

MANUSCRIPTS

SPRING 1991

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frozen word

this child likes to pray at night, i am told.
i kneel beside him, his bed an altar,
his requests unintelligible to me, except in snatches.
jesus. mommy. daddy. amen.

once
i listened to this child with reverence,
with longing, desiring to love You first
without ego.
i longed not to desire answers or evidence, i longed
not to think about now,
i longed to come to You like a child,
like this child,
unfettered by grief, filled
with joy.

and this child remains forever beside me,
forever redeemed, forever
unintelligible, and
forever removed
from me
and from my grief, grief which asks questions,
does not trust, which seeks itself, and which taints
the memory
of a child on his knees.

for i'm a child no longer, and
tender memories curl up at the edges
like leaves in autumn,
when death begins to stalk the weak,
the temporal, and
coming to You now is like
a leaf in autumn, which
knows it is stalked, decaying, and
dying,
and yet
is unable to go on living
because dying
is what leaves do in autumn.

i am hardened
by this prologue to winter,
by the burial of Your word
deep beneath the freezing soil,
where autumn leaves decay and will continue
to decay.

--Shannon Hicks

This Morning

This morning an Italian eight-year old
With a British accent
Walked to school singing.
He was not a normal eight-year old.

Launching stones off a polished shoe.
He scuffed the sidewalk
Like little gentlemen were forbidden to do
Behind the brick walls
Of the Catholic parochial school.

Distantly grass danced free
In a field while the crickets
Played Mozart's fortieth symphony
(which they composed),
And feeling drawn toward this unbroken
Virgin frontier,
He removed those refined shoes
And socks
And scrambled off the pavement.

Ran for his life he ran
Propelled by the pressure
From the pavement sucked in
By new discovery he fell
Uncontrollably before himself
While the whirling blades
Of grass the trees the shrubs the yellow
blur
Of dandelions ran just as fast
In the opposite direction.

But
The end of breath
And innocence
Stopped him in his tracks
While a tense leaf with its veins showing
Crouched hideously and desperately
Over a few pieces of grass
As if shielding them
From the shadow of his footstep.

The Sicilian schoolboy watched
His clear conscience drip
gently
Into the muddied puddles at his feet,
And paralyzed by afterthought stood
Perfectly crooked for balance.
One step more
Would upset the balance.

Sisters

Two girls stare at me from a dusty frame,
sharing a bath they've often shared.
One sandy-haired, the other chestnut,
their skin glistening with beads of water,
legs twined like the braids they wear.
No separating this pair.
They smile knowingly at each other.

Toys and dolls set aside now,
time to grow with the restless clock.
No longer the children in that old enamel tub,
but two girls giggling about the boys,
and women gossiping over the phone.

Now they stand together at the altar,
one in white, the other in black
mourning the wedding.

--Trina Hall

His eyes tugged at his head
Til he turned to behold the broken
Blades of grass
Beneath his footsteps.

They must have been
Willing to make the sacrifice
For him
Because they too
Stopped running

--Mark A. Clements

Mad Moments

The song of the lonely
Is as a Banshees wail,
Agonizingly and depressingly
hollow.

The cell of the mind,
Loneliness, slowly
Tightens about the soul,
Menacing sanity's horde.

Loneliness, like a siren,
Lures the unexpected
Into a trap that cannot
Be escaped.
As with a Venus Flytrap,
Loneliness engulfs the victim and
He can no longer back out.

Silent! O Mind of Mine Be Silent!

My feelings are always confusing,
[Anger and love happiness and hate,]
A turmoil, all consuming.
[Each a viper but can it be fate?]
I know my own emotions,
[Lethal, cold, deadly, unsure]
The toxic potion of Man's Notions.
[But if it is fate, there can be no cure]
My mind is too clouded to be untrue
[Why must I be condemned by fates gone mad?!]
This maddening cloud is more than a ruse
[Do I have free will, now, if I ever had?]
I am doomed to madness, for I must never love.
Am I to be punished by unseen Gods from above.

This madness is silent
And my mind bleeds no more.

--Apollo J. Masterson

Because They Were Open

Jim Zeigler

It was the way their eyes rolled open that really bothered Jake. Other than that he could stomach it. He needed the money. Everytime he pried a lid open and started to roll a body out, the eyes always managed to flip open. For just a second he'd see white and then the body would smack face down into the damp dirt. The men were the worst. Dark suits blended into the night broken only by Jake's dull yellow lantern. Their bright white eyes flipped open and seemed to almost dance in the air before plunging into the damp soil.

He never got completely used to the eyes, but it got better. He learned to flip the coffin fast and nearly all the way over so the body would fall straight out instead of slowly rolling. Always, his first couple shovels of dirt landed right on the head.

With a thrust of his knee, Jake buried his spade neatly to the handle in the fresh ground. The tombstone read:

Eli Worthington

RIP

April 7, 1912-

November 3, 1990

The letters were deep black, darker than the sky that night and they sprang forth from the light gray granite. The soft earth, just dug this morning, gave easily and Jake was glad because this was his last job tonight. He quickly emptied the grave, carefully digging out the dirt around the base of the casket so as not to scratch it. The lid was really tight this time. The casket handle dug into Jake's hands as he tugged at it. In the cool air Jake could see his breath. He began to sweat. He could feel it beading on his forehead and streaking down his cheeks. He let it. He was intent on the coffin, his gaze fixed on the surface where he imagined the head must be. His feet slipped in the mud and he nearly gave up but then with a loud pop the lid flew up, carrying Jake's body forward and down to rest crossways on the open casket. His heaving chest hovered inches above the motionless body. He sucked a musty taste like urine into his lungs. For a moment nothing moved except his chest and then, as if waking from a bad dream and not knowing where he was, Jake sprang from the coffin. Leaning with his back against the grave wall, Jake peered down into the dim casket. Eli's eyes were already open. The mist stopped pouring from Jake's mouth as he stared into those blank eyes, so white against the body's face

and suit. Minutes passed and nothing moved until Jake began to feel lightheaded from not breathing and, with a deep breath, turned to the side as if not wanting to face the man in the coffin.

Gathering himself, Jake bent at the foot of the coffin to grasp both sides and with his well-practiced technique flipped it completely over. Removing the coffin, he couldn't help but stare at the back of the body. No longer perfectly arranged with folded hands and neat creases in the suit, the body sprawled in the mud. One leg bent out at an unnatural position. It certainly wouldn't have been uncomfortable had he been alive. Jake couldn't stop thinking about those eyes; wide open and pressed into the soft dirt. He stooped and pulled the leg straight, pressing the ankles together. Then, with the same deft movement used on the coffins, he righted the body. The eyes glowed even more brightly from the now dirty face, and Jake froze at the sight of the body staring up at him. His damp breath escaped his mouth in small burts of cloud that quickly dissipated. When a wrinkled brown leaf fell onto the coffin and scratched down its length, Jake sprang forward. He seized the coffin and flipped it from the grave raising a cloud of dirt which quickly resettled leaving a fine mist of brown over the body. Eli's jacket had been pulled low on his shoulders and only his fingers extended from the bottom of his sleeves. In the dirt the fingers looked like eight giant white slugs. Jake squinted down and began to pry at a finger with the tip of his spade. He held the very end of the handle to stand as far away as possible. To his horror he succeeded in tearing away a chunk of skin from Eli's last finger. A silvery liquid welled in the cut and flowed under the other fingers in a puddle of spittle. Drawing the spade up to his face he stared with fascination at the morsel of moist pink flesh which quivered at the tip of the shovel. With a glance to the body and then back to the flesh, Jack lifted the shovel high over his head like an axe and, with a cry, flung the shovel forward out of his grasp. With his eyes, he followed it end over end beyond the toppled casket until it disappeared in the dark and landed with a crash into some brush.

From his pocket, Jake produced a now-gray handkerchief and, kneeling next to the body, secured it to the damaged finger. After tightening the knot he remained kneeling with the hand resting lifeless in his own. It was ice and he shuddered at

the thought of being like this himself some day.

"Cold, eh? Yeah, I bet. Air's gettin' brisk 'is time a year. They oughta buried you in a coat. Not just a jacket," Jake said, pausing to let the words sink in. He wondered at the sound of his own voice and realized that he hadn't spoken since early morning when he'd agreed to retrieve coffins for Mr. Adams, the cemetery owner.

With a cough, Jake cleared his throat. He bowed his head, "Listen, I'm real sorry 'bout the finger. I just. Don't know what I was thinkin'. You know, I ain't spoke to no one since mornin'. Till you, that is, and you're dead. Nuts, huh? Talkin' ta dead people. What's wrong with you, Jake?" For a reply he looked up into Eli's eyes. He folded the arm over the body's stomach and leaned forward to peer closely into the dead man's face. Inches apart, his breath steamed all over Eli's face and Jake could see nothing. Even Eli's eyes fled behind the smokey cloud. He held his breath and the eyes seemed to jump out at him as the air cleared. On impulse he pressed two fingers to Eli's neck. Nothing. He held his fingers under the nose. Nothing. Jake released his breath slowly, making a thin stream of cloud as he sat back on the ground.

Clasping his hands together, Jake rested his knees against the inside of his elbows, pulling his legs up toward his body. He rocked back and forth as he looked at Eli.

"A man can go crazy talkin' inside his own head all day, you know." Jake stopped rocking and bent his head down to peer at the body in the dark.

The body didn't respond.

With a shrug, Jake continued, "That's right. It ain't natural, but I'm the only one works here on grounds. I won't let the weeds grow over ya. And nights, some nights after funerals, I stay late and dig you all up again. Then I take the coffin and put you back. Never miss 'em and Mr. Adams give me \$50. Cash. I guess he resells 'em. Ain't right I suppose, but if it weren't me it'd be somebody else. Fifty bucks, right?"

"How 'bout you? Married, Eli? Bet you had kids. All grown by now. Tomorrow. Same boat as me. You won't even get to talk to Mr. Adams. That's probably best. He ain't nice. I hear him making fun a families come here for funerals. Women crying and all, and he'll sit in his office watching 'em and laughing at what they're wearing." Jake shook his head from side to side slowly and looked down again into the dirt as if to think. With a cough he pursed his lips and let the spit drain from his mouth in a long lump that bubbled in a pile on the dirt too moist to absorb it. He stared at it and then scratched his heel in it until it mixed with the dirt and was gone. In the distance a bell tolled and Jake looked at the watch on his arm. He had to punch the

button three times before the light would show him the time, 12:15 a.m. He had to get home.

"Listen, Eli. I gotta be going but I'll tell you what. You don't tell Mr. Adams and I'll put ya back in your box. Deal?" He paused halfway to standing and listening. "O.K.? All right, be right back," he said. Jake leaped from the grave and dragged the coffin back. He lowered it sideways next to the body. Dropping into the hole, Jake laid Eli into the casket. He was light and Jake lifted him up and in comfortably.

Once the lid was on, Jake went searching for his shovel. It didn't take long. Thrust almost entirely into a bush, it took three good yanks to pull it from the branches. Twenty minutes later Jake was taking the long walk through town to his solitary trailer. "Can't believe I stayed so late talking to a dead guy," he muttered to himself, "I must be losing it. Eli Worthington, hmm?" Smiling, he shook his head and raised it as he walked a little faster, the gravel path through the woods next to his place already in sight down the road.

The outside light had burned out again, so he almost stumbled into the yard. He leaned his shovel against the wall, he always brought it home, and groped for the door handle.

Inside he dumped some ham and beans into a pan and headed to the shower. The water echoed loudly against the thin plastic floor. It was hard to regulate. Just when it was the right temperature a surge of heat would make him jump and turn his skin bright pink. The rubber floor decals to prevent slipping rested on the floor beside the toilet still in their package. A thin layer of dust muffled the shiny plastic and the stamp-sized price tag was beginning to yellow and curl at the edges. Wearing a faded red towel and still half-wet Jake sat down at the small table cluttered with newspapers and a couple of dirty coffee cups. He'd never been married and had lived here more years than he could remember. He thought about the speechless dead man. He couldn't eat. He flipped off the kitchen light, leaving the plate full on the table, and walked to the bed. Curling into a fetal position in the dark, Jake didn't close his eyes. He was afraid they wouldn't open. Afraid because he couldn't stop seeing Eli's eyes. Afraid that he'd lose his job for not taking the coffin; knowing he could never explain that he couldn't do it. Finally, Jake fell into a dark, dreamless sleep and didn't wake until morning.

He was relieved to find Mr. Adams absent the next day, although it meant he would be alone. As he pruned bushes and pulled weeds he tried not to look at Eli's grave but his eyes would drift over. He watched to see if anyone would come to visit him. No one did. In fact, no one came in all day. As soon as it got dark he got his shovel to head home. With

Mr. Adams gone and no new graves he no night work. Without thinking, he found his legs carrying him to Eli's grave. He stood for a few minutes and read the headstone over and over again. He didn't really begin to shovel—he just kind of let it slip into the dirt. He closed his hand over the end of the handle and rested his chin on his hand. His weight pushed the blade under the ground. He lifted the shovel slowly and set the dirt on the grass. Another shovel followed and another until he found himself lifting the lid before he really thought about what he was doing. Eli's eyes were still open and bright against his now quite dirty face.

"What am I doing? Hey, why am I talking to you again?" Jake asked Eli harshly. Standing over the body he shoved his hands into his coat pockets. "Anyway, might as well tell you. Mr. Adams was gone, so your box is safe another day. Can't promise nothin' tomorrow, though."

Jake sat down on the edge of the coffin. "God ya look cold," Jake exclaimed and pulled his scarf around his neck. He gently lifted Eli's head and slipped the scarf under it before tucking the ends into his suit vest.

Jake sat back and admired his handiwork.

"Yeah, that looks good on ya. It blends right into your suit being black and all. Why didn't ya put nothin' in your will 'bout being dressed warm for a fall or winter funeral?"

Jake stared up into the sky, "Stars sure are nice tonight, Eli. You're lucky ya got your eyes open. I'll sit a bit and look, but I ain't stayin' long. I'm hungry, and I gotta sleep tonight. Hardly slept at all last night. Empty stomach and all."

After a few minutes Jake stood to go. He looked down at Eli and felt compelled to touch him. He patted his cheek with his palm. Ice. Jake replaced the lid and quickly refilled the grave. The walk home seemed to take forever even with the benefit of the starry sky.

His trailer glowed in the starry night against the dark backdrop of trees. Opening the door he found he'd left the lamp on. It was the tall brass one with the small shade with frills like a short girl's bobbed 60's hair. He only turned it on when he sat in the cracked brown Lazy-boy recliner; the only chair in the room he ever used. The trailer had three rooms but he found himself only passing through the middle one (with the recliner in it) on his way between the kitchen and the bedroom. He strode past the chair into the kitchen. He reheated his ham and beans and ate so quickly it burned his throat, but he wouldn't wait for it to cool. He downed a beer, and unshowered, curled up in bed and dreamed he was at a party. Everyone else was dressed nicely but Jake wore his work clothes. In the morning Jake went to the closet and pulled out his single suit. It

was gray with a faint pinstripe. He even had a shirt and tie for it. He'd worn it to church in high school with his family. He hung it on the doorknob and sat on his bad to stare at it.

Nervously rubbing his calloused palms, he sat on the stool he'd brought to the grave. Eli's eyes were even brighter tonight with an additional layer of dirt that coated his body. From the satchel hung over his shoulder, Jake removed an apple.

"I brought you this," he announced, thrusting it forward with a laugh. "Just kidding, this is for me. I did bring you this, though," and he produced a thin green blanket from the bag. He spread it over Eli and pulled it up like he was tucking in a youngster. The blanket was a sickly green like the color of surgical scrubs and in the lamplight it seemed to glow faintly.

The cemetery was silent except for the crickets' nighttime chatter and the droning of Jake's voice floating up from the hole he shared with the dead man.

"Flower's for you," Jake explained as he snapped the stem and slipped the rose into Eli's lapel button. "Martha, three rows over, never'll miss it and now you look sharp. Almost too good for me." He sat and took a bite from the apple. The red flower looked dark, almost brown, next to the green blanket and under Eli's eyes.

"Eli, did you like to dance? Maybe that's why I never got me a woman. I hate dancin'. Just hate it. You look like you mighta done some dancin'. Or some church goin'. That's a nice suit you got on. Probably ain't done much dancin' recently, huh? Getting kind of up there. No offense, of course." Jake bobbed his head cheerily as he crunched into his apple. He'd resigned himself to Eli's silence. There were worse habits. "You know, I got a pretty nice suit, too. Tomorrow's Sunday, and I ain't had it on in a long time. Maybe I'll show it to you and we can talk about some times we could have. Maybe you can tell me about dancin'."

For a long time there was only the sound of the crickets and the occasional interruption of Jake's apple crunching noisily in his mouth. Then he finished it. He pitched the core toward the bush that caught his shovel but it fell with a thud into the grass. He wiped his wet hand on the green blanket and left it there resting on Eli's arm. Through the blanket he couldn't feel that Eli's skin had begun to get dry and papery. Under the dust, the skin of his face was grey and beginning to break into even more cracks than the old man had when alive.

"You know, Eli," Jake began as he squeezed the arm, "Mr. Adams wasn't happy. You were lucky. You didn't hear him down here, did ya? He was

yellin' at me. I told him I cracked your box so I left it.
He bought it. You ain't got nothin' to worry about. I
won't let 'em bother ya."

On the walk home Jake didn't talk to himself.
He didn't even mind the rain when it began to fall,

and as he turned onto the gravel path the only sound
was the sound of the rain smacking the tin roof of his
box-like home. In bed, he laid on his back and
stared up at the ceiling listening until he fell asleep.

Winter on the River

I go there, sometimes, to lose myself.
The river, with its breathy flow, calms me.
Nighttime is the best, in the cold of winter.
The only sound you hear is the gently hiss of snow being
absorbed into the water moving below me.
Sometimes it is me moving—not the river.
I travel the length without the scene changing.
I float above the water like the clouds do overhead,
being shaped and moved by the wind.
My anxieties flow away with the water,
and I go back to the world, refreshed.

But now that I am away, I long for it more than ever.
The soothing feeling I get from something only God could
have
created.

But I realize that, as with all of God's creations, I need
only to close my eyes,
and my memories take me back.

--Mickey Rogers

Night Thoughts

A forest at 4 a.m.
My feet break the silence as they
crush the frosted leaves.
I walk through brush
and down to the creek.
A trickle of life, a creek never sleeps.
On to the next bluff,
and sit.

Nothing,
but not an annoying nothing,
like the thick ringing of a
hot attic in July.
The woods create a soft quiet,
like the sound of falling snow.

Sitting, I start to understand the
thoughts of night animals,
somehow they know the
bright noise of my world.

Here, they can run through the black silence
and do their work.
Even then they are at peace.

--Clay Jones

Beauty

Beauty
dies within my grasp.
My mind cannot comprehend
its value.
She is elusive
to my blind eyes.
In my own mirror,
She betrays me.
The fields of gold
and the seas of green
show her splendor.
I, only show her disgust.
I show the world
her obvious flaws.
It turns me away.
I will perish
within her bounty
leaving it
with
I was left without.

--Gretchen Zehner

A Catholic Boy's Ticket to Confessional

God stood watching
over Michaelangelo's shoulder
as he chipped away at the stone

But Michaelangelo
became a man possessed—
He went fucking
berzerk.

(I know I shouldn't
say that with
God in the room but it's true.)

He wasn't supposed to make it
That good, but he couldn't keep
His hands off you
And I can see why.

You are a beautiful
slab of rock, baby,
and when the volcano
erupted
you began to flow and ooze with your
hot scent all over the earth.

And you're so hot you scorched
the hands of that sculptor 'til he cried
Mercy, baby, Mercy
And his eyes sizzled as they
looked upon you
And his fingers twitched from the steam
off your skin.

He danced with you close
around the room ignoring
The modesty of his Lord,
Wrapped his polishing cloth
around your waist and put on
the finishing touches.

And all He did
was give you life.

--Mark A. Clements

The Red Stockings

Brent A. Johnson

Adam silently sat in his study, pen in hand, with a blank sheet of paper on the oaken desk before him. The same sheet of paper had been staring at him for the last three days, and for the last five weeks. Surrounding the paper were meaningful knick-knacks Jessie had acquired over his career as a writer, father, and person. A crude, wooden bowl his daughter had made for him containing paper clips, some old Indian cents, and a pair of fingernail clippers neighbored an elegant gold and oaken pen set that matched his deeply polished desk. In the front left corner was a miniature Grandfather's clock standing ten inches high. The University where he taught had given him it for winning the Pushcart Prize and for twenty-five years of being on the faculty. The clock had a small pendulum swinging side to side, keeping time. Its white face was marked with black roman numerals, and the delicately constructed black hands partially covered the etched golden moon dial in the top half of its facade. It wasn't a smiling moon like one usually sees. It was simply an ordinary orb surrounded by stars and light clouds. The miniature clock resembled the full-sized Grandfather that stood in the corner next to the bay window overlooking a small stream trickling over rocks below. It made much louder chimes than did the smaller clock. Adam had them set in perfect synchronicity so that he could hear their harmony whenever they struck the hour. On the right edge of his desk sat an old baseball in a custom holder. It was brown and weathered and covered with autographs from the 1945 Cincinnati Reds team. The ball read "July 27, 1945 Red Stockings vs. Dodgers." It was not a special year—no World Series championship, just an ordinary season, but it was the first baseball game that his father had taken him to. The baseball was a tangible piece of a sport that truly captured Adam's heart and symbolized essential Americana for him.

July 27, 1945, was a magical summer day. Adam was nine. His father had seats behind home plate, ten rows up from the fence. Adam's eyes were as wide open as the ballfield itself. The white sunlight shown brightly directly overhead, and cast the shadow of the stars and stripes waving in the light breeze over the green grass below. The seats in the stadium were filled. Ground crew workers were spraying the infield dirt with hoses in prepara-

tion for the game's first pitch. Adam excitedly stood up and pointed out to his father that he could see a rainbow in the mist coming from the hose. At the top of their section of seats, a vendor yelled to the crowd: "Peanuts! Peanuts! Get your peanuts! Hot dogs! Hot dogs! Get your hot dogs heeere!"

Tugging at his father's sleeve Adam asked, "Can I get a hot dog with mustard. Can I please, Daddy?"

His father waved the vendor down by holding up three fingers. Adam's mouth began to water in anticipation as the vendor, in a red pin-striped jacket and matching hat walked down the stone steps toward their seats.

"I need three hot dogs with mustard, please."

"Alright, sir. Three with mustard it'll be. Should be a goood ball game today I tell ya!" the man said in a Scottish accent while spreading mustard over the three steaming dogs.

Turned sideways in his hard, slippery seat and sitting on his knees, Adam's mind traveled back and forth quickly between thoughts of the baseball game and the delicious smell of the hot dogs.

"Will ya be needing any peanuts or anything to drink with that today, sir?"

"Yeah!" Adam eagerly offered.

"Then we'll take two large sodas and one bag of peanuts with that too, sir."

"Alright. That'll be \$1.10."

"Here's \$2.00 and why don't you keep the rest."

"Thank you much, sir, and enjoy the ballgame this afternoon will ya," the vendor said as he brought his right hand to his head, tipping his hat.

With his feet propped up on top of the seat before him Adam sat back, eating his hot dog and admiring his father. The hot dog's bun was soft and hot and smelled like it had just come from the bakery. The cup of soda slipped slightly in Adam's hands because the outside was wet with condensation. Adam looked at his father and smiled. He did not need not to say thanks. His father just smiled back at him and pulled his son's bright-red, felt baseball cap down over his eyes saying, "Let's watch the ballgame." Adam innocently laughed out loud as he used the top of the cup to fix his hat. They sat together, father and son, and watched as the first batter came to the plate.

Adam stared at the paper. It was the color of old newsprint. Tauntingly, it stared back at him, and

willingly flashed its nakedness for him to see. Adam kept staring. Thinking. Thinking about the gold trimmed, black fountain pen that rested heavily against the top of his thumb near the back of his hand. Adam loved writing with this pen. Never on a computer or typewriter because he believed a writer's power was lost with such machines. His writing students turned nothing in that was typed or word processed. He preached that only with the raw materials of pen and paper could the true spirit of a writer's heart come into contact with the physical world. Modern machinery disrupted the natural flow of spiritual energy that was drawn through the pen as one's hands held it and guided it across a page.

Without passion Adam held the pen softly between his thumb and forefinger. The life the pen once possessed was gone. The pen no longer danced freely across the page. No longer could he be the choreographer of the great performances that once graced his pages. He gazed at the pen, admiring its form. Its sleek black body was highlighted by the amber lights casting their presence from the bronze lamp behind his head. He gripped the pen between the tips of his first two fingers and his thumb, held it in front of his face, and slowly turned it counterclockwise. He concentrated on the light that stayed precisely in the same place while the pen turned underneath it. Adam turned the pen upside-down and back and forth while still watching the light. He was amazed, mystified as he watched the reflection of the bronze lamp creep over the curvatures of his fine pen, and how it shined brightly when crossing the golden trim. Adam looked back down at the paper. He stared. His eyes returned to

the pen. Clenching it tightly in his fist, he brought his hand to his bowed head, and wept silently to himself, the head of the pen resting between his lightly moistened lips. A tear fell to the blank sheet of paper. The sheet did not soak up the drop quickly. It sat beaded, unaccepted, yet slowly began to disappear, until finally all that was left was a dime-sized ripple on the previously smooth and untouched parchment. It was the first bit of Adam's heart that had touched the page in some time.

Teary-eyed, Adam raised his head. He looked at the clock to check what time it was. In the clock's glass he saw the clear reflection of the baseball on the other side of the desk. Adam turned his attention toward the baseball. Reaching forward he picked the ball up from its holder, and a sense of purity crept into his heart. He read the faded, but still distinguishable names and the inscription his father had labeled the ball with: "July 27, 1945 Red Stockings vs. Dodgers." Adam's tears had dried, and were replaced with a smile. A smile recalling the happiness of the memory of a sunny day when he was nine. When his only worries were spelling tests and winning the kickball game at afternoon recess. Jessie leaned back in his tall leather chair and put his feet up on his desk. Holding the ball tightly in his hands, he thought of his father and of the Scottish vendor that sold him hot dogs. He remembered seeing his heroes swing their bats and run the bases. Adam threw the ball up in the air and caught it—reminiscing about the open and carefree days of his childhood.

It isn't a Matter of Life and Death

The game is almost over.
Gripped by fear like a deer who hears a ruffle in
the leaves,
Am I afraid of losing?
It's just a game I played across the street from
My house when I was young.
What's so different now?
The ball floating in the air, mocking me,
you're going to fail.
That's it.
The world is watching.
But dropping the ball doesn't make me a failure.
That's what I tell myself.
Don't take your eye off the ball.

--Dax Gonzalez

On the Battlefield

Save our nation—
For what's it worth?
A daily battle
on Planet Earth
Who has won
When lives are lost?
Leads us now to
holocaust—
God
has spoken do not kill
But what's the choice
On the battlefield?
Our lives
Our children
Our lives to spare
The Politicians
Don't know
The Fear
Among the soldiers
On the
Battlefield

--Gretchen Zehner

A Black View

When exactly did I become not as smart as the others?
Where is it I always go to make my drug deals?
Why do people view me as a dog they think may bite?
What research are they citing?

Blackness and evil, coldness and death have been
forced together like a pre-arranged marriage.
Life is a series of hurdles, each a little taller
than the other.

All of us try to make our lives something to cherish,
to say I succeeded.

Cars with sirens form a circle around the scene
like buzzards looking for what was left.
Killing a man never kills what he stood for.

I stand alone.
But not alone,
Firm and proud among many.

--Dax Gonzalez

Fact

I was so upset when my father
burned down our house;
'Cause where was I to live now.

--Eddie O'Neill

Endless Dreamers

Catching an occasional glance,
she dreams still.
The silent bond
she holds,
is also one he follows.
Never shall the two hearts
meet,
for fear of breaking
the other.
Lonely ghosts,
they float
across the palid sky.
Learn
to loved
is the hardest taught.
The figures
dissipate in the
afternoon sunset.
Time
goes by,
another day gone
in their
eternal paradise.
Fiery hell
of regrets
awaits for them.
The curse
of dreamers
dwells
full in their tearing eyes
which is drowning
the glimmer of hope
for the other to see.

--Gretchen Zehner

A Short Story by Stephen Alexander Miller

Bicks sat at his computer staring at the screen, listening to the soul of Minnie Riperton flow out of his dual-cassette deck. He turned his head and looked at the door to his room, hoping that someone would come and disturb him.

BAM-BAM-BAM!

He smiled and said, "Yo!"

No reply.

"I said it's open, you dumb shit!" He knew it was Canter.

Canter opened the door and walked through with his long strides. "Yo, wuddup."

"Man, why can't you knock like a normal person? Naw, I guess that's just too much to ask from you."

Canter closed the door, sat on the bed, and examined Bick's room. His eyes focused on the kente cloth draped over the mirror. Bicks leaned back in his chair and let his hands fall in his lap. "Man, what the fuck you want? You see I'm trying to write this paper."

Canter sucked his teeth. "Man, you ain't writin' shit."

"I said I was 'trying' ta write this damn paper. I didn't say I was writin' it." Bicks noticed the expression on Canter's face. It wasn't his normal life-is-pretty-cool-face. "What's goin' on."

"Me and Dana are goin' out."

"Aaawwww, shit! Well go ahead, brotha . . . So why you look so down, man?"

"She's white," Canter said, as he shifted his eyes to the map of Africa.

"Yeah, so."

"I didn't even think about it until we walked into the cafeteria. Man, I walked past some of the black folk and they just kept staring." Canter's face became a frown.

"Yo, you know you gonna have ta put up with that shit from white and black." Malcolm pushed his chair back and stood up. He walked over to the closet, pulled down a package of incense and asked, "Is that gonna bother you?" He lit a match. He held the tip of the stick of incense onto the tip of the match. The flame brightened, happy that it had something else to burn. Bicks, not realizing the happiness of the flame, ripped it in half and blew out the match. He watched the incense get red than killed the flame on the end of the stick.

"Naw, it's not gonna bother me." Canter threw

his arms up. "But why they gotta act like that?"

Bicks tossed the match with the rest of the half-burnt matches, then put the stick in its holder. "You like her?"

"Naw, I'm just going out with her just for the hell of it."

Bicks stared at the swirls of smoke lingering in the air. He tried to imagine Canter and Dana walking through the cafeteria at dinner. This school is so damn small, everybody gotta know your business, he thought.

"Man, when we're in her room, I don't even think about it. But when we're anywhere else, it's on my mind. I'll tell you . . ."

"Yo, man, be cool. You gettin' all hyped up over nothin'."

"I know . . . but that shit gets to me."

"Yeah, and?"

"It's fucked up."

"No. It's life." Bicks walked back to his chair, turned it to face Canter, and put his feet on the desk. "I told you 'bout that girl I went out with last year, right? She was white and nobody said shit."

"Nobody said shit to yo' face."

"Yeah, awright. You got that one."

"Man, you know what's really fucked up is all the black girls goin' round saying that all I want is a white girl."

"Aww, man, fuck that. You know some uh dem petty anyway. Plus, I don't see any of them tryin' ta keep us."

Bicks slid out of his seat. He sauntered over to the dual-cassette deck and changed Minnie Riperton to Bob Marley. "I bet alluh her friends are askin' her, 'Does he really have a big one?'"

"You buggin'."

"Oh, Canter," Bicks said pretending to be Dana, "I'll never go back to a white again. They could never do for me what you can."

"Aw, man, git outta here. You know it ain't like that."

"How you know?"

"That's not right, man."

Canter rose off the bed and went over to the mirror. He put his hands on both sides of his head, touched up his Fade, and said, "Damn, I look good."

Bicks shook his head as he put the empty tape case back in the cassette briefcase. "Man, don't you have homework to do?"

"Nope."

"Get the fuck out. I gotta paper to write."

"Damn. Awright, man, peace."

Bicks watched Canter stride out of his room.

"Later."

"Okay. I'll meet you in the lobby in a few minutes." Canter hung up the phone, threw on his coat, and walked quickly out of his room. Passing through the T.V. room, he saw Sly with his eyes transfixed to the moving pictures in the box. Canter jumped in front of the huge screen T.V. holding his coat open.

Sly looked up. "Man, what the fuck you doin'? Would you get out of my way?"

Canter started dancing to the music from the video.

"Man, would you get your doofy-lookin'-Cosby-no-dancin'-ass out of my way."

Canter started dancing to the music from the video.

"You goin' to dinner?"

"Yeah. I'll be there after the Soul Countdown goes off. Now move! This babe is fine!" Canter finally stepped out of Sly's view to reveal a dark-skinned woman in very little black material that covered only the parts that were not allowed to be shown, grinding against the air. Canter backed out of the T.V. room.

He ran up the stairs to the lobby and found Dana waiting for him. "How'd you get down here so fast?"

"My secret," she said, hugging him. "I haven't seen you all day." She held onto Canter, then gave him one of those kisses that makes you totally oblivious to everything around you for a minute or so.

A group of students poured from the doors that led to the rest of the dorm. Some went and checked their mailboxes; some headed straight for the front door, intent on getting to dinner as soon as possible; others just wandered about the lobby, waiting for their friends to join them. Amidst the confusion of students fumbling around the lobby, one stopped and stared at the couple kissing with a disgusted look on his face.

Canter opened his eyes and found this other student, probably an athlete, he thought, looking back at him. The intruder had bulky arms, a bulky neck, a pair of sweats, and that wear-'n-go hair.

"Well . . . gotta problem," asked Canter.

The hair guy didn't say anything.

"Damn, man. People act like they ain't never seen anyone kiss before."

Dana turned to see who her new boyfriend was talking to. "Uh, Canter . . . Canter. Ignore him. I've seen him around before. He's an ass."

"I can't believe you would even be seen with him

in public," said the Hair quietly, but loud enough for Canter to hear.

Canter's eyes opened wide in disbelief. "Naw. Hold up. What the fuck you mean by that," he asked, not really expecting an answer.

"You heard me."

"You got somethin' against black people?"

"Yeah."

Canter walked over to the Hair with his hands pointing at his face. "Man, you fucked up in the head."

The hair shoved Canter. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Don't fucking touch me."

Dana grabbed Canter's arm and tried to pull him back. She felt the muscles in his arm tighten, then shake from the anger that jetted through him.

Canter glanced at Dana. But before he could tell her to go away, he saw an arm coming at him. In one motion, he blocked the punch that was near his face, pushed Dana back, swung his leg into some ribs, then nailed his fist dead into an eye. Blood and a cry of pain came from the Hair's face.

A crowd appeared around the scene. Some were there holding Canter back, some were attending to the Hair, but most were just being nosey. The security of the school just happened to be in the building when the Hair was laid out, so it took no time for them to show up.

Before Canter knew it, he was being led out of the dorm toward one of the security cars. Still boiling with rage, he tried to free himself of the security guards. A knee found its way into his back. His free leg broke that knee. An elbow slammed into his stomach. Two more pair of dirty hands grabbed, pushed, and pulled him to the snow-covered ground. Canter heard voices yelling around him.

"Canter, stop!"

"Yo! Chill, Money!"

"Get the fuck off him!"

"You get the hell outta here you little shit!"

"Touch me again and you goin' wid him."

"FUCK YOU!"

The Dean sat behind that big wooden desk that most Deans sit behind, protected. Canter sat in a chair against a wall without a desk to shield him. A window to the right, some certificates hung in some cute little design, and a glass wall between him and the Dean. The Dean looked at Canter, then at some papers on his desk, then back at Canter.

"Gene Canter. I have seven affidavits saying that you started the fight."

"WHAT! That's crazy! He threw a punch at me first!"

"I don't think these seven people would lie, do

you?"

"Hell, yeah—That's not what happened. That stupid sonofa—whatever his name is . . ."

"Larry."

"Larry' said how can my girlfriend be seen in public with me."

"That's no reason to get into a fight."

"It's what he meant."

"What did he mean?"

Canter didn't answer. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Only the hum of the building's intestines was heard.

"Larry's family is pressing charges and we have decided to place you on probation."

"For what? Defending myself?"

"We have witnesses saying that you kicked and punched Larry for no reason."

"No reason. That—that boy is a racist!" Canter wanted to scream and tell the Dean about the stares of hatred and fear from other students because of his 'white' girlfriend; about feeling like an alien because of being the only black in a class; about his English professor being suprised that he knew anything about Greek tragedies; about how he walked around mad at the world because of the attitudes of a few; but he said nothing.

Bicks was waiting outside of the Dean's office. He sat on a small leather chair, staring at the door to the big office. He felt that the secretary didn't feel comfortable with him there. When he glanced up, she would shift her eyes back down to her desk and find something to do. She probably thought he was going to steal something.

The heavy block of wood opened and Canter walked out of the Dean's office. Bicks stood up. His friend walked past him without saying a word. He

followed.

After they were outside and a good distance from the office, Bicks asked, "Well . . . What happened?"

"Man, that dick put me on probation."

"What tha fuck does that mean?"

"It means . . . man, I don't even fucking know. He said seven fucking people said that I started the fight."

"But that's bullshit—"

"You tellin' me!"

Canter and Bicks walked over to the cafeteria. The wind snapped across their faces and tried hard to blow their hats off. Bick's voice cut through the wind. "What'cha gonna do?"

"I'm gonna fight this shit. I'm gonna fight it hard. Ain't no way I'm gonna let a racist mothafucka git away wid some some shit like this."

"Hey. Don't do anything stupid to git yo' ass thrown out of school. You know that's what they want." Bicks kicked the snow. "They would looovve to kick a Brotha outta here."

"Yeah, I know. Alluh dem lyin' out they ass. And they know it!"

"What about Dana?"

"What about her?"

"You gonna stay with her?"

"Hell, yeah. I ain't gonna let these Fucks ruin' that. I'll blow their fucking heads off if they try this shit again."

The two young men walked through the cafeteria with hundreds of eyes plastered on them. They both stopped and shot at all of the glares. "WHAT THE FUCK ALL YOU STARIN' AT!" Canter yelled.

"Man, fuck it. Leave 'em."

Within the roar of the cafeteria, Canter and Bicks had a very quiet dinner.

Glass on Tequila

Have a drink on me.
He said with a kiss.
Cold heart, cold bottle
warm liquid, warm tears
stream down
into her bleeding soul.

Have a drink
and die for me.

Fuzzy sight
bright headlights
piercing her blank mind.
Numbness never felt so good.
Wood splits
as glass shatters
upon her dead soul.
Numbness never felt so dead.

A bitter smile
during the painful tears.
Black on black
red on pale pink
silk, satin and wood.
Church bells sings their
death song.
He slithers by,
cooing like a dove.
Have a drink on me.

--Child of Autumn

Time Has Passed

And the days continue without you
Much to my surprise, and
Much to my relief

When you left me mentally, and
I left you physically, I felt
Both upset and relieved
Upset because you had left, but
Relieved that I had left.

You'd smile if you read this
I was always so analytical
You were always so analytical
We analyzed
Everything

We'd deduct and induct and
Generalize and strategize and
postulate and demonstrate and
resolve and refute and
speculate and then masturbate

our own egos into orgasm
because we had won by making each other
lose,
hurt, and
foreign.

--Michael Millington

Premeditated

Virtuous
 Is what its supposed to be, but
 Premeditated
 Is what it was,
 Last
 Night.

No attempt at morality
 No attempt at devotion
 It was for us—
 Alone.

It wasn't for love, and
 It definately wasn't for god,
 It wasn't ornate or elegant, but it was
 Comely.

It was near Dover Beach, and
 It was on the floor, and
 It was—
 Feeling
 Good.

--Michael Millington

Via cieca per umanita

Run, run as fast as he can.
 Can't catch him, he's a man.
 Under the sea of tranquility
 with a touch of madness.
 he falls numb.
 Faces blend together
 as his eyes dilate.
 Rubs the glass against his face,
 the only reality he knows.

School is hell.
 Walks through the maze
 searching for a piece of cheese.
 it's in the car
 with the others.
 Just another glass bottle,
 that breaks with stone.

Hours go by,
 with more of his mind.
 He laughs in the dark,
 at the dark,
 thinking he's won.
 in the distance, the stone is thrown.
 its target is his very existence.
 Glass with paper covering,
 covering the lies.

No problems, no pain,
 not even in the morning.
 all he needs
 all he wants
 behind the label
 behind the glass
 behind the lies
 Buried beneath the amber waves
 he found manhood
 at it's finest.

--Gretchen Zehner

A Prisoner to Herself

A prisoner to herself,
she bled us to dry.
Guilt and lies pouring from her
mouth,
chilling blood through her veins.
The tears fell.
She went away,
taking our youth with her,
in her little suitcase,
made of our souls,
only to be filled and emptied.

Hid within the green-grey walls,
went crying to Mommy.
Blaming everyone in her path
except the culprit.
People point and scream
in their ignorance,
never understood why.
So quick to throw stones
that break our bodies.
Never us.
We're the evil, she's the good
as we go down.
She still plays the game to the fullest
with us as the pieces.
Moving our hearts
with her cold disposition.
Never felt so cold,
never felt so old.
We're prisoners, too
with no hope of parole.

Cry madness,
cry guilt
everyone loves it.
We never believed
and we're the victims
of a crime we didn't commit.
The believers are flies in her web,
only to be trapped and devoured.
Her followers run,
down the street she said was two-ways,
only to find a dead-end.

Her venom is strong,
as she came back here.
To finish the job,
we let her start.
With armor of hate and pain,
we fight her.
For the hell she caused,
is which she will receive.
Took our youth away,
but left us with something just as good:
hate.

--Gretchen Zehner

Driving or What Happens When Coming Home

Shannon Hicks

About five years after I stopped feeling, after I am in college and live at home only during summer vacations, the car is my only escape. My parents always wonder how we go through so much gas. They don't know that every night I leave the house after everyone goes to bed and drive around. The city where we live is pretty small, and you can only drive through the neighborhoods where your friends live without stopping so many times before you get bored. So every night when I leave the house, I leave town, drive south on State Road 6 through Whitetown to State Road 29. From there I drive through Hillsburg to Frayton, past the Little Theatre, and then go back north at the second stoplight in Frayton.

The whole time I listen to cassette tapes at full blast, all the windows rolled down, the wind beating at me. The whole trip takes maybe an hour, and I do it every night. Sometimes before I leave, sleep tears at me, telling me to be sensible and go to bed, but I love driving, and the empty car calls me late at night, whispering sometimes, but screaming most of the time, to come out and leave, leave the burden behind, the wall I've so carefully constructed.

Once I took the car early one evening without telling anyone where I was going, and I left and was gone a long time. We only had one car, and I was gone for about six hours that night, driving around, so nobody could leave my house. When I got back, my sister Linda started riding me, saying, "You could have at least called."

"I know," I said, "I'm sorry." On and on she kept going.

"Why didn't you call. Somebody else might have wanted the car. Why didn't you call?"

She was right. I should have called, but I didn't. And Linda didn't want to shut up. And then she got mad when I didn't get mad. "Mother," she said, "Dad," she said, "Kate isn't human. Just look at her! She won't even get mad at me. Don't the two of you find something strange about this?"

And I sat there beside her, smiling, chin tilted up. No—she couldn't make me mad at all that day.

And I keep driving.

Lately, every time I pass a hitchhiker on the highway, I want to stop and pick him up. They've all been men lately. I haven't seen a female hitchhiker since Mother got sick. Anyway, it was a Saturday night, and I was home for the weekend. I'd been out

driving, and I couldn't sleep. I hadn't been sleeping well for weeks, and I was in my room, in my bed for two hours, unable to sleep, when I heard movement in the hall and then a knock on my door. My brother Chris was outside my door. "Something's wrong with Mother," he said.

"What's wrong with Mother," I asked.

"Get dressed," he said. "We've called an ambulance."

I put on a pair of blue jeans and went out into the hall. I heard voices in Dad and Mother's bedroom. When I went in, I saw Mother in her bed. She looked stiff. Garbled sounds came from her mouth. "Kate," my father said. "Come here, she wants you."

I sat down on the edge of her bed. "What Mother," I said. But I couldn't understand any of her words. I just heard sounds. "I'm sorry, Mother," I said, "but I don't understand you." Her voice got louder and louder, but I still didn't understand anything. I looked at my father.

"Eleanor," he finally said, "it's okay. The ambulance will be here soon." And he sat down on the bed beside her, and I didn't hear his words, I just heard the murmuring tones. Mother's blond hair was pulled back like mine, wisps of hair hanging over her cheeks and forehead. When the ambulance took Mother away and Dad with her, Chris and I followed in our car.

"What happened, Chris," I asked.

"I don't know," he answered. He drove, his eyes on the road.

"You have to know something," I said.

"Like I already told you," he said, "I don't know. I just got home, and Dad had already called for an ambulance. He said she couldn't move."

"What do you think it is," I asked.

"Don't ask me, Kate," Chris said, "I'm not a doctor."

"I'm not asking you as a doctor, Chris, I just want to know what—"

"I already told you," he said, "what I know. That's it." I knew our conversation was over. I looked out the car window into the sky. I wished I was driving, or at least that I could identify constellations. Then I'd have had something to focus on. Instead of Mother. Or Chris. Or me.

Anyway, I'm not sure when the thing with the hitchhikers started. At the beginning of the summer, I think. I was driving down State Road 29 at about

midnight, and I saw a man about a mile outside of Frayton with his thumb out. He was near a light, and I saw him. I almost stopped then to pick him up, but I remembered seeing a television movie about a hitchhiker who murdered people who picked him up. So I passed him by.

After that, I saw hitchhikers on State Road 29 all the time, it seemed, more than I'd seen on 29 in years. And every time I saw one, I slowed down, but I never stopped.

I told my sister Linda that I wanted to pick up hitchhikers. "You what," she said. "You want to what!"

"I didn't do anything, Linda," I said. "I just thought about it . . . haven't you ever . . . wanted to?"

"That is the most stupid ass thing you've ever said to me, Kate," Linda said. "Pick up a hitchhiker? I can't believe this."

"I didn't do anything, Linda," I said. "I'm sorry. It's never happened before. I never wanted to pick up a hitchhiker before. But then I did. So I thought maybe you wanted to, too . . . once in a while."

"Just don't do it," she said.

And I haven't.

I just keep driving.

But this burden, it doesn't leave the second I get in the car, but by the time I am several miles down State Road 6, it lifts, as it does every night I drive, and I can see better. It isn't like how you sit in the dark and your eyes adjust to the dark after a couple of minutes, and then you can see shapes and shadows. It's like everything is in the dark, and then I leave town by State Road 6, and little lights just switch on inside my eyes. And nobody can see like I see on those nights when I drive around and the lights switch on inside my eyes. And nobody can understand like I understand. And nobody can feel like I feel. But walls are heavy, especially well-constructed walls that are inside you. They are the walls that stop your breathing and they are the walls that squeeze your lungs. And I leave, and the lights switch on inside my eyes, and the lung-squeezing walls disintegrate for an hour—until I reach town again. I re-enter my hometown from another highway.

Then I'm back in town, and I don't have much money, but as I said, my parents always wonder about the gas. So I put just a little gas in the car—not as much as I have used, but just enough so they won't realize how far I have actually driven and ask me about it.

Linda has her own car now. So she never knows how far I drive or where. Not that she would be upset—unless she paid for the gas, that is. But she is very curious and she would question the need, the importance behind my driving fifty miles

every night without any particular destination in mind. She would want to know who or what is causing me to drive around every night. She would question that without a doubt, and I would not like it.

Linda has always known how to make everybody angry, and I've never liked that because I don't like to argue with anyone because to argue, I have to feel intensely. And to feel intensely makes me vulnerable to the chaos around me.

Linda picked me up at my dormitory in May to move me home for the summer. Dad had informed me that I was needed at home this summer, regardless of any plans I might have had before Mother's illness was diagnosed. "It's Guillian Barre," he said, "and I can't do it alone anymore. And your sisters are working," he said, "and besides, Anne has her own family now. She tries, but she doesn't have the time." He cleared his throat. He does not mention my brother Chris.

The night before I moved back home, I packed the rest of my things. I packed for hours, threw away lots of things I used to think I'd keep forever. But I threw some of those things away anyway, and I packed the rest up tightly in boxes.

It rained as I packed. I saw the rain out my window, the drops of water knifing the air. I went outside and stood, letting the cold knives cut my skin for a couple of minutes. Once outside in the rain, I couldn't make myself go back in. I left, walked to the student center, around it, past a couple of classroom buildings, back to my own dormitory. Even then I didn't go in. I looked down at my thin cotton shirt, molded to my body, the rain gluing it to my chest and stomach. Where the 'V' left my chest bare, I saw the water running down into my bra. Drops of water fell from my hair onto the ground. I looked up at the sky, the rain stinging my face, and I thought about drowning on the sidewalk.

I thought I'd stand there forever contemplating ends and beginnings as the cold knives stabbed my arms, reminding me of what waited for me at home. The water dripping from my body felt like one huge, encompassing tear that I couldn't cry for my mother or for me.

Anyway, Linda was supposed to pick me up at three o'clock, so I began moving my things to the lobby at two thirty. She arrived, only fifteen minutes late, and we packed up the car and left. On the way home, I looked out at the hills and trees sliding by. I saw three crosses by a huge billboard and thought I should have known why they were there. I had gone to church all through my childhood. But I still didn't know.

Linda began to talk. "Why so quiet," she asked. I didn't answer. "Something's wrong, Kate, I can tell. What is it?" I didn't answer. I saw the sign at the edge of the highway, telling me we were thirty-two

miles from home . . . at sixty miles an hour, I thought, I would be home in thirty-two minutes. "Kate? You're mad. I can tell. Who are you mad at? Did I do something," Linda asked. It struck me as really funny that Linda should be worried that *she'd* made someone mad.

"I don't know who I'm mad at," I finally said.

"But you're mad."

"Yes, yes, I'm mad."

Linda laughed. "I'm sorry. It's not funny. I used to try to piss you off on purpose, but it never worked. It always bugged the hell out of me that you wouldn't fight back."

"Maybe that doesn't matter anymore," I said. "I made excuses for myself then, for everybody . . . You know," I said, "that I'm going to be the one who has to take care of her this summer . . ."

"I understand," Linda said.

"Do you," I interrupt, "do you understand? You've always been angry, and I was the one who tried to keep everybody happy and calm. I tried to make everyone happy, and I'm still doing it."

"I know, Kate," Linda said, "but that's not what I'm trying to say."

"What are you trying to say? You tried to make me angry, all my life, and I didn't feel it. Well, I'm feeling it now. Are you satisfied? Are you satisfied that I'm bitter now? Well I am! And I don't like the way it feels, and I don't like what it's doing to me!"

The hills and sign continued to slide by as we finished our ride in silence. When we got to the house, I opened the car door without saying anything. Linda grabbed my wrist. "Don't get out of this car mad at me," she said. "Please, Kate."

I looked up at our house. It looked empty. Quiet. Lifeless. "I wasn't mad at you to begin with," I said, and Linda let go of my arm. I grabbed a bag to take into the house to my bedroom. Forever at home. Never at home.

Linda always tried to bring us together, despite her anger, or through it maybe. Two days before Thanksgiving one year when I was still in high school, Linda declared a romantic desire for our entire family to go grocery shopping together, to

"really share this holiday." When I informed her that I already had plans and wasn't going to the grocery store, Linda's face reddened and puffed up, her eyes grew dark, and her words came out in short spurts, and she said. You know this is important to me. You care more for your friends than you do for your family. On and on she went for at least twenty minutes. And finally, I stood up, my whole body shaking, and yelled Damn it! I'm important too! Quit telling! me I'm bad! I'm not! bad! I'm not bad! I'm a person! Damn! it! and I'm going to do what I want this time! Quit! Just quit! telling me I'm bad! And you! can go! to! hell! A dead silence followed. I'm not bad, I said, I'm not bad.

And I walked out of the house.

I stayed gone for a couple of hours, sat on the cold cement at a playground in the cold without a coat, went home, got a coat, and left again.

And I came back home.

Nobody ever asked me about it . . . about my anger that night—not even Linda. Maybe, maybe if someone had, I would not have stopped feeling. But maybe not.

Because even when the chaos ends, and I have no reason to believe it might not, I know the voices will begin and reach a high-pitched wail and never stop, and I know I will hear those voices for the rest of my life.

Or maybe it's not even that at all anymore because you can't begin to feel again until you think you're out of the chaos.

So I take the car for a drive every night, and I let the lights inside my eyes switch on, and I wait for someone to say, "It's okay to drive around with your burden lifted, with your wall down. The struggle may not be over yet, Katie, but it will end."

What Linda would say, though, is "Take down your wall, Kate. The struggle is over, if we just admit the truth. This struggle is over."

But it's not. Not really. How can it be? Not when I take an excursion every night around the city I have lived in all my life. Around it . . . because I don't want to drive through it if I don't have to.

a fall from grace

she walks,
 and he follows,
 down the aisle surrounded by walls.
 the walls hold frames that hold paintings.
 Brueghel's *Icarus* falls into the water—feet kicking.
 nightfall,
 dressed in the sun's reflection,
 guides them down the hallway.

the ship sails,
 and the ploughman looks concerned.

they pass each doorway,
 until they reach the celebration room.
 continuing their procession to the bed,
 genuflecting at its feet,
 knees dropping,
 chins pressed to their chests,
 sign of the cross and up,
 their backs rest against the wooden headboard.
 they look up and out unto the altar
 drawn by the line that divides the sky from the sea.
 the moon awaits the blessing.
 she kneels in front of him,
 back to the window,
 back to the altar.
 the light of the eucharist traces the outline of her body,
 arms above her head,
 her reaching hands clasp each side of the moon,
 and she sings:

take this and eat of it.
 this is my body and it will be given up for you.

he reaches with his right hand open over left palm.
 she pulls the eucharist down with white hands.
 she places her hands in his.
 their bodies wind.
 they sing hymns
 and chants,
 responding
 to the sermon
 of the night.
 Brueghel's *Icarus* falls into the water—feet kicking.
 and they sing:

lamb of God,
 you take away the sins of the world,
 have mercy on us.

the ship sails,
 and the ploughman looks concerned.

--Christian A. Carl

A Second Look

Tom Faust

John wished he could bring someone he knew with him. Whether for the moral support or just. . . *Ah the hell with it.* He didn't know anyone now anyway. Plenty of friends to surround himself with, but he had turned his back on all the people he knew a long time ago. Even if they were here now they wouldn't be able to go where he was going. They hadn't been there when it had all started: the meetings, the discussions, the debates, and everything else in those days. They weren't with him then, and they weren't here now. Besides, ruminations on the choices of his past were of no use to him.

The days were getting cool and the nights were getting cold, so John slung his woolen longcoat over his shoulder before leaving the apartment. He wouldn't have needed the coat if he took a cab the few miles that he had to go, but nothing could deprive him of his walk, not even them. John knew the route by heart, a winding, intricate path that lengthened the trip but made it more enjoyable. It was, in fact, one of the few things he did truly enjoy these days--seeing the dingy hotels and scattered, greasy-spoon restaurants that lined the mostly barren streets. Every now and then a cat would walk beside him, hoping for a tiny morsel hinted at by the fishy smell blowing in from the harbor. It was real for him. He started off his secret way, his coat now buttoned up to fend off the October chill.

Finally, he reached the club. He was late, as usual, but they didn't mind and neither did he, really. John felt warm even though he had checked his coat at the door and some of the windows were cracked open to let in the night air. Indeed, he found that his palms were unusually sweaty and, upon passing a mirror, saw that his natural pale complexion had reddened considerably. He really couldn't help it though, knowing what was to come. Their reaction had dominated his thoughts on the way to the club, so much that it took his mind off the walk. In fact, once, upon looking up, John realized that he had missed a turn and had to backtrack a full block.

John began to notice the gazes of the group he was talking with linger on him a little too long, so he excused himself and drifted toward a window after lifting a glass of champagne from a server's tray. He had hoped that the breeze would cool him down, but it only succeeded in giving his skin a clamminess it had not possessed before and added to John's overall discomfort.

Soon enough, Vincent sought him out as John knew he would.

"Johnathan, are you feeling well?"

"Yes, thank you, Vincent. Just a little tired this evening."

"I tell you, you must quit taking those silly walks of yours. A taxi would keep you out of the cold and you might arrive on time for once."

"Vincent, I—"

"Yes, yes I know, you enjoy them. Please join us now, won't you?"

As John began to mingle once again among the *litterati*, he listened to the conversations going on around him. The group he had left earlier was still discussing David, another was comparing Seurat to the impressionist movement as a whole, and a third, smaller group was extolling the merits of Eliot. God, how he loathed Eliot.

He had worried about this night excessively over the past two weeks, outlining the date on his calendar with a thick, black marker. John's confidence continued to wane as he thought about bringing the topic into casual conversation. He wanted to leave, but that was impossible. He was already as much of an outsider to the group as they would indulge. John had heard the whispered speculation on his presence, his age, and his ideas. If only he was a little younger. When he was their age it was so much easier. . . but that was what this was all about, wasn't it? His life in their world.

Examining his life in minute detail recently is what had driven John to this thinking. In earlier days it had been a novelty. He was the angry young man that was written about by those he criticized. He took nothing on precedent, respecting little, and genuinely liked even less. The spark of conviction in his eyes that had characterized him and which others had remarked upon, that same spark he now recognized when he looked at Vincent and the others, was gone. The spark hadn't been replaced by any dullness, it just wasn't there anymore.

Could he really live through this night? Remembering how he had scorned those not enlightened enough to understand him when he was younger caused John to shiver momentarily. How was he supposed to explain what had happened?

"Well, then, you see, I was walking back from the club a few weeks ago when I suddenly realized that I hate my very existence and feel that the past

twenty-odd years of my life have been a complete waste.”

What a thought! The old man leaps upon a soapbox, speaks his eternal wisdom, and retreats back into his cave never to be heard from again. It would happen sooner or later, wouldn't it? If it doesn't, would he find the satisfaction that had thus far eluded him some years later debating the same things he was debating now and had debated years before? What if, when he finally catches a glimpse of higher meaning from the debutante sitting next to him, she turns and explains that he has misunderstood her point entirely.

There was so much he had seen and missed, so much he had passed by without a second look. He never took time to smell the roses because he couldn't. John had never seen that the roses were there. *Let Vincent be the brooding, introspective hero*, John thought. He'd much rather play the faithful manservant that retired silently to the garden.

How he longed to tread upon those beaches which he had only read about and then insulted from being trite. Only when he walked on a shoreline without any thought but that of his next step would he know that he was free, but how to explain that to them? They will only exchange contemptuous glances, dismiss it as a joke, or laugh outright. *They can't understand. How can I make them understand? They'll never—*

A thin smile appeared on his lips and, in the middle of a brilliant and scathing diatribe against the cubists Vincent was delivering, he loudly cleared his throat. John waited until all eyes in the room were on him. Then, in a soft voice, he said "I'm sorry people, but you must excuse me. I have more pressing matters which require my attention."

He walked down the stairs and into the warm glow of the streetlight without even bothering to retrieve his coat.

The Country Quarry

If I could,
I would walk to the cliff
above the limestone quarry
stand on the edge,
and look down to the cold yellow floor.

I would take my stress,
fears,
inabilities, and
faults,
and form each into a crystal figurine,

and throw them
with all my strength.
Then watch as they float silently
down,
exploding into shards against
the floor.

--Clay Jones

The Glorious Blue Skies

The glorious blue skies
 behind the mirrors of your soul
 makes me face the world again.
 Among the crowds of indecision
 who try to knock me down
 with talk of confusion
 your strong arms hold me above
 the blank faces and names.
 The north wind
 doesn't rule
 my open soul
 any longer.
 Only the Sun
 motivates my mind.
 Like the gulls of the Sea,
 my heart is free
 free to love you
 not to fear you.
 Putting strength
 behind my growing bones,
 I owe you my happiness.
 Rising like the Sun,
 my soul rises above the din.
 Only it goes down
 in the comfort of your arms.

--Gretchen Zehner

Reflections on Blood

She had to put the book down. All that violence and so much blood. It seems as if blood is spilling off of the page. She can see the blood on her hands and worst of all she can taste it in her mouth and she knows it has filled her stomach. All that blood, all that life and it is pooling in her mouth. Hoping others can't see it and know—know that she has the blood and it is her fault the violence all happens. She feel the guilt, all of the pain, the hurt, the damage, the death of it all—and she tastes the blood. She can't find a reason for the damage of life and the discovery of blood. The game of predator and prey—the prey only knows fear and pain and that its blood is being let out. Blood is only life when it is on the inside, it is death when it is outside. She wants to vomit all of the blood up. Vomit until the blood comes, not from the violence she knows she is responsible for, but from her. Let the blood out in penance for having had life.

--Heidi Lorraine Bechtold

For the Sake of a Photo

They loved the park in the late summer
with its two-inch high—no more—emerald-green grass carpet,
its antique colonial lampposts,
finely stained cherry grain benches with intricate etchings just like home,
unscented beds of yellow silk tulips and
wallpaper print roses growing in the bushes.

The horizon hung on the west wing
of the park like a picture done in adorable shades of blue and pink,
except for one small tree that seemed out of place,
and framed at some angles by maples no closer
than a hundred meters apart,
scattered for just a touch of nature.

Seated with posture on a bench these two
photogenic inamoratos
absorbed the sun until it dissolves in the horizon
and they lounged in their unnaturally pleasant perfection,
she holding a camera in anticipation.

He swam with one arm through the air
until it landed undulantly on her
cushioned shoulder, hand stroking her gold
bleached hair that looked real,
drawing a moderate line through her make-up
from that intimate spot under her ear to the pendulum curve of her chin
they moved like clockwork.

Wait
she said
its time
she held
the camera.
But that young tree
ruins the picture.

Its leaves shook
erratically
in the untimely
breeze.

He swam with both arms cutting
through the air until they fell freakishly on its sapling shoulder,
hand choking its inherently gold-hued leaves,
fingers pressing a deep dent in its trunk as he ripped
it from that intimate spot in the ground
and flung it aside
with ambitious ignorance.

She
snapped her photograph
pleased to catch the sunset
at the cost of
only one tree.

--Mark A. Clements

American Institution Kirstin Ellsworth

After they had been in McDonald's for seven hours, ten-year-old Danny finally asked when they were going to leave.

"Mom, we've been here forever, can we go home, now?" he whined.

"Yeah, I mean, we've eaten breakfast, lunch, and dinner here, man. If I get another McDonaldland game card, I'm gonna go nuts," said Eric, Danny's older brother.

"Look, boys, you're going to have to ask your father. I'm just not too sure about those police cars outside," said Mrs. Henry as she adjusted her coat like a pillow behind her head. "Can one of you run to the bathroom and get me a drink of water? I think one of those nice cashiers will give you a courtesy cup."

"Christ," murmured Eric as he watched Danny manoeuvre through the groups of people camped out on the floor of the restaurant, "What a suck-but, always doing what Mom says."

"Eric, that's enough of that language," warned Mr. Henry who was sitting in his own booth furiously scratching off a McDonaldland game card. "Hey, look at that! I won a free-order of fries." Mr Henry's ruddy face shone with excitement. "I've never won anything, except for that one time I won the television set from the Paradise Condo sweepstakes."

"You never won that television set, honey. Remember? We had to drive to La Jolla to look at the condominium development before you could claim the TV, and you said there wasn't a bat's chance in..."

"Forget what I said," growled Mr. Henry, the look of elation completely gone from his face. "You know, you always have to, make some negative comment. Let me be happy, just this once, let me be happy."

Eric swung out of his swivel chair and left before things got worse. The next thing would be the argument about whose family had come over to the house and stayed for two weeks, never once offering to do the dishes or even take them all out to dinner. He had heard the scene before.

"Eric, there's nobody at the counter," said Danny. He had reappeared empty-handed.

"What do you mean, moron, you're such a gufus," Eric replied. "I guess I'll have to get it because little baby here can't ask the lady to help him." Eric mimicked these last words in a mocking baby voice. Danny slouched back to the table. "Move it chicken-

shit," Eric hissed, forcing Danny to run.

Eric walked over to the counter himself. It was getting really dark outside and those goddam police lights, they were lighting up the place like it was a show or something.

"Hey, um, I like need some service here," he yelled back to the kitchen.

"Leave it to these workers, probably lazing off in the back," said an old man who had taken a place in line behind him. He had taken off his shoes and was milling around with a cup of coffee. "Do you know if they have any stirrers around here, son?"

"No, I don't," said Eric. The whole scene was beginning to piss him off. Where were the cashiers, anyways? And really, Danny was right. Why had they been here for seven hours, and why had everyone in the restaurant been there for seven hours? No one came in, no one went. It was kind of weird.

"Hey, bud, how long have you been here?" asked Eric of a twenty-year-old studenty-looking guy with a ponytail.

"Oh, around seven hours. Man, isn't it great? I mean, since the cashiers left we've been, like, helping ourselves to whatever we wanted. Me and my friend, Joe, here, we, like, figured out how to run the shake machine and mixed all the flavors together, you know. Man, I bet Old McDonald would lose it if he knew."

"Yeah," laughed Eric as he watched the guy and his friend vault over the counter into the back. What a bunch of stoners.

"Eric, Eric, would you ask Mrs. Leavinson if I could borrow some Kleenex?" Mrs. Henry's voice drifted over the poker game in the playland birthday room.

"Okay," he growled. Immediately a woman rocking a baby and taking small bites out of a fillet-of-fish sandwich gave him a dirty look. "I just got her down for her after-dinner nap, can you please be quiet?" Eric just rolled his eyes and walked off.

Mrs. Leavinson turned out to be cleaning up coke from the floor when he found her at one of the side booths in the non-smoking section. Her daughter was slurping up what was left from her large size cup with her fat red and yellow straw.

"Well, Eric, fancy meeting you here. Are your folks with you? Over by the emergency exit? Well, I'll have to go over and chat. Sure, here's some

kleenex. Oh, and tell your mother Margery Dunne's daughter had her baby this morning—a healthy eight pound baby boy.”

As Eric walked back to the table an immense anger began to pump through him. This was absurd. They had been in here for seven goddam hours, the cashiers disappeared, no one came in, no one came out...”

“What the hell is going on here!” he screamed. “WHAT THE HELL...” He stopped back in horror. Janie Lantz was standing at the salad bar with her friend, Rachel.

“God, Eric, what’s your deal,” Janie asked, frozen in the position of shaking out crumbled imitation bacon bits on her salad.

“Janie, I ah, ah, was just kidding, I...”

“What a dweeb,” snickered Rachel, and they both progressed down the line like they had never seen him before. Eric thought of grabbing a styro-foam plate and trying to catch up with them, but there were too many people in front of him.

“Eric, I really need you over here,” called Mrs. Henry.

“Coming, Mom,” shouted Eric. “I’m coming.”

When he got back to the table, Mr. Henry was gone, the remnants of his game card lying in little pieces on the paper placemat with the pictures of the new McDonald’s chicken sandwich on it. Danny was sitting on the floor playing with a strange little boy wearing a plastic Ronald McDonald bib.

“Who’s that kid,” asked Eric as he handed Mrs. Henry a wad of pink Puffs kleenex.”

“I don’t know, dear. It’s a real mystery, but isn’t he the cutest thing? Look at that curly black hair. I remember when you were little, you had the nicest hair. I used to comb it back in a...”

“Quit it, Mom.” He looked around to see if Janie and Rachel were in sight. Then he looked down at the kid on the floor. His nose was running, and he had pieces of chicken McNugget on the sleeves of his garanimal shirt. He was trying to color in the picture of the cheeseburgler on his Happy Meal box.

“Geez, Danny, what are ya playing with him for?”

“There’s nobody else around,” pouted Danny. “I tried to get Dad to play hangman, but he’s in the bathroom trying to dry off his pants from where that old man’s hot coffee spilled on them.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Bet he was mad,” laughed Eric.

“It’s not funny, Eric, it was hot, I saw steam coming off the cup when the man walked by us,” said Danny.

“It wasn’t funny, Eric, waa,waa,waa, I’m a little goddie-two-shoes,” sneered Eric, “it wasn’t funny, Eric, I...”

“COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP. WE’VE GOT THE PLACE SURROUNDED, I REPEAT,

COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP.”

Eric was startled by the blaring of a police megaphone. Before he could even move, the right side door burst open and an LAPD officer jumped the ponytailed-student guy.

“You’re under arrest, you may remain silent until you...”

“Hey, man, I didn’t do nothing. I mean the machine was there, and...” the guy was beginning to blubber.

“Yeah, he didn’t do nothing,” pleaded Joe. I was here...”

“Must be the accomplice,” one of the men said matter-of-factly to the officer beside him. “Yep, matches the description. You’re under arrest, too.”

Eric watched the scene with morbid fascination. Man, he thought to himself, they really do have television cameras by the cash registers.

“Now, just a minute, these young gentlemen were kind enough to make shakes for my kids, and I just don’t see why you’re hassling them. Go after real criminals, is this what we pay you for—to pick on harmless kids?” shouted a middle-aged man from the self service tray area.

“Yeah,” echoed the other customers. “Why don’t you leave them alone.”

“Really,” said Mrs. Henry indignantly as she bent down to straighten Danny’s shirt. “I don’t know what the world is coming to. Police officers harassing nice young men. If they ever bothered our Eric, we’d have something to say about it, wouldn’t we, Bob.”

“Yes,” Mr. Henry mechanically replied. He was busy rolling down his pants leg so he could tie a bandage from the first aid kit in the Men’s Restroom around his burned calf.

“Leave them alone? LEAVE THEM ALONE??!!” shouted the policeman. “Are you people morons? These two have held you hostage for seven hours, and you want us to leave them alone?”

“Maybe it’s a case of that hostage-taker identification thing like in Iran, sir,” whispered one of the other officers.

“Shut up,” snarled the policeman and then louder, “if you think that paid officials, that the SWAT team that’s been on the roof here for more than seven hours, the FBI investigators from L.A. and the men who risked their lives to save you are going to take this kind of ingratitude, then maybe we ought to leave, maybe we ought to just go and...”

“Yeah, why don’t you just leave,” shouted the middle-aged man again. “Leave us so we can get some peace, just leave.”

“LEAVE, LEAVE, LEAVE, shouted the restaurant, LEAVE, LEAVE, LEAVE.” Even Mrs. Henry and Eric joined in, “LEAVE, LEAVE, LEAVE.”

“Hey!” shouted someone in the din, “it’s Candy Jennings from CNN.”

"And here we are at the scene of the McDonald's hostage take-over in Pasadena, California," gushed Candy Jennings into the camera that appeared from back of the kitchen. "Sir, can you tell me what happened?" She thrust the mike in front of the face of the old man with no shoes who had spilled coffee on Mr. Henry.

"well, I come to McDonald's for my morning cup of coffee, and after I get here all these police cars block up outside, so I decides to stay in here until this here policeman barges in here shouting at some kids."

"What?" asked Candy, a look of bewilderment on her face. "Is this man senile?!" she screamed. "I'm a live cut to a hostage taking, and some man walks up saying everything was fine in here until the police came?! RODNEY, get me my producer!" The camera man sprinted off with a look of terror on his face.

"Senile? Now young lady, I might be older, but I'm not senile," lectured the old man, obviously hurt. "You young people are..."

"Does anyone know what is happening here. WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING HERE?!" screamed Candy.

"I do," bellowed a voice from the back of the restaurant. The voice carried an authority that silenced the crowd.

"Well, then why don't you come over here to the camera and tell me," said Candy in a strangled voice.

"Okay," answered the man, and he walked up to the front. He had on a plaid shirt and a red bandana around his head. In his back pocket was a thick looking wallet.

"Now, speak into the mike, and I'll give you the questions. First, tell me what happened here at McDonald's on Foothill Road, and how you were involved."

"Honey," whispered Mrs. Henry to Eric, "could you pass me my diet coke."

"Yeah," Eric hissed, "but I'm trying to listen here, okay?"

"Sorry," snapped Mrs. Henry, "and the next time you talk to me like that young man, I'm going to tell your father."

"Right," mumbled Eric under his breath.

"Well," the man began, "basically, me and my friend, Steve, here, got up this morning and decided to rob the Toys R Us across the street."

"Jesus Christ," snapped Candy as she snatched back the mike.

"No, Ma'am," pleaded the man, "I'm not lying. Steve and I robbed that Toys R us over there and when we saw cops were following us we came in here to get cover, and we ordered food and all, and just stayed. But the cops outside never left, so we just waited. But these crazy people were just staying around, so we couldn't do anything."

"We weren't doing anything because there were all those cop cars outside, young man," said the Old Man. He was still angry about being called senile on live television.

"Is this true?" Candy asked the officer standing off to the side.

"What?" he asked. "Oh, yes, I believe it is. The assisitant manager barricaded himself in the basement and called us to tell us there was a hostage situation here, but he couldn't identify the attackers. When the other employees escaped they couldn't provide descriptions, either. One of them saw a man come in with a gun in his pocket but couldn't exactly describe him. I guess I grabbed the wrong guys," he added sheepishly, nodding toward the direction of the two handcuffed to one another behind the counter.

"So I'm standing here TALKING TO A MAN WITH A GUN?" screamed Candy.

"Yes, that's right," crooned the policeman, getting more comfortable in front of the camera. "Absolutely right Candy, and we're...." suddenly realizing where he was, "...WE'RE GOING TO ARREST HIM."

"ARREST HIM?" shouted the middle-aged man. "Don't you think you've arrested enough people for today? I'm telling ya everything was fine, FINE, until you and your buddies here decided to come get some action at the neighborhood McDonald's." Wild applause followed his words. "And another thing—if we want to sit here for seven hours, it's our God-given..."

"He's getting away!" screamed one of the other officers. The crowd ran to the window. The man and his accomplice were forcing the outside cops to cuff them as they clamored on to the paddy wagon. "These people are nuts!" he screamed frantically to Candy as they sped off, "just plain wackos."

The people in the restaurant weren't too happy about that. Even Eric felt his fur ruffled. "Like that one dude said," Eric later explained to Danny as they stood in line for another round of Big Macs, "if we want to sit here for seven hours it's out own god-damn business."

Grey, Hazy Mist

Grey, hazy mist
clouds the glow
in her red-rimmed eyes.
Confusion has become
her mentor.
Unwanted oblivion
tears the only one
she knew apart.
Confessions
to a silent
Savior
doesn't Absolve her soul.

She never appears
among the Silver Gods
hides within
the broken pieces,
hoping to be cut,
seeing the Reality
of Life.
To feel something
except Repression,
Guilt and Depression.
Pain has conquered Pleasure.

Guilt has taken over
this reign of Hate.
Kills more souls
than a piercing
Metal blade.

Silver Gods,
with pure silver souls,
never tarnishes
in the acid rain.
Fire and Brimstone
hitting,
ever breaking
can't Absolve
what can't be resolved.
Breaking her only portal
to their world.
The shards of broken past
distorts her face,
showing her true
soul and mind.
The way
they see her.

--Gretchen Zehner

Sacrifice

R. Matthew Butzow

He would usually wake at the sound of the door falling shut hard against the frame, and he would throw the sheets across the bed where she would have been, stepping onto the cold floor, searching for his wrinkled trousers. And pulling them up around his waist, he would run over to the frosted window to look down upon her, leaving him, in the pale glow of early morning light. Having nothing to say, he would usually drop his head and smile.

Sometimes she would look up to see him at the window holding onto his pants at the waist, and she would mouth the words without saying them. I love you. And she would spin around on the balls of her feet smiling, running to catch the train.

The mornings were always dark. A washed-out blue light from outside the window tried its best to reach into the room through the thick gelatin darkness. A washed-out blue like the skin tone of the models on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine. A bluish grey, like the suffocated tissue of a corpse. And there it was, trapped in a curtain of cigarette smoke, fighting to touch the cold wall on the other side of the room. The light was cold. A light that could pierce window frost all day long, but never melt it.

He would sit on the bed with his back to the window—his bare feet—on the floor. The floor was cold and dry and there was dust that had settled over its surface—especially along the hardwood seams.

Her feet must seem to twist into the very surface of the hardwood floor when she turned on her toes, he would think.

She was a dancer. He was not.

In the kitchen he would drink his breakfast from a china coffee cup, and watch the

cigarette smoke hang in the air on the warmth of orange sunlight as he looked out into Manhattan. He was alone.

Between the two of them the ashtrays were always full at the studio. They each had their own beveled crystal ashtray about as large as a hand spread open and as deep as the first knuckle on an index finger. His was always on the paint table in the near corner, away from the brushes. Hers was usually on the kitchen table in the afternoon and middle evening until she went to bed, where it sat on the night stand to the side of her magazines until morning.

There were times when he would phone her at the dance studio just to hear her voice. He would swear he could hear her smiling up and down his spine. And for a moment he would almost believe that the whole world was quiet. She was always quiet—shy.

On the weekends she didn't teach and they would spend those mornings together. He would always think of her in bare feet standing at the refrigerator on her toes with the door standing open and her pajama top unbuttoned down the front, her long black hair spilling down her back, the sleeves half way up her arms and the warm sunlight on her skin.

The shower would wash her from his body, but he could always smell her perfume somewhere in the room—especially near the bed, hiding in the sheets. He would imagine that she had come back early from dance class, and was hiding beneath the unmade sheets. He would watch the paint on his hands and forearms slip down the drain in small dark metallic particles, each one about the size of a sand grain. It was like watching an hour glass.

His studio was spacious and dark, with hardwood floors, gray unfinished walls and shades closed over the windows, in the afternoon. He liked it this way. After every gallery showing, and much to drink, he would bring her back to the studio and they would dance alone to a waltz on the stereo. They would swoon together in formal wear, laughing and gazing at one another. And she would fall against him, pressing herself to his chest and he would kiss the top of her head. Both of them would smile with their eyes closed.

There would often be two wine glasses with tall, dark stems and a long empty green bottle on the tile counter top near the sink. And in his mind he would see her dark, tender lips gently touching the edge of the glass as if she was right there drinking from it. He would wipe the lipstick away with his thumb and rinse the glasses.

Almost everyday he would meet her in Little Italy for lunch. He would drink wine with his pasta, she would have water with her salad. They sat near the window most of the time, on the far wall of the restaurant, where they could be alone—together. He normally wore pleated trousers, a tie and a long-sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She would wear her hair up in a bun, faded blue jeans and an oversized Maine sweater that covers one shoulder and exposed the other. Before they finished eating, before they even excused themselves from the table, he had always started painting again, and he knew that she was already dancing.

In the afternoon he would pace around the open studio, his heels clicking over the floor, his glasses out on the end of his nose from staring at the ground. He would twirl a dry, long wooden-handled brush up and down through one set of fingers while holding a glass of dark wine perpendicular to the floor in the tips of others. Hanging his head, he would notice that there were always spots of dried paint on the floor and on the tops of his shoes.

They were her favorite shoes of his, and sometimes early in the morning she would get out of bed and slip her tiny feet into them, shuffle to the kitchen and make a pot of coffee.

For hours he would watch the canvas like a television screen, as if a program was unfolding in front of him without his help. Then he would take his brush, a remote, and change the channel—flashing colors across the neutral canvas. He was looking through the canvas, not at it. He was seeing another dimension. A dimension he wanted to show to himself more clearly, and to others since they could not see it at all without his help. It was not as if was applying the lines, the shapes and the colors with his brush, but as if he was erasing the neutral curtain of canvas which covered the image beneath.

There were times, usually before an exhibition, that he would go night and day thinking only of the canvas, the brushes and the paint, refusing to see anything else of the world. He would rest only when he collapses from exhaustion, and upon regaining consciousness he would lift himself back to his feet and begin painting again.

There were times, usually before a performance, when she would be gone for days at a time. When she would sleep at the dance studio, not eat at all, and practice with bleeding feet. Feet that bled through her point shoes and into the seams of the hardwood floor. She would practice to the point of exhaustion, sometimes collapsing to the floor, risking serious injuries upon her fragile body.

Sometimes he would miss dinner, and she would eat alone—like he did almost every morning. She would sit in the kitchen, at the end of the dinner table with her legs crossed, her elbow on the table and her head resting in her hand, watching him paint.

He was a painter. She was not.

When he was finished he would walk

into the darkness with a glowing cigarette, where she waited for him in bed. She would hear his shoes coming closer, and she would smile with anticipation. He would undress and climb into bed. Drawing near to her, he would gather her solid body in his arms—and kiss her neck.

He would always love her more than life, but he would always be married to his painting. And she—she would always try to understand why he couldn't have both.

A few years ago he was in the kitchen washing dishes. He was reaching for a tall dark stemmed wine glass when he accidentally brushed a long, empty green bottle onto the tile floor of the kitchen.

He watched it drop off the counter, four feet through the air, toward the floor. It fell slowly as if telling him he had time to reach out and catch it before it hit the ground. Instead he watched it fall. He didn't even attempt to move to save the bottle. Not even a flinch. The upper side of the bottle made the first contact with the floor, imploding, sending a stream of left-over wine out of the neck. It appeared as if its chest had been crushed, and it began to bleed from the damaged area, splashing wine over the tile. The rear section of the bottle was the

next section to impact the floor. It was heavy and shattered the entire mid-section inward as it hit. The end of the bottle itself did not break, but bounced spinning upward with sharp edges, throwing wine into the air. Finally the neck of the bottle, free from the shattered remains, bounced forward on the tile, also without breaking—the bottle decapitated. There was no noise at all. He wasn't listening anyway. He could see the protrusions of dark liquid reaching out several inches from the collapsed mid-section of the bottle, and the silver-like fragments of glass that were carried outward in the small torrents. It was beautiful. The dark green fragments of glass, ranging in size from puzzle pieces to tiny asbestos fibers, the deep purplish-red wine and the white tile.

He thought about having lipstick on his thumb.

It had been five years since he had seen her when he received a telephone call informing him that she had been driving to see her parents in New Jersey, when her car plunged into the Hudson River and she drowned. On that day he announced to his distributors at the gallery that he would be filing for divorce.

Telephone Hour

Greg Lineweaver

Look into the heart of a city and see what you find. Peer into the depths and see the walking dead. The city is a place of mystery, of intrigue, a place of darkness and hostility. The city is unfriendly. Ride the bus and get off at any corner and we see the madness and darkness as we step onto the cold, grey cement. Ride the bus and get off on Lake Michigan Avenue, Ohio Street, or even at the corner of Ninth and St. Clair. Face the stains, face reality. We ride the bus and we get off at Ninth and St. Clair, and we step into the world of Thomas, a world where Thomas is the only good and the only evil.

Tucked away in his corner apartment, Thomas hovers over his phone. He is poised, wound tight as the last echoes of the ringing fade away into the cracks of the cement-block walls. His eyes dart from the black phone to the door with eleven deadbolts; polished, gleaming, identical deadbolts. The deadbolts are all brand new. He lets his gaze travel to another door in the wall. This one is black and wooden, but unbolted. The door is cracked open and inside he can see books that reach from the floor to the ceiling, filling every available inch of space in the entire room. The books are spiral pads colored red, green, blue, yellow and purple. In darkness, though, they are all a faded grey. Seeing them sleeping like that, it only takes a glance to key his stiff body into animation.

Thomas wakes at 8:00 am, as he always does, even though he has never owned an alarm clock. He rises, steps into his once brown, but now grey, leather lace-trailing shoes, pulls a pair of paint splattered tan working pants over the shoes, throws on a red hunting shirt with brown patches on the sleeves, and places a navy knit winter hat on his head. He shuffles to his door, releases the eleven shining deadbolts, closes the door behind him, pulls out a massive silver ring with eleven keys, and systematically locks the bolts. He turns, descends three flights of stairs, picks up a stack of newspapers in the foyer of his apartment building, and walks down the stone steps to the sidewalk lining Ninth Street. Once there, he cuts the string on the papers, fifty copies of The Daily, and lifts the top one off the stack. He raises the paper high above him, moving slowly, as if activated by mechanical hydrolic force, until his arm reaches full extension and stops. He

only stands for five minutes before he is approached by his first customer.

"Hi, Thomas!" the man says with a deep, rich voice. "Almost beat ya' out this morning. Thought I might've had a chance 'cept the 7:30 train at Pettibone was five minutes late."

Thomas looks at the sky. He sees the grey clouds of a November day as he listens to the man ask him why he always wears the same clothes. The voice sounds familiar, but he doesn't attempt to place it. His eyes scan down the face of the apartment building across the street. He sees open windows, sees clothes hanging out to dry, sees the constant color changing of a small square television. He sees heavy drapes covering several of the windows, drapes that shut out the world. The face might be that of one of his "regulars," but he can't tell because he never sees it. The man is talking about the rising gas prices which have led him to start riding the trains into the city and about the new briefcase he has just bought. Thomas returns his attention back to the sky and continues to ignore him, not listening, but not thinking, either. Then the man is gone, walking down Ninth Street into the insanity of downtown. Thomas pulls out another paper, raises it above him, and stands motionless; a modern artist's tribute to a twenty-first century Statue of Liberty.

He crosses from the phone, throws open the door, falls to his knees, snatches up a notebook, opens it to the last page, sees it is covered with numbers, replaces it, then grabs for another. Looking amidst the stacks of notebooks, it takes him several tries before he finds one that is not completed. Quickly retracing his steps to the phone, Thomas lunges for the receiver, nearly knocks it off the white pedestal, then brandishes it high over his head with an extended arm. With his back to the pale streetlights shining through the third-story apartment, the polished, black receiver glints as it catches reflections of the lights and casts white along the walls. He rips through the pages of the notebook, searching frantically for his last entry. Finally, with a sense of overwhelming success, he tumbles upon the last recording of the day before, "335-6874." Dashing the notebook to the ground, he stabs at the numbers on the face of the phone, rattling the phone's innards with each powerful strike. He dials

335-6875.

"You have reached Furnitureland," a pre-recorded male voice says over the phone. "All our lines are busy right now, but if you would like to hold, an operator will be along shortly to help you with whatever furniture questions or needs you might have..."

He presses the receiver into the side of his head, gripping the black object fiercely. The dull plastic wears a groove just above his ear.

"...and love seat combo for only \$280," the recording is saying in it's metallic, monotonous voice.

Thomas slams the receiver back home into its cradle. His sweaty hands slip away and he searches for a pencil to mark the number into a notebook.

The number recorder, he dials 335-6876.

"Guy's 24-hour Coffeehouse, can I help you?" a young female voice asks into the mouthpiece after two rings. The voice is innocent. In the background, he can hear the clinking of dishes being washed and stacked, the electronic beeps and manual crashes of a register ringing up sales, and the persistent, low hum of the nightly customers conversing in subdued tones.

"Hello?" she says. "Hello?!...HE-LLO?!!!"

There was a short pause, then the sweet voice turns to ice.

"Listen, you creep! I am **sick to death** of these disgusting phone calls. You think this is funny?"

She stops and waits for some sort of response, but Thomas has already disconnected her as he lets the receiver fall from his grasp and tumble onto its mount. The sound of plastic meeting plastic rings in his ears and seems to bounce off the walls of the apartment.

He marks the number in the notebook and dials 335-6877.

Footsteps outside the door. Thomas lies on the cold, cement floor which blends into the cinder-block walls and makes his room look like a cell block. It is his prison. The jailor is outside.

Knock, knock!

Thomas is laying face down on the newspapers that make up his bed. His arms rest close to his side and his nose and chin flatten on the copy of the Sunday Daily.

Knock, knock! "Thomas," a voice calls into the room.

Newsprint is on his face and he sees the black words that are only a blur from the closeness of his face to the newspaper.

"Thomas, I know you're in there!"

His arms slide up his body and wing out like a

grasshopper. The papers rustle under him. He shoves with his upper body and his torso rolls over, off of the papers and onto the dusty cement floor. He slowly rises.

"I hear you moving, Thomas...let me in."

Thomas stands in front of the eleven deadbolts and reaches for the top one. He touches the shiny, cold metal and flips it to the right. It snaps as the clockwise motion carries it all the way around. He does the same with each of the remaining ten locks, but leaves the three chains in place. He turns the handle on the door, and it opens only as far as the chains will allow.

The landlord stands in the hall of his respectable apartment building and wonders why he ever allowed someone as lunatic as Thomas to rent a place from him. He thinks about this as the eleven new deadbolts slowly release, one at a time.

The door cracks open and the landlord sees a blood shot eye peering out through the space. The eye is black around the edges and hides beneath a swatch of greasy black hair. The eye looks out at him suspiciously. He sees half a mouth with nearly black lips. There is a beard on Thomas and it grows wildly, untrimmed.

Beyond the eye, the landlord sees a piece of the room. He sees newspapers on the floor and barely, a black telephone resting on the floor and barely, a black telephone resting on a white pedestal. The room is dark because the only light is that which is let in through the windows.

"Thomas, I need your rent," he says.

The eye looks at him, unblinking, and the mouth does not even twitch.

"C'mon, Thomas, we go through this every month. I...need...your...rent. You know, the green stuff that you give me so you can live here..."

The eye continues to stare at him unblinkingly. But the mouth suddenly moves and the door shuts in the landlord's face. From outside, the landlord hears the bolts slowly click as, one by one, they are locked back into their secure positions.

He listens and hears the shuffling of calloused feet scrape against the cement floor. They move slowly, rhythmically. They fade out of earshot, and the landlord has to wait in silence for several minutes. Then he hears them again and they approach the door. He hears rustling at his feet and sees a tattered envelope appear from under the door. He bends and looks at the envelope. Inside is the money Thomas owes in rent. He takes the money, places it in his pocket and slides the envelope back under the door. There is silence from the other side. The landlord stands and walks away from Thomas for another month.

In the first ring, a woman with a nasal voice picks up the phone and continues talking as if she has just been interrupted from a very intense conversation. Thomas toys with the twisted phone cord. He carefully inserts his middle finger through the black coils until it completely disappears, completely engulfed in the winding plastic. He is slow, methodic, sensual in the way that he wraps his hands up with the black cord. The coil becomes a living thing in his bone white, blue-veined hands. It is a black snake; black and poisonous.

"...I just don't know about Jason," she is saying. "He never goes out and plays with the other boys in the neighborhood. Of course, it's probably because **they** never ask him to. You know, I just heard on Oprah the other day that children that are too assertive at an early age can grow up to have psychological problems in the workplace. Can you believe it? **Psy-cho-lo-gi-cal pro-blems...**for being **assertive!** Can you imagine? Anyway..."

Thomas lets the phone crash down on its cradle as the cord slides away from his fingers. He places the pencil on the white pedestal beside the phone and quickly dials the next number.

"Hello, this Charley speaking. Can I help you, please?" a small voice inquires after one ring.

Seconds pass and the voice asks shyly, "Hello? Is anybody there?"

The plastic of the receiver is warm against his face and condensation has gathered on the mouthpiece where Thomas exhales. The muscles in his hand begin to spasm from gripping the receiver for such a long time without a rest. Faintly, he hears behind the child a parental voice.

"Who is it, honey?"

"I don't know," says the child. "They won't answer."

"Then hang up and come back to the table."

The phone clicks and a dial tone again rebounds in Thomas' head. He marks the number and calls another. This time he dials 335-6879.

From outside on the street, Thomas appears to be a living silhouette in the window of his third-story corner apartment. The phone glued to his face is an abnormal growth, and the cord springs from his ear in the evening shadows. The number he dials rings five times before it is picked up.

"He-Hello?" a frail woman's voice nearly whispers into the mouthpiece.

"I-Is that you, Ben?" she asks. "Are you home? Home from the war?"

Thomas stares at the black casing of the phone. He sees its rounded corners and runs his finger between the numbers on the touch-tone face. It is smooth, smooth as the porcelain sink of his kitchen.

"I'll be right there, I promise. I'll take you out to dinner, at Rick's Cafeteria, your favorite...I remember. And we can walk to Higbee's, and I'll buy you...What?" the voice cracks. "Oh, you're right, we'll have to go to the Arcade, first, so you can try and win a stuffed bear for your bed..."

Thomas' ear throbs from the pressure of the durable plastic against his delicate flesh. His pale, shrunken hand becomes invisible as he rests it on the white of the pedestal.

"Why did you never write to me, Ben? Why did you make me wait so long to hear? Don't you know the torture these two years have been? But you must, because now you've come home...home, to your lonely mama..." she practically whispers into Thomas' ear.

The delicate voice is silent for a moment, as if it is waiting with patience while a young, excited voice answers its unanswered prayers. Then, at a suitable breaking point, it picks back up again with newfound energy and continues its conversation with whichever angel it hears.

"But I'll see you soon, though. Right, Ben? Just as..."

There is a crack as Thomas slams the phone back onto its cradle hard enough to split the molded casing. He records the number in the notebook, then dials 335-6880.