some solace in the sand and the surf. I was still close enough to visit from time to time but far enough away where I didn’t have to watch things happen every day. “

“Did it help?” Grace asked avoiding Gladys tear-filled eyes.

“Some,” Gladys said. “But I kept finding myself dreaming about him. Those dreams eventually turned to nightmares about the way he was conceived, which gave way to waking thoughts of what he would think of me if he knew the truth. So I just tried to move on.”

“Well you’ve got four kids…” Grace said.

“It took the right man to wash away the hurt and make me feel good about myself again,” Gladys said. “Grace, where’s your baby’s father?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Grace said defiantly.

“Does he know you’re pregnant?”

“Yeah, but when you rape your best friend’s girlfriend it’s probably not something you want to tell everybody,” Grace said with contempt.

“You and I have so much in common,” Gladys said trying to comfort Grace. “My son came into this world in a similar way, but you’re so much braver than I am. I couldn’t have done what you are doing. I still keep my little secret from my family. “

“I don’t want my baby to grow up being whispered about,” Grace explained. “Maybe here I can get a clean slate and start a life for us. When the baby gets old enough I’m going to go get my GED and then try to go to college.”

“You go girl,” Gladys said with a proud nod of her head. “I didn’t plan that far ahead. So where are you living?”

“I’ve got a little room at a pay by the week motel. I’ve been working at McDonald’s to pay the bills,” Grace said.

“Grace, I know I don’t know you really well, but I’m so proud of you. I hope that my kids have your gumption,” Gladys said with a motherly approval.

Grace was shocked. It had been years since anyone had told her they were proud of her, and even longer since she cared if someone was proud of her, but hearing those words come out of Gladys’ mouth moved Grace.

“Gladys please don’t leave me tonight,” she pleaded. “I really don’t think I can do this by myself.”

“Honey, I’m not going anywhere. I handed over my pager a little while ago. It’s me and you until this baby is born.”

“You won’t get in trouble?”

“Shoot, honey I run this hospital. They’d be lost without me, and don’t you let anybody tell you any different. So how’s the storm coming?” Gladys asked eyeing the television.

“The Weather Chanel says they eye will make landfall around 2 a.m.,” Grace replied, turning the volume up.

Grace and Gladys chatted and napped for the next few hours. It was just before midnight when the power at the hospital went out. In the few seconds of darkness before the emergency generators kicked on, Grace reached across the bedrail and found Gladys’ hand.

“You ok, sweetie?” Gladys asked through a yawn.

“I’m beginning to think you’re right about the pain medication,” she replied.

“I’ll go let Stella know,” Gladys said.

There were tears in Grace’s eyes when Gladys left the room.

The world outside sounded like it was coming to an end when the doctor came in and announced that it was time for Grace to push. As the wind outside pushed palm trees down all around the hospital, Grace pushed and screamed. As the silence of the eye of the hurricane passed over the hospital, the doctor handed Gladys a crying 7 pound 2 ounce baby girl to give to Grace.

“Grace, here’s your daughter,” Gladys said.

Grace was amazed; she didn’t know she could love anything as much as she loved the little girl now lying naked on her bare chest.

“Any names come to you yet?” Gladys asked through tears.

“I think she looks like a Gladys Grace and we’ll call her Gigi, what do you think?” Grace said, never taking her eyes of her daughter.

“Perfect,” Gladys whispered.

Three days later Grace and Gigi left the hospital, but in Gladys’ car, and instead of a small motel room she moved into Gladys’ home where Gladys treated her like another daughter.

Twenty years later Grace and Gigi stood at Gladys’ graveside. Grace sent Gigi to the car so she could say goodbye.

“You were right about everything you said in the midst of the hurricane that night. I didn’t forget, and I’ve found someone to wash away the pain and I have a family that loves me. All thanks to you,” Grace whispered.

Grace tossed a red rose over the edge of Gladys’ grave and turned to go. She walked right into the arms of her husband, Gladys’ youngest son.

Purple Prose*

By Carole Coates

“Why not?” I ask.
After all
it’s just the way we talk
down here in the South.

Sometimes it’s even red,
orange, or aquamarine
but never black and white
and certainly not boring beige.

Like taking a Sunday afternoon ride
on an unknown and winding mountain road
sans map or GPS
or any other clue where we’re going,

Turning onto this side road or that—
up a mountain then down a hollar
where people turn and stare,
the bumpy route nothing more sometimes
than an old cow path.
We never know quite where it will lead.

For the most part, it’s all we have left
of rocking chairs on verandas
shelling beans and shucking corn,
or for the more genteel,
sipping sour lemonade and
clinking ice cubes
in tall glasses of sweet tea.

I blame
the sultry days of summer
encouraging sloth.
Too hot and humid, I say,
for anything but telling stories.

Why else do we stand in front yards
with never-ending goodbyes
but scores of colorful anecdotes
while moralizing or
passing along old wisdoms
and country philosophies?

Sooner or later
we’ll get to the point.

Or not.

That’s really the point, when all is said and done,
is it not—
the ride?

* *That style of writing that is so extravagant, ornate, or flowery as to break the flow and draw excessive attention to itself*



Sierra Beane
Halloween Self-Portrait
Graphite



Tanner Bearden
Halloween Self-Portrait
Graphite



Lucci Murgolo
Self-Portrait
Graphite

The Mother's Hip

By LB Sedlacek

Two dangling legs
are what you
usually see
wrapped around it.

Before that it
can be simply
thrust out
or rocking, swaying.

For soothing sleep
or comforting cries
moving fast
sometimes genuine safety.

A protective stance
no matter the
size, shape
of the kid.

Something I miss
the most because
my child
outgrew my hips.

Dynasty of God

By Rachel Anders Michaels

Stars more excellent than diamonds
embellish space
as God drapes the universe
in fabrics of elemental eminence
signature colors of covenant
swirled into rock, ice and gases of various origins

Explosive creativity
forms many new worlds
with painstaking detail
as though a carpenter
were building mansions

Life itself hard at work
capturing moments of splendor
Into one handful of impressive ability
Leaving awestruck the world at large
as all witness power
in its full glory

Light dwells within the midst
taking his proper seat at the throne



Angel Shook
Pick Your Poison
Pen and Watercolor



Ashley Barnett
Parody of George Seurat's Circus
Watercolor and Graphite

Ice Age

By Lella Shaffner

Over the tumbling vastness of Her rolled the white, phlegmatic anger of the Northern lover. Before her cryohibernation suppressed her, she uttered, "Never fear..."

Some of the children knew their Mother's philosophy was locked under ice, incomplete. The coyotes divulged the full message to the crystal vapors of a clear sky. The bears, salmon, ravens, buffalo, oak, and primrose heard them and knew Her full truth.

The humans could hear only their own weeping until one remembered their fear as forbidden. "What else exists but fear?" another asked. As they pondered the riddle, fear only grew in dark nights and hunger, blue lips and numbed limbs. No alternative to fear found, the humans devised a way to cover their weakness. A mask of strength to kill. A mask of power to conquer. A mask of control to rape. A mask of compassion to justify. The humans wore their masks before all their siblings. No matter how the dog tried to befriend, the dodo to trust, the horse to serve, or the deer to give, fear dominated the human brothers and sisters beneath their disguises.

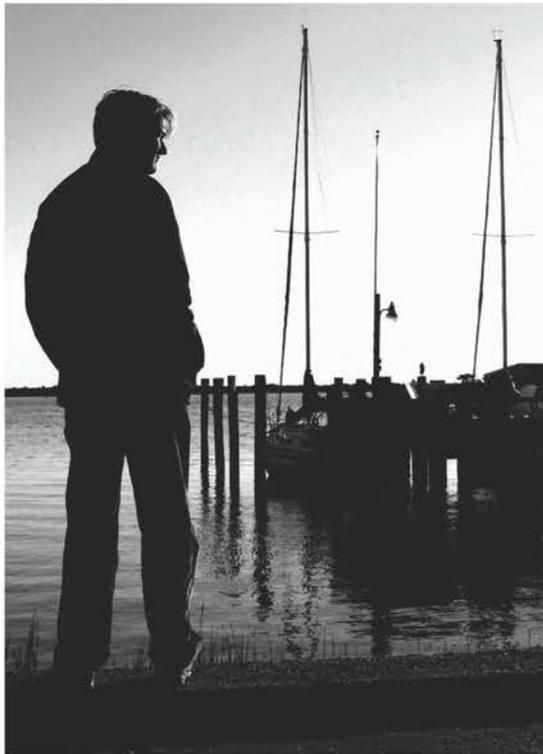
Thawing currents of energy awoke the mother. Her guilt was burdensome. Her back bore the responsibility of slumbering while her children grew without her. Too late did she pronounce before them all her entire proverb. "Never fear for only love is real."

The human children had forgotten their Mother's language. Silenced, she quaked or rumbled in hopes of being understood. Her voice ceased as she realized fear was the only understanding by which the human children were guided. They built dams and walls against her shouts, where the other children curled against her and lapped at the wounds sustained to their Mother by their distant siblings.

As before, chill set in her bowels and against her bones. She looked about to blame the winds and their master as the culprits of an age before, but they pointed to a new attacker. She returned to slumber but first she said, "Only love is real and illusions fade." And the coyotes sent her message to the sky.



Charlie Ostrom
Peanut Butter Sandwiches
Intaglio



Peter W. Morris
Untitled
Digital Photography

San Francisco Lament

By Karen J. Maj

Crossing the intersection of Columbus & Pacific
as I walk toward City Lights Bookstore,
I see a Chinese woman.
She squat-sits on the sidewalk resting against
a building front of shiny black tiles;
sweet smile, she reaches out to me with bamboo Crosses.
I smile back. Keep walking.
(I should have at least made a donation).

Further up the street at Kerouac Alley
sprawls a man of grease and dust
in the entryway of Vesuvio, bar of the Beats.
Shoulder-length stringy hair, long filthy coat;
eyes gray, frightened, mouth missing teeth;
I smile a hello as he stares at me as I walk by.
(I could have at least given him a dollar or two).

Now in City Lights, I browse book titles in
the upstairs Poetry Room; my eyes glance
through the grimy city windows
at Vesuvio next door.
Who are you, old man?
Poet? Artist? Musician? Writer now long forgotten?
Any one of us?

A few months later I travel back to San Francisco,
emotionally intent on returning to the North Beach neighborhood:
to have a second chance; to make it Right.
For: I was so certain these two city icons
familiar neighborhood faces, would still be sitting in their Spot
over and over again

But they were gone

and all I could do . . . as I stared . . . was whisper an apology
to the emptiness
of their

Humanity



Kelly J. Dickinson
Octocorn
Colored Pencil



Katherine Ann Scott
Lemons
Acrylic

Free Sample

By Patricia Maynard

Out for a walk on a gray cloudy morning,
My heart almost achy, my mind caught in troubles,
I passed an old storefront, a sign in the window
That spoke to me quietly and shifted my rhythm,
A small piece of cardboard said

Poetry: Free Sample.

They used to sell coffee here, muffins, and cookies,
Aromas still lingered though shelves were all empty.
She sat by the window, her back to the wall, wearing
Faded blue denim, black velvet, and pearls.

A legal pad, yellow, a blue felt tip pen, and
A small pair of glasses were laid out before her.
She studied me briefly and saw what she needed,
Then started to write as I sat down and waited.

Between us has passed just the briefest of light
Like a flash in a mirror when cars drive by late.

She tore off my page and she handed it over,
And spoke, saying, "Poetry needs both eyes and ears,
So I'll read you your words while you watch for their charm."

"Stop fretting," she said, "and stop pushing the river
As if you could alter its pace or its path.
Stop trying to be so in charge all the time.
What was is behind you, what is, is what is,
What will be may not be the same as what if."

I thanked her and folded my yellow free sample
And stood up to leave but she stopped me by saying,
"I do have just one small thing more I can share."
She tore off a corner and wrote just one word
And said, "Here, this is magic."

I looked at my word and then all of a sudden,
I knew what she meant and she knew that I knew.
I went on my way with the word in my pocket,
The poem in my heart, and I knew I was different
Because of a sign in an old store front window,

Poetry: Free Sample

And I'd let myself in.



Windy Hammond
Rustic Circle
Assemblage



Monday Musings

By Holly Michaels

I say
that everything is ok
because there is a socially acceptable time for grief
that elapsed
over two years ago,
not to mention
that no one died,
no one
except the younger version of me
that still dared to daydream
about knights in
somewhat rusted armor.

I pray that there will come a day
I don't see his eyes
as soon as I close mine,
blue as a sky
which hints that it is going to rain,
a touch of gray
that no one really believes yet,
how appropriate.

Yet something in your own
makes me long to forget,
reminds me of the mountain river
where I was baptized,
where I first felt clean
before the doubts left me covered in a sludge
only I could see.

You are liberating
and I am terrified
for feeling too much too soon,
terrified that you do too
and I will change my mind
and cause that river to lose some of its shine.
I have an amazing ability
to make the waters murky,
a skill at turning sweet water
to soured wine,
like some broken miracle.

I am no Messiah.
I am not the one you've been praying for
I'm the one you've ran from your entire life,
the temptress on the spire
promising you can fly.

I am a lonely soul's forty nights,
wilderness smile
pulling you out of purpose

I am drowning in an ocean of lies
I tell myself to survive.

But I'll tell you I am fine.



Belinda Galicia
Fish or Not
Assemblage

Chrysalis

By Rachel Anders Michaels

I

One last look at the world I've known
its sickening stench of hypocrisy
clinging to my overwhelmed nostrils
like clouds to a rampant storm
reminds me of why I must leave
and why I must be the one to change

II

Secret chambers lie deep inside
nature nourishes in subtle measures
begins to rend me into many pieces
Submitted to a process of pure agony

III

Churning chaos inside a silk room
safely hidden within unreachable chambers
transformation is well underway
condition critical, but stable

IV

Colors and patterns are rearranged
sewn into a new life, soon to emerge
nothing is left as it came into this place
all things are new, strong, and wise
beauty brought forth from ashes of death

V

Cloaked in novelty I began to move
fresh and vivacious; I try to break free
it's time to leave the silk room behind
and face the world with a different resolve

VI

On brilliant wings of resurrection



Tristen Michael Fitzpatrick

9

Alabaster

Gender Bender

By Carole Coates

What if humans...

were synchronous hermaphrodites
like earthworms who,
when two mate,
both are impregnated

Now, that's equality!

Or like the banana slug
able to mate with itself alone
uniparental reproduction
is what it's called

As much fun
as with a partner?
More?
Simpler for sure
certain of being in the mood.

What if humans...

were parthenogenetic
like the rock lizard.
Some turkeys do it, too
going it alone
reproducing without
fertilization
making maleness irrelevant
for species survival
making maleness obsolete?

If men were extraneous,
would we still
keep them around
just for the fun of it?

What if humans ...

were like the blanket octopus,
she a hundred times his size
and he, wanting to mate,
breaks off his penis
and gives it to her
for keeps?

Perhaps the ultimate romantic gesture?

What if humans...

were like seahorses
where the male
is the one
who gives birth

Would we have any reproductive laws?

What if humans...

were like anemonefish
with their dominance hierarchy
where the largest female rules
and on her death the favored male
gender morphs to take her place?

Where all develop
first as male—then mature
to female,
how would social conventions change?

What if humans ...

were bidirectional
like hawk fish
able to change gender
at will
and back again
and again

What would we learn
when we've lived both sides?
Where would we hang
our biases?

What if?



Bethany Smith
Double Personality
Low-fire Ceramics

Who I Am

By Rachel Anders Michaels

I am from gravel roads that once led to
nowhere,
Paved with blood sweat and tears,
they now lead to my destiny,

I am from soft rains, that cried bitter
tears,
But now sing a song
About hope for tomorrow.

I am from the craggy rocks
A jagged climb upward
Yet with breathtaking views

I am from the tallest pines
That dance in moonlight
And whisper secrets in my ear

I am about the oak tree
Lightning strikes often
Still, I stand firm

I am about a bonfire
Appalachian smoke
Reaching for the sky

I am about Zephyr
I have my part too
In Western Caroline

I am about softest silk
A very strong house
Made of feminine lace

I am a Bob Welsh classic
A gentle sentimental wind
Guiding through the abyss

I am a dandelion
the dreamer with a trampled heart
Yet still so full of wishes

I am a mood ring
Ever changing with time
Reflecting my circumstances

I am a Mountain Lion
You will not see me coming
But you will hear me R

O
A
R

I will be a phoenix
From my own despair
I will rise and conquer

I will be a honeysuckle vine
With fresh blooms
And sweet juices of liberation

I will be a stream
Gradually carving out
A mighty canyon

I will be Appalachian
A high mountain
Tough, yet tender

I will be who I am



Frances Nicholson
Tree Vase
Low-fire Ceramics



When Trees Cry

By Sharon Howard

relentless
midnight rain
suppresses
morning light
till dawn
arrives at noon

sun exposes
delayed drops
undone from trees
sporadic
second rain

these crystal drops
flash back
the day you left
flash forward a future
of leftover rain

and shatter the day
 when the trees cry

Pelt

By Phoebe Greene

I never felt more alone
than when I found out
the wolves
were gone
They just left
I thought it was
Just the one
But she was
All of them
More entirely
She represented what
A wolf was
She loved ferociously
Tearing the heart out of you
And nursing it like her own cub
Teaching it to hunt and howl
And then teaching it to leave
By example



Eric A. Price
Goocho Sama
Low-fire Ceramics

Birds of a Feather Flock Together

By Amy Millette

Inspired by an article about Vuong Nguyen, *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2016,
authors Sue Halpern & Bill McKibben

You discover your true self
wrapped in a cocoon of private living
walking among people who don't even know you're there.

They chatter, laugh, joke and keep talking non-stop,
they can't bear a gap in conversation,
A lull in voices – quietness – still silence.

They come too close, invade your personal being,
ask personal questions as if they're entitled to real answers.
And can't fathom why you never want to join in their fun.

Go to loud, boisterous parties with music blaring,
televisions cranked on high,
high pitched laughter, repeated stories, more suffocating laughter.

And when you disappear from their sight
They barely seem to notice
Too preoccupied with their own existence

Too ready and eager to talk about themselves
Their Facebook lives
As if it really matters.

So what Really Matters?
Your own inconspicuous escape
From their whirling extroverted lives
You, a highly sensitive person, need space of your own

Where you spread your wings so far
You're "hitting people in the face"
And, oddly enough, they don't even know it.

They're so busy focusing on their own sense of place
To recognize, much less care,
About your introverted need for wide open spaces

Where wings spread free and fingers like feathers
Stretch beyond borders in a field of waist high grass
Head tilted back, eyes on the stars above you.

A universe so open, so quiet
And welcoming the new found wings
Of a highly sensitive Introvert.



James L. Waters
Uh Oh Frog
Low-fire Ceramics



Cindy Meissner
Untitled
Relief Print
Awarded Cover Art for *Branches*, Volume 22