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Amee Bohrer

Aubrey Bonanno

Natalie Esposito

Christie Jean Hall

Jeremy Hartzell

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Authors

Amee Bohrer, Aubrey Bonanno, Natalie Esposito, Christie Jean Hall, Jeremy Hartzell, Erika Larson, Timothy Lockman, Ron Lybarger, Reginald Mansfield, Dave Moutray, Lisa Sarm, Jessica Shekleton, Josh Sopiarcz, Joe Webb, Janet Windeguth, Qynn McCrory, J. Benjamin Blount, and Mike Scales

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Michelle Jones

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Reginald Mansfield

Elizabeth Newmayer

Lisa Sarm

Cover Art:

Mike Scales "Busted-Ass Hood"

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Black Lace Under White Oxford

by Ameer Bohrer

Something innately wicked, and empowering
About leaving that fourth button undone
The cherished contents tantalizingly plush
In leaning over, not-so-accidentally
Standing with arms strategically crossed
Reclining backwards demurely, stretching upper body
Inconspicuously adjusting, just for the fun of it
Finally, in celebrating a beautiful bra that does its job
By complementing it with an equally bold neckline.

We Have Forgotten

by Aubrey Bonanno

so alike
so alone

separated by bullets
by imaginary lines
drawn in the sand
scrawled into sacred texts
by prophetic men
who lie dying on their backs

separated by fear
we paint our windows
our mirrors
black out the sun
we leave our homes with brimming
bellies
with arrows
with axes
without appetites

our gods shimmy around the stars
slip in and out of our hearts
we proclaim loyalty to a plot of land
a race, a rich man

with an important title
telling us to fight

we purchase goods made my nimble
fingers
extending from open hands
filled with birth control
with twelve cents every hour
they are the same hands that picked
cotton in Virginia
laid brick in Siberia
gathered rubber in the Congo

we are hearts in a bucket
carried by our mother
she is shedding tears of blood
rolling down her arm
sprinkling us with her grief
as we each fight to lap it up
forgetting why she is weeping
forgetting we are

so alike
so alone

The Grand Old Drink of the South

by Natalie Esposito

So there's this pretty lady with red hair
My mother's mother

She let my grandfather die in a nursing home

I still wear her perfume,
get some of her high heeled shoes.
But that doesn't give me any comfort

The smell of cigarettes in the kitchen, the countertop a little quarter glass with a straw

Southern Comfort helps her breathe,
but my mother would never tell you that.

She used to drive a Cadillac,
maybe even love my mother

As real to me as
a photograph,

like a 3x5, glossy and full of detail, but flat.

Symphony

by Christine Jean Hall

I take you in my mouth
with the passion of a baritone saxophone
and the innocence of a solo flute

while you write intensely,
jolting back and forth,
hands clutching my shoulders,
knuckles white.

Your voice is an orchestra.
Violins shriek as your neck falls
back with pleasure.
A low bass hums,
vibrating between my ears
with your every move.
I progress, up and down
to the beat of a timpani
resounding in the undertones
of your moans
as cymbals clash with the forte of my name.

The pressure of your fingers eases,
your hips cease movement.
My shadow creeps up your chest,
beaded with sweat,
as you pull me toward you,
nosing the soft trail
of dark hair covering your stomach.

A single cello
replaces blaring trumpets,
bellowing deeply as
my fingers outline your swollen lips,
tired frame cradled in yours.
The piece ends
with the fading remembrance
of a major seventh
lingering in my spine,
surrounded by darkness,
your heartbeat heavy in my ear.

Sol from the City

by Jeremy Hartzell

I.

Sol Roseman sat up in bed. He had been awake for forty-five minutes just staring at the ceiling. He was drenched in a sticky, southern-climate sweat. His powder blue, short-sleeved pajamas clung to his body and turned transparent at the points of contact that boasted the most perspiration. He could recall maybe five times he had ever been anywhere close to being this hot. The coastal plains of North Carolina were muggy and unforgiving compared to the dry heat Sol knew in Chicago. How can people live like this? he wondered to himself. The early morning sun was filtering in through the off-white Venetian blinds. The slice-up sunshine extended like long fingers across the ironed-smooth sheets of the bed. Sol leaned on his left arm and thoughtfully slid his right hand, palm down, over the empty space where Rose was supposed to be. He spread his fingers out wide and pressed down hard on the emptiness next to him.

Sol breathed a deep sigh and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He sat reserved — as if there were no real reason for getting up, and no real reason to stay in bed. He planted his feet firmly on the carpet his daughter had vacuumed in preparation for his visit. Sol stood up and walked into the bathroom scratching his ass the whole way. He could almost hear Rose's voice in his head sarcastically saying, "That's so sexy." A small smile curled its way on to the side of his mouth and surprised him.

Dana was in the kitchen burning some toast. Sol could hear her swearing at the burnt breakfast. Her voice was amplified by the linoleum flooring and marble countertop. He heard her say "fuck" just before he turned on the water in the tub and drowned her out. She had probably burnt her fingers reaching frantically into the toaster over. "Now there's something I never thought I'd hear my little girl say." He cupped his hand under the flowing water and held it for a moment. Sol pulled the stopper on the faucet and the shower head hissed to life. The water was warm and gentle on his old body.

II.

Sol stood next to the bagels and lox, table-spread in the back of the of the Synagogue. He looked distinguished and confident from the neck down in his blue sports coat and gray slacks. He had left his own yarmulke back in Chicago. The one he borrowed from the Synagogue sat starched atop his bald head. It was crisp and white and came to a point. He muttered under his breath: "I look like a Klan kook in this thing" during the lighting of the Sabbath candles. He spent the entire evening matting it down and trying to force it to adopt the curve of his round head. The fuzzy white remnants of hair on the sides of his head, just about his ears, splayed out horizontally under the skullcap.

Sol was enjoying full spoonfuls of pure cream cheese; something Rose would never let him get away

Sol from the City cont'd

by Jeremy Hartzell

with. He stood there blissfully out of place in a region of the country as alien to him as another planet. It felt good to him to be out of place. Wilmington, North Carolina, was a curious city to Sol. It was a paradox of old southern tradition and modern multiculturalism. It was like Chicago with no tall buildings. Wilmington had lots of trees, brick streets, and southern accents. A bit of cream cheese fused with saliva and started migrating its way down Sol's chin. Dana crossed the room and caught it was a paper napkin.

"How'd you like the service Daddy?"

"It was nice. That Rabbi has a good sense of humor. He reminds me of this guy I like to listen to on the radio back in the city. He's always making fun of the president."

"You really shouldn't eat cream cheese like that."

"I know." Sol put the plastic spoon down on the little paper plate sitting on the table. "I just can't stop myself from doing that sort of thing since your Mom passed. She used to kvetch at me all the time. It kept me healthy but drove me nuts."

On the other side of the room, standing next to the lectern, Rabbi Weinshaw was conversing with some of the old women in the congregation when he caught notice of Dana and Sol standing by the smoked fish. The Rabbi was a tall and handsome man in his early forties. He had dark hair with bushy eyebrows and a pearly-white smile. He politely dismissed

himself from the company of the elderly women — "If you'll excuse me, ladies, I was going to go say hello to Dana's father." The block of old women broke up and several of them headed over to pester little David Messer, unassumingly playing a handheld video game in the corner.

The Rabbi approached Dana and asked, "Aren't you going to introduce me?"

"Of course. Daddy, this is Rabbi Weinshaw. Rabbi, this is my father, Sol Roseman."

"Please, call me Jacob. Rabbi is so formal."

Sol wiped his right hand palm down on the side of his gray slacks and shook the Rabbi's hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Jacob." Sol was uncomfortable with the idea of calling a Rabbi by his first name — but these were new times. Sol could see the attraction Rabbi Weinshaw had for Dana. Dana was quite alluring and young looking for her age. She had her mother's features. Her hair was dark chestnut and her eyes were friendly and non-judgmental. Sol couldn't be more pleased with the prospect of a Rabbi for a son-in-law. If only Rose could be alive to be delighted with him too. Dana certainly deserved a man who was good and kind, and wouldn't break her heart for a change. Who better than a Rabbi for my little girl? Sol thought to himself.

The Rabbi smiled and patted Sol on the shoulder.

"I hope you'll be around for a

Sol from the City cont'd

by Jeremy Hartzell

while."

"Just a few more days." Sol and Dana shared an uncertain look. The extent of his visit had never been finalized. Sol certainly didn't want to impose on his forty-one-year-old daughter's private life. She'd been on her own for far too long now to have Daddy hanging around.

"It was nice meeting you. I have to go say hi to the Holloways." The Rabbi trooped across the room. He looked back and gave Dana a little smile. Sol was sure that Dana reciprocated the Rabbi's romantic desires.

"What do you think of the Rabbi, Dana?" Sol gave Dana a father-knows-all look.

"Oh come on, Daddy!" Dana blushed. "I like him just fine."

III.

"I was hoping that you'd stay more than a couple days."

Dana had burnt the toast again. She was scraping the knife across the toast. Butter wasn't finding its way onto the bread, but bits of black crisp were speckling the yellow butter that held steadfast to the knife. The whole process sounded like sandpaper against rock.

"I'd love to, honey, but I wouldn't wanna get in the way." Sol smiled and shook his head as he watched Dana futilely try to butter the unforgiving toast-like char.

"You won't get in the way, Daddy. I like having you around. You've already fixed the garbage disposal, and I didn't even know the car

was six-hundred-miles past due to change the oil." Dana revealed a toothy grin and put down the butter knife. She reached across the table and put her hand on top of her father's. "I need you around, Daddy."

Sol hadn't felt needed in months. Ever since Rose died he didn't have anyone to explain the finer workings of a water heater or pocket-watch too. Sol loved figuring out how things worked. He could spend hours reading Popular Mechanics and doodling schematics on napkins for simple household machinery. He'd taken apart the Grandfather clock in his living room and put it back together over a dozen times. He had always told Rose it was "to clean it," but he really just liked deconstructing and rebuilding from the ground up.

So put his other hand on top of Dana's and looked into her eyes. He smiled a smile of acceptance and submitted.

"I'll stay as long as you want me around. The minute I get too 'Father-knows-best' on you — kick me out. That understood?"

"Loud and clear, Daddy." Dana started to tear up as Sol squeezed her hand three times. It was code for "I love you."

Dana stood up and her father released her hand. She scooted her chair back from the breakfast table and carried the black toast over to the sink. She opened the cabinet below the sink and slid the toast off of the plate into the trashcan hidden under-

Sol from the City cont'd

neath. She dropped the plate into the metal-sink basin and turned around.

"Why don't we go to the mall today and buy you some shorts? You're going to need more summer clothes out here. Besides, all of the shorts you've got make you look like an old man."

Sol leaned back in his chair and picked up the sports page from the local newspaper. "Okay, and while we're out we can stop at IGA and pick up a brisket. You can invite over that nice Rabbi for dinner." Sol craned his neck and looked behind himself at Dana standing by the sink. "You can use your mom's recipe, the one with the brown sugar and onions. I'm sure he'd like that. It's how she got me to marry her." The sun coming in from the windows over the sink forced him to scrunch up his face and squint. The facial expression revealed

every wrinkle he had. He could only make out Dana's silhouette as she turned and placed her left hand on her hip, her right hand covered in soap suds from cleaning the dishes. Sol could tell she was smiling with enthusiastic embarrassment.

"I'll cook the brisket if you do the dishes."

Yellow Time

by Erika Larson

Well past the time
when the sun has left the day
and the skyshine watercolors
sink down,
down,
out of sight -
and well before the time
when the world becomes alone
and sound stops -
is the time when the moon
hangs so heavy
that he almost breaks the string,
and I could
press my fingers into his craters
almost.
It is his yellow time -

a time beautiful
because it refuses to last.
Only this time, tonight
the moon shed a tear,
one twinkling speck of light
lingering below him.
This time,
he is sadder.
It hurts him more that he cannot stay.
He makes a wish
that he could kiss the earth
and keep her beauty.
But the universe pulls him back,
and yellow time melts away
like the last strain of a lullaby
fading to silence.

Death of a Salesman's Wife

by Erika Larson

This wasn't the life we dreamed of, Charlotte,
When we were going to be actors,
And I photographed you
Red lips and chestnut curls.
You were still beautiful, Charlotte,
Born with a crossed eye,
And I was still brave
In the military uniform
I donned as the war ended.
We couldn't find anyone else to marry us
So we married each other.
I sold cleaning products door-to-door, Charlotte,
I was going to be a radio personality.
But we built a house
And we had three children,
An actress, a dancer, a musician.
I still photographed them
When Susie decided to clean teeth
Vicki worked in retail
And Greg became an insurance man.
Those pictures
Sure turned out nice.
You always complained
That I didn't pay attention to you, Charlotte,
But I stayed, didn't I?
I stayed, not like my father,
Who drank and drank
Then left us.
I stayed, Charlotte, and the photographs
Tell happy lies
Of ski vacations, rich Christmases
And golf days.
Look at that swing.
You gave up too soon, Charlotte,
Why couldn't you hang on just a little longer,
At least until
I was gone?
It's so hard to keep up with the dishes

Salesman's Wife cont'd

by Erika Larson

in this house.

Your heart was fine,

Your heart was healthy.

This wasn't the life I dreamed of Charlotte,

But you were still beautiful in those 8 by 10's

Red lips and chestnut curls.

This Side

by Erika Larson

This side of heaven is

green shining leaves turning

brown,

falling from lofty, exalted places

to the humble ground.

It is dark circles under eyes

and feet parading on

beaten paths.

It is the ten-minute climb

up the slippery snow hill,

breath clouding,

for the ten-second downhill rush.

It is good-byes and the-ends

and cleaning up the mess

of wrapping paper, plastic cups

and balloons.

This side of heaven is a

photo album.

It is dust collecting and paint

cracking.

It is wiping your mouth after a kiss.

It is washing dishes after a

feast of prime rib and herb-roasted

potatoes.

It is packing up your things,

closing the pool

and turning the last page of a good book.

This side of heaven

is only a small part of the story.

Juice

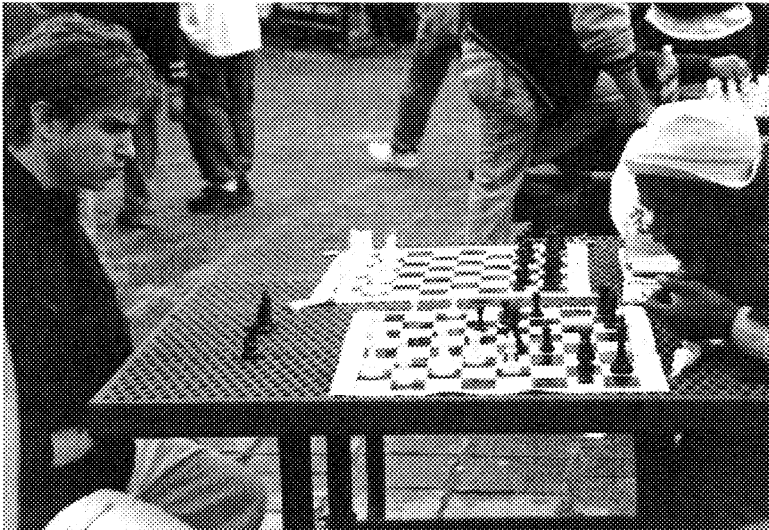
by Timothy Lockman

These tangerines, delicious to my eyes,
Compel me to unleash their orange growth;
To let them share their citrus mysteries
And sting the broken corners of my mouth.
So I unwrap the dimpled leather shell,
Peeling off the bitter for the sweet;
And drinking in the fresh and eager smell,
I find within a tangy teardrop meat.
For in the sections sleeps a sweet cocoon,
A tiny crescent in a larger pouch -
An embryo that's sweeter than its womb,
A bundle firm, delicious to the touch.

And O, how my eyes water at the sight:
These tender orange morsels of delight.

Chess Game

by Mike Scales



Facing Him

by Timothy Lockman

My young face fades,
Dissolving in the framed glass.
I thought I'd never
See it.
I'm me. I'm him.
His frozen spectacles watch me
Like binoculars.
I blink my eyes - the visage
Disappears. I focus them - I'm inside
My father's face again, squinting my
Eyes to make the difference. I
Measure in the ears, the brow,
The lips, and vacant forehead,
Half-expecting to feel
His bristles on my cheek. When I
Line up the noses, I add thirty-six years
To my life. My dark hair trembles
Into a reddish-gray.
His high school sweetheart interrupts
My gaze with a questioning
Half-smile.
I'm a shadow.
She's lost her name inside
The photograph.
Within the frozen image, a girl
Nods in agreement - no,
She's listening to music.

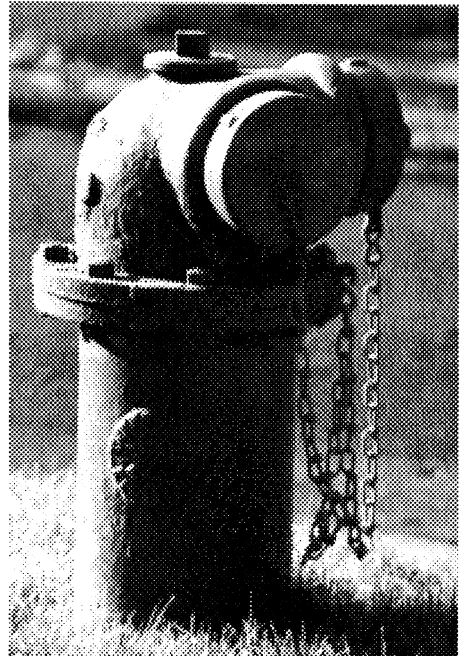
Shame

by Ron Lybarger

"Copper!"

The smell of hatred
Killing the best fowl
"I warned that damn dog
for the last time!" His nature,
that of a bird dog, Would
be the death of him.
The crack of the instrument
Barking disapproval
Circling twice collapse.
30/30 shell empty
ejected floating languidly
on the autumn breeze.
Dead eyes lolling tongue.
Shame.
Hide the evidence.
My brain remembers
Dad yelping commands.
"Go get me a trash bag!"
Makeshift body bag,
Hefty cinch sack.
"Here take the gun!"
Long walk back.
My eyes, they dare not weep.
White Ram truck,
a dog's hearse.
Silent trickle of water,
Black plastic splashes and sinks.
Giant oak leaves shake and fall
Say a prayer for a worthless dog?
I did.

Sunlit Hydrant by Mike Scales



11-22-63

by Reginald Mansfield

Jackie jumping half of the car for
John Fitzgeralds brains
Seeing at seven
Camelot die temporarily
The entire world cried

Jack Ruby just S-H-O-T
Lee Harvey Oswald
Communist Patsy that
Terribly Evil Worldwide
Mr. Nasty

etc.
etc.
etc.

Even within bland black and white
An absolute unreal sight
Jackie jumping
She's grasping
Trying to save the remnants of
her husbands shattered brain fragments

Oswald shot dead before explaining
In his filthy rotten fucking tracks
Like some Untouchables episode
The Death Of A President remaining

etc.
etc.
etc.

even within these eerie rabbit ears of
Black and White and Static
Our innocence Violated
Our Nation RAPED

11-22-63 cont'd

by Reginald Mansfield

Permanently etched
this formerly blissfully beautiful
Sunny day in downtown Dallas

etc.
etc.
etc.

Over what Over that
Goddamned Bay of Pigs Fiasco or perhaps
the exquisitely lovely yet equally dead
Marilyn Monroe

four corners

by Dave Moutray

it takes four corners
to make a room,
and this stubborn man
with my eyes, my blood,
but not my respect,
seems to fill each one

more calendars have passed
than words between us
and now,
he finds himself in a room
with a numbered door,
a chart dangling from his bed,
men dressed in white,
stethoscopes hanging over their
scrubs,
somber lines on their lips,
words edged in doubt

and then, a man in black

cross dangling from his neck,
offers him a chance
to take it all back:
the words, the silence,
to make the distance closer
but he had gone too far
and time is as unforgiving as I
even as his last breath
chokes out of his throat
I feel his cancer-blackened soul
leave the room, and now,
I can see three corners
from my own

regretting Pam

by Dave Moutray

this beautiful dream
leaving a mark, like a tattoo
etched in my slumbering mind
where you are tucking me in
kissing my forehead
smiling, as if the world is right
but you pause,
just before flipping the light
was it a sight,
or just another deep breath,
and the deep breaths are becoming few
and between them is a nothing so loud
it echoes off my dreams

the hour is late with night
and I'm given to the thought
that makes her sharp
in my mind
leaving scratches, like memories
but to regret
an investment as rich
as those three words
is better than remembering
the worse is actually the wear
and the slow tearings
of these childhood memories
haunting not just night,
but days

and so I choose to call you Pam
so please return the apron,
the black hills earrings,
the Mother's Day cards —
they are somebody else's
another woman somewhere
is missing her apron
her ears are noticeably vacant
as is her mantle,

regretting Pam cont'd

by Dave Moutray

with spots reserved for cards
never received
she is the woman
I was meant to dream
it is her hand that tucks
her lips that kiss
with a smile lacking
the pause, the sigh,
and the deep breaths

Chicago Summertime

by Lisa Sarm

The smell of summer
Summer in Chicago
Burning barbecue sauce on dirty patio grills
Pounds of sidewalk chalk pulverized into concrete by tiny fingers
Where we all meet, our feet clad in sandals.
Meeting at night,
We dig a hole in the sand and drink some more discount beer.
Sand castles spreading across the beachfront.
The slapping of sandals stomping sidewalk back home from the beach.
Remember Mom callig us to eat?

Fruit salad
Flies and fruit flies flying everywhere
Mosquitoes and lightning bugs create clouds in heavy August air.
Neighborhood kids gang up, gang up to play tag.
THE FIRE HYDRANT IS BASE! NO TAG-BACKS!
ONE-TWO-THREE, GET OFF MY FATHER'S APPLE TREE!
Mom gingerly picks blue spruce needles out of already scabbed knees.
She soothes through the peroxide stings.
Weary kids wearing stained T's
Greyish band-aids on tanned knees.
Even in the suburbs,
us kids can hear the hum of the city

The Hands of Time

by Jessica Shekleton

Her hand never held mine.
It never guided me,
Reassured me,
Clapped for me
Or congratulated me.
Her hand confused me.

Her hand was fierce.
It was cold,
Striking,
It was hot.
Her hand meant danger.
Her hand meant pain.

Her hand created scars.
They never healed.
Her hand grew older,
And tired.
Her hand was alone.

Her hand got sick.
I offered her mine.
Her hand retreated,
Rejected.
Her hand was ashamed.

Her hand lost its energy,
It's hair.
It could hold little,
But it carried a lot.
Her hand began its decline.

My hand holds hers now.
It's not quite comfortable,
Downright awkward.
But her hand needs someone's
And I've always longed for hers.

Her hand is out of time,
And mine has time to spare.

Her hand is cold,
Mine warm.

Her hand will slip away
And mine will feel empty,
Again.

An Appointment

by Josh Sopiartz

I think, "He's blind you fool,
Not clumsy."

Though in vain conceals his stumbling
And whistles to remind himself,
Indeed he is alive.

And struggling.

He leads.
I am footsteps from behind him,
A dullness on the floor.
He walks, feeling,
His shoe has come untied.

He stops, profanely bends to lace it,
No more whistling,
Gives a sight,
Fakes a smile to the wall.
Stands and bumbles to his office,
Where some crooken pictures hang.

A small, black boy stands,
In gravelly old photographs.
A seeing child,
In woolen gray suspender shorts
Smiles shyly at the blind man,
The man he has become.

With jazz drums, horns and vocals in the backrgound,
He sits listening,
Slowly smoking.
My voice,
My reading
Like a monotonous bass line.

Our Fates and Old Men's Glasses

by Josh Sopiartz

You, who once walked with us,
Are now planted in the ground.
In the wet, gray ground
Becoming nothing more than bones,
A cheap blue suit, forgotten.

I met you,
Stumbling on your overgrown.
Traced your name, your dates,
In the wet, gray limestone.
Bearing witness to your pale bouquet.

A solitary plastic rose, wilted, fading,
Pink as your skin once was.
Your Korean made, American flag,
And your glasses. Broken now,
Left to bear October's wind and rain.

Above the stone that hides your face,
Beneath my foot as I left that place.

"I apologize to your dear ghost,
"But still you miss a lens.
"Take mine as some recompense,
"We'll call it even then."

"And tell me where do glasses go
"When we mortals meet our ends.
"Lying dead and broken, cold
"To never see again."

An Apple Orchard Picnic

by Josh Sopiartz

I would paint you had I canvas,
A brush,
With purple, furnace flavored passion.
Sly golden arms
Draped delicate above whispered brows
And raven eyed hair.
Dark as the unknown,
Colorless like time.
Every stroke a breath stolen from the small number allowed.
Every straight line unending, every curve indefinite.
Every minute of youth shown with rosy-cheeked arrogance.

These hands possess nothing of a painter's
But eyes, to the beholder true.
You I remember smiling on Sundays
Lifting acorns from the forest's filthy floor.
We spread to love each other.
Your sun soaked skin dancing with the crimson sky
As light burns upon red apple tree leaves.
I fumble.
Remember every touch.
Every splash of the river's waves
Played against the humming jet's white tail.

We breathed the bumblebee's efforts.
Black and orange paper birds flitted
To the rhythm of Earth's drum.
Flittering. Fluttering. Stop and go.
Much like us, a tangled twosome
To the rhythm, till we're gone.

November Grays

by Joe Webb

When the sky is as gray as the color of nothing,
And there is meaning in nothing you seek;
When the leaves have grown tired of hanging on for the trees,
And the rain is like ice on your cheek;

When the ponds and the lakes are too stubborn to freeze,
But they're too cold for birds to set down;
When grass on the ground is exhausted with green,
And instead turns a dull shade of brown;

When the robins have gone 'til the middle of March,
And have left only squirrels for the seed;
When you're certain inside there is no feeling left,
And make cuts just to see if they bleed;

When the year's stretched so long there is nothing to do,
Because what's worth it is already done;
When you know deep inside that the snow fast approaches,
And you wish you could just see the sun;

When talks of Thanksgiving and your brother's great job,
Make you head down to Red's for a beer;
When you know how I'm feeling at this very moment,
Then the November Grays have appeared.

The Ax

by Janet Windeguth

It was Monday night and closing in on the 2:00 a.m. bar curfew. The day had dawned clear and hot with the New Mexico sun blazing down - leeching color and life from below. The weatherman on channel eight predicted "a steamy night with lows in the mid-seventies and little to no chance of thunderstorms" but the murky cast to the sky proved the folly of listening to someone who drew smiling suns and frowning clowns for a living.

Bernie walked down the alley, kicking a few empty beer bottles and the occasional syringe out of his way. Once he had to stop and disengage a condom from the bottom of his shoe where it dangled, chewing-gum like. When he was growing up, this neighborhood was filled with middle-class American families. Now, dealers and whores peddled their goods among the ghosts of lemonade stands.

A thin girl, barely eighteen and clad in a threadbare dress, approached. She touched her hair, making sure the greasy strands were in order.

"Lookin' for a date, handsome?"

Bernie smiled. "Not tonight, honey." The girl's face fell.

"You have much luck tonight?" he continued.

"Been out here since ten and hain't had s'much eza nibble."

"What's the going rate?"

"Fifty hou'." Bernie pulled out a wallet and began peeling of bills.

"Here. Two hundred. Go find yourself a decent meal and get some sleep."

Waving off the girl's protests he pushed the fat wallet back into his pocket and walked on. Bernie was at that dangerous time of middle-pushing-old age. What was left of his hair was a dull gray, matching his eyebrows and the bristly tufts sprouting wing-like from his ears. A red bulbous nose spoke of his drinking habits; his rumpled appearance vouched for his personal habits. His freshly polished shoes clashed with the rest of his outfit.

Bernie had a thing about his shoes. His mother had always said that a man was judged by his shoes. Never mind character or physical appearance - to Mrs. Kaison shoes were what counted. In a world where sneakers and loafers were the norm, Bernie's buddies were always kidding him about his "Mary Janes" and asking "Do black patent leather shoes really reflect up?" Bernie didn't care. His mother had died four years ago and the perpetually shiny shoes were his personal memorial to her. Right now, those shoes were heading towards one of his favorite spots.

The bar was housed in a squat, windowless gray building. When it first opened Addie Thompson, fed up with the booze-

The Ax cont'd

by Janet Windeguth

windowless gray building. When it first opened, Addie Thompson, fed up with the boozehound ways of her husband, Robert, chucked an ax at him. The ax missed Bobby and buried itself in the doorjamb. The owner wasn't happy, but bowed to popular demand and named his place "The Ax." The only outside decorations were spray-painted calling signs left by neighborhood gangs and the occasional dried smear of urine from those too drunk or high to bother about indoor plumbing. Bernie stepped over the crumbled remains of the stairs and pushed open the wooden door replete with plywood patches. The air in The Ax was always tainted with a peculiar mix of peanuts and beer. Bernie often wondered if there was some sort of peanut perfume Max used to overpower the odors of stale vomit and urine. Once inside, he hesitated, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the non-light provided by a handful of bare bulbs. Bern made his way to the bar, pushing chairs and tables out of his way.

Everything in the place was black: the paneling on the walls, the tables and chairs, the floor, even the bartender/owner. The only thing breaking the monotony of the walls was the huge gilded mirror behind the bar. The mirror itself sported its share of scars. Bits and pieces were chipped from the edges and hairline cracks scuttled from one end to the

other. There was a hold that was rumored to have been made by a bullet, but Max neither denied nor confirmed the stories.

Max had owned The Ax, as its regulars named it, for fifteen years. He had been a bouncer for the previous owner. At six foot eight and 250 pounds (no beer belly on him), he made the ideal security system. When the owner retired, Max bought him out. The last he heard, his old boss had relocated to Chicago and now spent his days ensconced in grandchildren up to his knees. Max looked up from polishing a glass as Bernie eased himself onto one of the more stable-looking stools. With his bulk he didn't want to chance having a stool disintegrate under him.

"Bloody Mary, Max." The man nodded and plunked the glass he'd been holding onto the counter. While Max mixed, Bernie swiveled in his chair to survey his fellow barflies. To his left was an elderly derelict crying into his beer. As if it weren't already watered down enough, Bernie thought. No one was on his right. The tables were mostly empty save a few small knots of men. Women didn't darken the door of The Ax very often. There wasn't a house rule forbidding women patrons but somehow the dirt and dark just didn't appeal to the fairer sex.

"Slow night."

"It's a Monday. That'll be

The Ax cont'd

by Janet Windeguth

three for the drink."

Bernie slid a ten across the bar. "Keep the change."

Max nodded his thanks, stuffing the ten into his pocket. He didn't bother with such niceties as cash registers. Drinks were sold in even dollar amounts. On a full night Max's pockets resembled fat cantaloupes jutting off his hips. Tonight there was just one kiwi-sized bulge. Bernie sipped at his drink, testing. Max waited.

"Just right," Bernie confirmed.

The bartender slapped the bar with his towel in response and moved down to the old man and his mostly-tears drink. Bernie watched Max for a minute before checking his watch. Half past one. Where the hell was she? Brenda had said one o'clock sharp. Just like that woman to be late. Shit, she would probably be late to her own funeral. He had told her that once, back when they were still married. They had been invited to dinner at his parents' house and were almost an hour late because Brenda couldn't find her other shoe. After the divorce she'd confided in him that his funeral would definitely be worth being on time for.

Bernie snorted. He hadn't heard from her in five years, then one day last week he'd answered his phone and there she was on the other end, asking to meet him at The Ax "as soon as possible." Bernie wondered

why The Ax, of all places. Max would probably faint if a skirt ever brushed the doorway. Bernie checked his watch again. Quarter til. He began to worry. This was cutting it close, even for Brenda. Maybe he should call her. Max spoke suddenly.

"Last call boys, come on and fill up once more." No one moved except the teary fellow down the way, and he only blew his nose on a bar napkin and took another sip of his drink. Max turned to Bernie.

"What's gnawing on your balls? You've been eyeing that door like you expected a snake to come through." A snake. How appropriate. His ex was like a viper—strong, quick to anger, and poisonous. He shrugged away Max's concern.

"Just jumpy I guess."

"Yeah, well, I close in a few minutes. You'll have to jump elsewhere."

"All right. Hit me again?"

He tapped his empty glass and produced another ten to back his request. Max exchanged glass for cash and left Bernie to puzzle over his ex again.

Why had Brenda called him? Did she need something? Money? He had given her a generous settlement, but with Brenda you never knew. She had been known to blow upwards of a thousand bucks on a pair of shoes. The first time he had met her—at the Christmas party his precinct gave every year—Brenda was

The Ax cont'd

by Janet Windeguth

wearing an eye-catching pair of emerald green half-boots that could have fed Jesus, Mary, and Joseph for a year. Not to mention the twelve disciples. Brenda was just an assistant to the District Attorney back then. Bernie was tending the make-shift bar, and she'd ordered a White Lady. The rest, as the tired cliché goes, was history. Bernie shook his head. This was getting him nowhere. He gulped at his drink and choked.

"Jesus, Max, you trying to kill me?" A glass of water slid down the bar in the style of old Westerns.

"I thought you liked it strong."

"Stong booze, not strong spice!" Bernie seized the water. He was still drinking when the door opened and she walked in. Max flipped the lights up a notch.

"All right, bar's closed. Go home and sleep it off or get drunk somewhere else." The handful of occupants got up one by one and started for the door, Bernie's bar buddy bringing up the rear. They gave Brenda a wide berth that spoke of recognition but not respect, like stepping over an old dog. She walked straight to the bar, weaving carefully between table and chair. God forbid she get anything on her suit, Bernie thought as she sat down next to him.

Physically speaking, Brenda McDonald and Bernard Kaison were

the embodiment of "opposites attract." Where he was short, she was 5' 9" in her stocking feet. Add to this the 3" heels she was wearing and there was almost a foot of height difference between them. Brenda had long peroxide blonde hair pinned into a bun so tight Bernie half-expected to see her face pulled back from the strain. Bernie's eye's were watery blue, hers icy cobalt. He wore rumpled corduroys and a spotted pole, she was turned out in a red Marshal Fields suit in impeccable condition. She laid her purse—a tight little streamlined number—onto the bar. The description of the purse was often extended to the woman herself. The purse, however, did not take umbrage to its description. Brenda did.

"Bar's closed, Brenda. Didn't you notice?" Brenda ignored her ex.

"White Lady, please." Max didn't protest this after-hours order but placed a glass before her and gingerly took the five she offered, adding it to the rest of the wad lining his pockets. She took a sip of her drink and nodded.

"Come on, Brenda. Max wants to go home. You're an hour late as it is."

"Oh do sit down, Bernard. You were late often enough during our marriage. It is my turn now."

"Me, late? That's a laugh. Max—"

The Ax cont'd

by Janet Windeguth

"No sweat Bernie. You're a regular customer. Damn good one too. I've got some stuff to do in back anyway. Let yourselves out when you're done." Max vanished through the swinging doors that led to "the back." Bernie suspected Max's "stuff to do" included the bottle of Jack Daniel's in his desk.

"I told you he would not mind."

"What do you want, Brenda? And why here? This ain't exactly your kind of place."

"What do I want? The same thing any nice girl wants, I suppose. A career, a nice house with a picket fence. Two point five children. How did they come up with a point five child anyway? Perhaps it covers a pet. Yes, that must be it." She paused to study the play of light through her glass as a faint rumble of thunder sounded. Bernie managed to drain the rest of his drink without choking and smacked the glass down on the bar. Brenda started slightly, then frowned.

"Cut the crap, Brenda. Do you want money? I've got better things to do with my time than sit here listening to Ms. District Attorney pontificate on the—"

"Damn it Bernard. Can you just shut up for five minutes? You want to know why I wanted to meet you? I could have just given you the news over the phone, but..." Brenda

shrugged and let the rest of her sentence drift away.

"Give me what news? Brenda, what is it? Is it the kids?"

"No, no, the kids are fine."

"Then what?"

"I went to the doctor—"

"It's not mine."

Brenda looked puzzled.

"What? Oh, not *that* kind of a doctor, Bernard! A specialist. He drew blood for something or other."

"What did it show?" Bernie watched what Brenda was building up to. He hated listening to her courtroom-style storytelling.

"I...I've got AIDS, Bernard." She faced him directly for the first time. When Bernie didn't say anything, she added "That's Auto-Immune Deficiency Syndrome."

"Christ, I know what AIDS stands for, Brenda. I'm just... I don't understand. We took tests before we married. We both passed. We were together for ten years. You must have been sleeping with some pretty rude customers after we split. What do you want me to do about it? Bernie hated to sound like a hard ass but sometimes Brenda didn't leave him any choice. Brenda laughed, a harsh sound from the back of her throat. Another rumble of thunder, closer this time, followed immediately after.

"You pompous ass." She said it almost regretfully. "Think, Bernard."

The Ax cont'd

by Janet Windeguth

"What's with this 'Bernard' business all the sudden? 'Bernie' was always good enough during our marriage."

"'Bernie' speaks of a familiarity we no longer share."

"Oh, Christ." Bernie rolled his eyes. Brenda ignored him.

"The symptoms of AIDS do not show up until eight to ten years later. I could have slept with Magic Johnson every night for the past five years and it still wouldn't show."

"What, exactly, are you trying to say?"

"Some detective you are, Bernard. I'll spell it out for you. Remember all those lonely nights you spent away from home, doing your little detective things? I didn't find them lonely." Brenda shook her head. "Poor Bernard. You always prided yourself on the fact that you were such an observant little gumshoe. But you never figured out what was going on in your own bed." Brenda drained her White Lady and set the glass next to Bernie's. His jaw worked for a minute, trying to summon enough spit to speak. Brenda waited. A crack of thunder broke the silence before grumbling away to die in the silence.

"You goddamned bitch! You lying cheating backstabbing manipulating slut!" Bernie picked up his glass and hurled it at the mirror. The resulting crash punctuated the "slut" comment perfectly. Not satisfied with

that, Bernie threw Brenda's glass too. It made a gentler crash before sliding down the wall to join the fragments with Bernie's.

"Jesus, Bernard!" Brenda swore before pulling a cigarette out of her purse and tilting the pack towards Bernie. He slapped it away, and sent it spinning across the surface of the bar. Brenda shrugged and brought the tip of a lit match to her cigarette. Inhaling deeply she shook out the match and turned to Bernie.

"Do not be so upset, darling. It is not like we are still married after all."

"What the hell do you mean, 'don't be so upset'? I just found out my wife of 15 years has been cheating one me!"

"Ex-wife, Bernard."

"And stop calling me 'Bernard' damn it!"

"The fact that you just found out can hardly be considered my fault. You are the detective, after all." Bernie took a deep breath, inhaling courage as well as a healthy dose of second-hand smoke. He decided to try a new tactic.

"If you have AIDS, then the children..."

"No."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I did not cheat on you until they were born." A flash of lightning sent purple fingers seeping underneath the door outside before disap-

The Ax cont'd

by Janet Windeguth

pearing again.

"Oh, well, thank you so fucking much for your sense of decency." He rose to his feet. Brenda still had a few inches on him, though she hadn't moved from her stool.

"Decency? Do you call it decent to leave your wife alone for God knows how many hours? I might as well have been a widow for all the time you spent at home. Day in and day out with only Mattie and Jo for company." Brenda shook her head, puffs of smoke exiting her mouth in time to her words.

"You make it sound like I was gone for weeks and months at a time. What was the longest time I was ever gone? Twelve hours? Fifteen?" Bernie sighed and shook his head.

"Hours are endless to the lonely, Bernard. And the scared."

"What could you possibly have been scared of? We had a state of the art security system, deadbolts, locks on the shatterproof windows, dogs..."

"I was not scared for myself, I was scared for you! Do you have any idea how hard waiting can be?"

"How did it start?" Bernie's voice was flat, matching his expression. He slumped back down onto the stool.

"I went out one night to find you. Left the kids with Mrs. Holmes and started searching the bars. I came here last." Bernie blinked.

"Here?" He was dimly aware of Max hovering at the door at the other end of the bar, towel slung over his shoulder.

"Max said he had not seen you. I had a few drinks at each bar I stopped at—"

"Brenda wasn't in shape any to drive, so I saw her home myself." Max came to stand beside Brenda, laying a hand on her shoulder. The two exchanged a look before turning back to Bernie.

"It was you! You were the one fucking my wife. Max how could you do this? How many years have I been coming to The Ax? Five years? Ten? And all this time you and her...?" Bernie's voice broke off. He jumped to his feet and swung at Max, who ducked before knocking Bernie to the floor.

"If you ever take a swing at me again I will rip off your balls and shove them so far down your throat you'll be shitting sperm for a week. You've been a good customer, Bernie, but I think I can get along without you. Get out."

"Get tested for AIDS, Bernie. After all, you never know what curveballs life can throw at you, right?" Bernie pushed open the door and lurched outside. Overhead, the first drops of rain began to fall.

The Old Porch Swing

by Joe Webb

The old green swing
On the old wood porch
With loosened boards
Held his attention

For years he sat there
Gathering thoughts
Collecting wisdom
Counting stars

It was held up
By
Just two strings
Of old rope gathered from a barn

Evidently
Thought the man
My thought must not
Have been too heavy

Green Machine

by Qynn McCrory

*High School Writing
Contest Winner from
Hustonville High School

All day long the steel treads bit the ground.
Hill over hill, day after day, that green machine popped.
But time passes,
and what once was strong becomes weak.
Now that Johnny popper sits,
its steel wheels half rotted from the mud.
The green machine has rusted brown.
But time passes,
and what once was strong becomes weak.
That old green machine got stripped down.
Fresh with pain, and a lot of work,
the two cylinder is firing agin.
Roy was proud of the transformation made
of the green machine.
But time passes,
and what once was strong becomes weak.
Roy has been gone for two years now,
and again the green machine sits;
riderless, and alone.
Perhaps for nostalgia,
perhaps for a link with his lost Granddad,
a sixteen year old boy asks his father to help him fire the green machine.
The tank, once filled with kerosene
has been replaced by gasoline.
The plugs are cleaned,
the oil changed.
And what was weakening became strong.
That green machine did not for the first, or the twenty first spin,
but the cylinders did pop again.
And I thought I saw my Granddad Roy sitting on the green machine,
ready to drive it again.

My Little Pony

by **J. Benjamin Blount**

*High School Writing
Contest Winner from
Oakland High School

There I sat, astraddle the giant creature. "Giddyuppp!" I cried, trying desperately to get the horse to move. Nothing was working. I slid my way off the saddle and stood close. The horse's ear felt smooth and warm as I picked up and leaned close. "Come on, baby," I whispered softly. "You've got to do this for me." I was hoping all I would have to do is ask politely. So, I added a "please."

I could smell the icy leather of the saddle as I put my first foot into the stirrup. I swung my other leg over and felt myself slide gently into place. It was as if I was meant to be there. A fly landed atop the horse's ear. A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead and into my eye. I felt it burn, yet, I sat calmly in the saddle, unwavering. I gave her one final pat and watched the dust rise off her back. The sharp, musty smell rose until I lost it in the afternoon sun. "Let's do this."

I pressed my heel deep into the horse's side. Still, she wouldn't move. She was stubborn as a mule. I kicked her harder this time.

My mom came out of Wal-Mart and said, "Jake, what are you doing? You haven't put in your quarter yet."

Biographies

Amee Bohrer - is an enthusiastic elementary education and English major who has been absolutely infatuated with language and poetry since the seventh grade. This is her ecstatic second publication in the Vehicle. She thanks her fantastic English profs, Chris Hanlon and John Martone, for their encouragement to pursue English, writing, and her poetry.

Aubrey Bonanno - Is a senior sociology major and creative writing minor. She is engaged to Jason Wagoner, a senior history major. They both hope to someday help bring the issues of injustice, intolerance, and ignorance to the forefront of American politics and aid in fostering the growth of international peace.

Natalie Esposito - I am a junior English major.

Christie Jean Hall - Is a senior English major with a flair for poetry.

Jeremy Hartzell - I am a senior English major. After college, I plan on becoming a costumed crimefighter. I will be a beacon of hope to the common citizen and a shadowy figure of justice to the common criminal.

Erika Larson - is a senior English major.

Timothy Lockman - I'm a senior English major. Besides writing and reading, I like music; I am in a Christian praise and worship band with the EIU Wesley Foundation. I've written a few songs of my own and done a couple amateur recording projects. I thank God for the gift of creativity; its one of the greatest feelings I know to produce something out of my own imagination.

Ron Lybarger - I am a Charleston native. I am in my junior year. I plan to be a secondary English teacher with a minor in creative writing. I will have a son within a few weeks and I have been married a year and a half. Wish me luck. Peace.

Biographies

Ron Lybarger - I am a Charleston native. I am in my junior year. I plan to be a secondary English teacher with a minor in creative writing. I will have a son within a few weeks and I have been married a year and a half. Wish me luck. Peace.

Reginald Mansfield - Is an English major at UIS and a history major at Eastern.

Lisa Sarm - Still likes cheese. She plans on getting a Master's of Library Science. Then she will have enough money to buy all the cheese she wants, and she will be happy. She also loves her mom.

Mike Scales - Having only a couple of photo classes (at Lake Land Community College and Eastern), I don't consider myself an expert photographer. I mostly just point and shoot what's in front of me. I think that I have a good eye for turning normal, everyday scenes into cool-looking pictures.

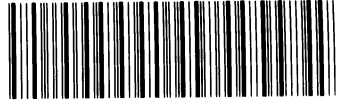
Jessica Shekleton - I'm a junior Family and Consumer Sciences major with an English from Arlington Heights, Ill. Creative writing seems to be the only way to clearly express what's in my mind and heart.

Josh Sopiartz - Is a senior history major set to graduate this May.

Joe Webb - Is an English major.

Janet Windeguth - Is a senior English major graduating in Spring 2002.

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“If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the ‘Ode to a Grecian Urn’ is worth any number of old ladies.”

-William Faulkner