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**Pecan Grove
Review**

***Volume VI
Spring 2001***

**Pecan Grove
Review**

**St. Mary's University
San Antonio, TX**

**Volume VI
Spring 2001**

A special note of thanks to all who submitted,
and to all those students who were involved
in the very difficult process of selection.

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Pecan Grove Review

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Pecan Grove Review is published each spring by students and faculty of St. Mary's University. This publication is sponsored by the English Communications Department. Submissions of poetry, short fiction, and essays are accepted during the fall semester. Selected writers should be able to submit an IBM compatible disk (Word 97 -- available in the computer lab). Payment is one copy, and all rights revert to the individual writer after publication.

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After the Flood

Debra Johnson

There is a way to begin this. Certain an onslaught
Nature will hit it. There could be no other
kick or rick. I see it all.

Look at the
sunlight
you could touch it away

and the world would be clean again,
new. Then everything would come back
fast. Here we are in the meadow

all the grass water brown but the hills
and yet when up there
green, tender, a reborn by and

I am breathing with the water
and the wind, the air
There's a sound of us, we should be singing

and the pain that we have learned
the shadows, fiber, and of the
it has taken up all we see

waiting for us to notice
The dunes are smooth like marbles
my father dove their softness

into a pipe. He built them
I keep trying to find a better way
but each time I find no more

How dusty bells
increased. How many ways
a thing can be broken

Pecan Grove Review

After the Flood

Debra Innocenti

There is a way to begin this. Create an emptiness.
Nature will fill it, then build on top of that
rock by rock. I won't do it.

Look at the jays, there's no color left in the days
but theirs. The light is so thin,
you could scrub it away

and the world would be clean again,
bare. Then everything would come back.
See. Here we are in the meadow,

all the grass winter brown but the oats
who've shown up overdressed –
green, tender, a rebuke to grief.

I am breathing into the silence
and the trees, too, join in.
There's a chorus of us. we could be angels.

And the pain, that somehow entered
this equation, hibernates, or else
it has diluted into all we see

waiting for us to notice.
The claws are strewn like blankets.
My father piles their corpses

into a pyre. He burns them.
I keep trying to find another way,
but each time I end up here.

How many paths
there are. How many ways
a thing can be broken.

The odds are against wholeness,
but I try to will it, arrange myself
into a patchwork of faith.

Even the sparrows who study my father's ashes
are still. They're waiting.
They want to see what we will do.

How the World Comes to Be

Eve McQuade

Night is a vase
that holds fresh cut stars
blue marbles
with wild glowing moon
the time
for prayers
pleasures
fantasy.
Then a candle is lit
in a fresh flush of fire
stillness
fades
mystery vanishes
noisy thoughts
worries
rushing.
Then the flame is blown out
cool crisp color remains
and the vase
can be filled again.

This Poem is Better Backwards

Claudia Bejarano

I see you across a space
Your pace too quick for me to bother
And you turn around and wave that warm wave
Smiling like a criminal.
That smile always makes me want to rip off my face
But with every shiny, white, perfect tooth I stay a second
longer
Until you are within a kiss of me.
You go in my chest and take my breath
And smiling, you hold up my pulsing heart
Red dripping from the ends of your pointy elbows
In long drips like paint on canvas.
I watch you toy
I wait for you to please give me my life
But you drop it hard on the concrete and some pieces chip off
and stain my stockings.
I do nothing but watch you at play
And you pounce on my heart like a child jumping into rain
puddles,
Breaking it into pieces so fine, they will never reunite.
With the care of a sculptor
You gather the pieces and mold them back like a snowball
And like a snowball you hurl it back into my chest again
And send me on my way.

Alaska

Matthew Landers

A boy, young and small,
five years old, maybe six
amidst hundreds of trees
skinny green on rolling hills
like the desert dunes of sand,
for hours, on the lake's shore
I'd sit beneath the rustling leaves
spread above like a canopy.
There, at water's edge,
gray fur, thick in bristles,
heavy tail swishing
back and forth
back and forth,
snarling, rattling in
my ears, like a charged chainsaw.
The muzzle dips low,
in clear water, ripples
billowing, billowing
like the rings of a planet.
Shining stalactites stagger
along the curled lip,
red and bloated
and curve away.
At water's edge,
golden, liquid eyes catch
my young face, and
turn back to rusted sand,
orange yet brown,
where I now stand,
looking out over, the clear water
shining sunlight shimmers
like panned gold before my eyes
and the heaving fur
turns, slips away into the trees
on silent footsteps,
from the water's edge.

Butterflies

Maria Ureste

I saw a girl with curly hair,
the color of volcanic mud
with traces of cooling fire.

Amongst the chaotic bunch
of twists and turns,
four sapphire and gold
butterflies are caught
in the netted mass.

Struggling to break free
from the peat moss mane
as it weaves around them,
the butterflies wait
when the wind will shift
her hair just right.

from the water's edge
on silent footsteps
turns, slips away into the trees
and the heaving fur
like panned gold before my eyes
shining sunlight shimmers
looking out over the clear water
where I now stand,
orange yet brown,
tum back to rusted sand,
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At water's edge
and curve away
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in clear water, ripples
The muzzle dips low,
my ears, like a striped chinew
snatching, rattling in
back and forth,
back and forth,
heavy tail swishing
gray fur, thick in patches,
There, at water's edge,
spread above like a canopy
I'd sit beneath the rustling leaves
for hours, on the lake's shore
like the desert dunes of sand,
skinny green on rolling hills
amidst hundreds of trees
five years old, maybe six
A boy, young and small,

The Lessons We Learned **For Father John Rechten** **Eric Cruz**

Father, your thinned fingers pressed together
propped the open book, with its now ragged
pages, jolting the fallen
eyelids of your children. It grows—
your voice like an avalanche
that buries us in the depths. Slightly
stooped were your shoulders that rocked
when follies tugged a chuckle away
from a pursed face that bent
from your warmth toward us. Fading
is why those squinted
eyes shifted like a daydream on everyone—
Father... why did you bleed
for us? Lips often smirked at the tattered
relics you cupped in those creased hands, though faintly
the soft beats echoed in our minds.
Why, when you throbbled for rest, did you trudge?
Our tombstones
were etched with the omens of glassy-eyed stupor
walking in half-steps, clomping to a faint march of reasoning;
our hearts numb, our minds a deserted cause.
But you chose to shatter our silence, swatting ignorance
that suckled at our entombed passions.
You wailed when we whimpered,
eyes wide for the moment laughter would blaze the air
with traces of embracement—Towards you
our minds were a dropped jaw. We did wish
we could consume you, Father, and perhaps we did,
but shame blankets us now
and the book that lays as a maiden in slumber.
The last lesson you gave,
your eyes anointed us, and though your voice
was a shadow, when you exited, you left the door
half cracked.

Movie Tricks

Steve Acevedo

“Daddy, how does Superman change so fast?” I asked. For some reason I didn’t wonder how he managed to lift up entire buildings, freeze lakes with his breath, shoot lasers beams out of his eyes, or even fly for that matter. All I wanted to know was how Clark Kent was able to strip out of his nerdy business suit, and change into his spandex Superman outfit in a split-second.

Every time I saw him do that on screen, I used every bit of my six-year old brain to figure it out. I never could though, but fortunately my dad knew a little bit about moviemaking and special effects, and offered a simple answer:

“Well Mijo, first they film Clark Kent (played by Christopher Reeve, just in case there’s someone out there who didn’t know that) in his suit. Then they stop the camera. Then he changes into his Superman suit, and then they start filming again.”

“Huh?” I was thoroughly confused and baffled. I had no idea how stopping the movie camera could somehow give Clark Kent the chance to change so fast. The look on my face showed.

“Well son, they edit and use movie tricks,” my dad told me.

Like I said, he only knew a little bit. He wasn’t known for his extensive movie knowledge.

“Hmm, I see. Thanks dad,” I told him.

Yeah right. Come on, I was only six years old. I didn’t know what he was talking about. He thought he had given me a good enough answer, but remember, I was young. So that’s when my Dad, not known for his creativity, decided to become a director, and make our own movie to show *p-2Xme how it was done. He got his VHS camcorder, popped in a tape, and with a star-studded cast of my older brother as the Evil Villain, my mom as the Poor, Innocent Bystander, and me as the Man of Steel, we actually made our own Superman movie in our backyard.

There I was, the little Clark Kent in jeans and a T-shirt, waiting by the monkey bars. My Dad was getting the camera ready, and that's when he called the famous movie word, "ACTION!"

That was my cue. I began to cross the monkey bars, when all of the sudden, I heard the desperate cry for help. I jumped off the bars, ran behind the tree, and... "CUT!"

Next, my mom (also the costume designer) brought me my Superman pajamas, which actually looked like the real thing—red briefs and all. I changed, ran back behind the tree, and my Dad called "action" again. The Poor, Innocent Bystander (my mom) was calling for help, so I jumped out from behind the tree, attacked the Evil Villain, and proceeded to throw several "movie punches"—including one that actually connected. My brother didn't like that too much. But at least I saved my mom.

We went on to shoot a few more scenes, and after we were done, went inside to our living room/theater, and watched my Dad's directorial debut. He was no Steven Spielberg, but by running behind the tree, stopping the camera, and a changing from my day clothes to my Superman outfit, I saw myself go from Clark Kent to Superman instantly on TV.

"Wow! So that's how they do it," I thought. I was on top of the world. I finally learned how Superman was able to change so quickly. And now I could show all my friends my mini-movie, starring yours truly.

I thought my dad was a genius. To me he knew it all. If he could make me change outfits in a split second, I figured he could do anything.

Soon after, my curiosity wandered, and I moved on to my next question—"Daddy, how does Superman fly?"

Well, there never was a Superman Part II in my household.

Chapter 2

Anabella Alvarado

A slam of the door

Papers packed neatly in its envelope

My life on all the papers

Oak furniture that's yours

A house that becomes solely mine

Children who become visitation schedules

Lavish ceremony of lilies and lace

A bad investment

A corsage of white roses you gave to me on prom night now

Takes up too much room in the freezer

Gold promise ring I wore all my college years

Now awaits room and board at the local pawn shop

A new scent of happiness waiting for my signature.

An unknown life required

Lonely nights of liquor and Danielle Steele

Your son who names every toy figurine after you

A daughter who pretend to be married to you

PTA meetings to attend

A new breath that sits behind me, waiting to speak

The scent of expensive cologne and class to my left

A muscular arm that rests on the armchair on my right

Welcome just sign here.

An Afternoon Run

Melissa Scully

Rain

Allison Halpern

Down the backstretch—the block behind the house—
we ran companionably.
My girl—my graceful, leggy child—
trailed complaining through the mile.

Then, warmed, we crouch together at the start
of the shorter, kinder spring—her art.
Knees high, she pulls away
and away.
No elderly effort of mine can stay
her love of instant speed.

Later, as we walk, spent, up the block,
I try again to praise her effort in the dash
and counsel greater patience in the mile.
Our damp and gritty elbows graze, while
more worn wisdom jogs from mother to child.

Rain

Allison Halpern

What do you think about
When the rain falls down
Sitting at a stoplight
Vehicle victim to the pounding deluge
Do you contemplate the raindrops
Their size
Their velocity
The volume of the rising waters
Do you notice the sound
Of your malnourished wipers
As they scrape across your windshield
Foreground to the insane
Rat-a-tat
All around you
Do you think of the water's scent
Do you long to immerse yourself
As the fingertips of God land on you
Renewal streaming down your face
Do you feel your smallness?

Discipline

Sandra L. Kennison

rusted, busted cords of heart hang
heavily from rafters in the old barn

pain, shame exploding a Fourth of July
night in purple red blue brown

unblinking, sinking eyes stare
steadily at strips of peeling paint

tight, white fists clench,
dirty nails cut callused palms

cold, bold words break brain-
washed refrains

torn, worn Velcro sneakers
kick up loose straw

rusted shame, cold pain form walls
of pride that last a lifetime

Africa's In December's Smile

Yvette Marie Gonzalez

In the mist of sunset
Your rhythm rises out of the earth-
Melodies light on air,
Shadows racing giraffes into the horizon...

Run wild like the tiger,
Your time to rest will come later
When moonbeams freeze over
And gold is the color of water,
Where adults are allowed to weep
A Congo River of relief.

Those living will remember.
Those loving will never forget.
Millions more diagnosed in the
Soft Sahara sun.
Let not your spirit be paralyzed
By sharp statistics
Or
Brazen words of educated men.

You will die.
Yes.
So will I.
Unearthed, unbroken, tender and graceful
You will go into her arms.
Always my African dream of
Humming birds in snow,
Pure and patient,
Defying time.

If I Thought of You

Anita Carranco

If I sneaked a peak inside your pink polka-dot treasure chest of
thoughts I would stumble across

I would stumble across
road maps stretching across Texas and the U.S.,
butterflies and clarinets,
airplanes and starships.

If I followed my nose into your kitchen

I would smell the aroma of carefully prepared pizzas
topped with your renowned peppers,
casseroles so artistically created,
red-hot enchiladas with a mouth-watering side of Spanish rice.

If your home had the warmest illuminations

I would catch a glimpse of your
four raspberry scented candles by the love seat,
St. Joseph and Our lady of Guadalupe burning strongly on the
dinner table,
cinnamon sticks burning on the stove.

If I knew of everything you did for all people you cherish dearly

I would know about
the late night coffee with your pals,
the mid-boggling you go through in choosing the perfect
Hallmark card,
the number of times you've tucked someone in,
the two hundred million tears of joy.

If I eavesdropped on your box of music

I would hear the pleasant sound of
your tears as they rhythmically hit the ground,
the cracking of your face as you smile,
and angel from heaven, in the sweetest imaginable voice,
singing everyone of these words to you every night in your
dreams.

Clutz

Michelle P. Piña

I am a clutz. Let's just face facts here. I think that it all began when I was four years old and cut my head open while skipping to the back yard. Or maybe it was when I was three years old and was tickled into a pile of ants by my uncle in my grandmother's back yard. These two events alone would cause me to think that maybe the great outdoors isn't for me after all. Yet, I have also had many accidents inside. I fell down an entire flight of wooden stairs when I was thirteen years old and sprained my ankle while walking across the aisle at church. Even though I've been a clutz most of my life I had never broken a bone until my junior year of college.

When most people break a bone, it is usually an arm or leg. Sometimes, in rarer cases, it is a wrist or ankle. They are usually doing something to cause the bone to be broken. For example, they are skating, or riding a bike, or running and ran into some object, like a wall. They get people asking them how they are doing and helping them with things they can't do such as walking or reaching for something. They also usually get a really cool cast on which everybody they have ever met writes notes and draws pictures to make their recovery time more entertaining.

Not me though. I like to be unique. I broke my left pinky toe. I wasn't even doing anything! I was walking from my suitemate's room to my own. Pretty pathetic huh? I didn't get any pity. I got laughter. Everyone thought it was hysterical, even my own mother. When I told her what I had done, she just sighed and said, "Oh Michelle."

It was a Sunday evening. I had been in my room all day studying for a Theology final. My suitemate had the same class and professor in a different section and therefore had the same review. I had been walking to and from her room through the bathroom we share all evening asking questions while I was finishing my review. Around the tenth time I left her room was when it happened.

I was just at the door to the bathroom and from there,

everything seemed to happen in slow motion. I turned on my right leg to walk through the door. *SNAP* My toe was caught on the leg of a chair next to the bathroom door. I screamed in pain my suitemate asked me what was wrong. I could barely talk because I was in such shock. *That was not a snap, toes are not supposed to snap. I just overreacted and imagined I heard that.* I told her that I stubbed my toe on her chair. She was sympathetic and asked if I was okay. I told her yes, just in pain. I hobbled back to my room and informed my roommate why I had screamed. She wasn't too worried. She always says that the day I hurt myself and don't scream is when she will be worried.

My toe started to turn bright purple and I thought that it sure had bruised a lot for just hitting it against the chair. It never occurred to me that it might be broken. I started getting ready for work-study and church and realized that my toe had started swelling. I managed to put my shoe on and hobbled over to campus ministry.

Once I got there, I was in a lot of pain. I took my shoe off and thought it was interesting that I could see the bruise even through my pantyhose. It was when it started to turn black on the bottom that I started to worry. *Now I know that my toe turning black is probably not a good sign.* One of the campus ministers looked at it and suggested that it may be broken. I still didn't think so but I promised her I would go get it looked at the next day.

I made it through the rest of work and mass and hobbled back to my room. I changed for bed and began studying one more with my foot propped up on a pillow to keep me from hitting it against something else. A few minutes after I was settled, my friend came in. "What happened to your foot! It looks like you broke your toe" he screamed. I informed him that I was fine, I just hit it against a chair. Now this friend of mine tends to overreact a bit but what he did next probably saved me from greater pain. He got a piece of my Tupperware, filled it with ice and water and plunged my poor foot into it. I screamed worse then when I actually hit my toe but I had to keep it there for fifteen minutes.

I got so busy with finals that I didn't go to the health center until Thursday. I still didn't think that it was broken even though it was swollen to three times it's size and purple on top

and black on the bottom. I am not sure why—maybe I was in denial. I have always said that with all the times I hurt myself, it has never been too serious. When I finally got it checked out the nurse confirmed everyone else's suspicions. It was broken. She said if I wanted to, we could get it x-rayed but she could feel and hear that it was broken without it. I figured, why bother if we already know?

I spent the entire Christmas break with tape around my toe and my shoe off for most of the time at work. It didn't heal for almost six weeks. It also ended up healing slightly crooked, which I am told could have been avoided if I had gotten it looked at earlier. I think that this fun experience has taught me something. I should actually try paying attention to where I walk. Then again, maybe it would be better if I went back to crawling for a few months before attempting to walk again.

The Dream

Anabella Alvarado

The dream was like the tips of fire on thin, lighted candles
Three inch sky blue candles on a white cake
Some kind of happy red print on the cake
Someone smoking I could nearly smell the cloves
So I awoke to blow out the candles but there was nothing
Complete darkness except for the red
3:26 am
I close my eyes

Old friends and relative that should be young like me but are
all grown up
A glass punch bowl filled with red *Hawaiian* punch
Tall Mylar balloons that have "HAPPY BIRTHDAY" printed in
purple and soft pink

A dark shadow of a large man in the corner of my view
The cigarette falls to the floor I heard it hit the ground
The sound was like a bomb.
Sparks of fire burn my mind
Butt of the cigarette sparks my memory

I awake

It's my father
It's that day the fire swallowed him up
I was young I remember that night
It was the night before my sixth birthday

I fall back to sleep
I never got to blow out the candles
I didn't get there on time, it was too late
My father was one of those candles and he melted on my
birthday cake

Sergio (1924-1999)

Silvia M. Sotelo

Never did you tell me how you met my grandmother.
Never did you tell me why your son was in jail.
Why didn't you tell me how much pain you really felt,
or how ready you were to die?

Never did you mistreat me for not being your real grandchild.
Never did you tell me how much you missed your first wife.
Now your children gave you a chance to lay next to her,
but grandmother will forever hold your memory in her heart.

Never did I call you "Abuelo" or "Apa."
Never did I tell you how important you were,
and forever will be in my life.
Why didn't I tell you how much I appreciated you?

The look on your face gave your feelings away-
That final, gentle encounter assured me that you are no longer
in pain.
Your peaceful, angelic expression assured me
you are now where you belong.

But it didn't reassure me that you knew how much
I Loved You.

Migrant Worker

Michelle P. Piña

Grandpa brought me
a boll of cotton.
Fluffy, dirty white, soft stuff
exploding from dark brown
casing of dead fiber.
"I used to pick this"
he told me
in his hoarse voice tinged with a
Spanish accent.
I see his false teeth
whiter than the cotton,
surrounded by the brown of his skin,
faded from the chocolate it was
to the color of the cotton casing.

My Magic Carpet

Sandra Vallejo

There's a certain bus bench located on New Braunfels Avenue, midway between the two black wrought-iron Fort Sam Houston archways. Today this bench is a round, gazebo-shaped fiberglass structure. When I was six years old, this bench had stocky concrete legs with straight dark green wooden slats to sit on. These slats sometimes had a random splinter that would prick a bare leg, but the adventure they offered a small child was well worth the risk.

I grew up in a small neighborhood just outside the north gate of Fort Sam Houston. My mother's mother, or Nana as I called her, lived two streets over from us. Once a week, early in the morning before the sun shone fully down the street, Nana would come to our house, carrying her black leather handbag across one arm and her umbrella hooked over the other. I would be waiting for her, and off we would go to the green-slatted bench on New Braunfels Avenue. My small legs would hurry to keep up with Nana, who always seemed to be in a race against the rising sun. Arriving at our destination, we would plop down on the bench and let our legs dangle above the sidewalk, mine just a little higher than Nana's. There we would catch our breath and wait for the next bus to downtown San Antonio.

Nana never spoiled the adventure by revealing what our final destination for the day would be, even though after several trips, a pattern of sorts did develop. We would board the bus and sit up front near the bus driver in the seat that faced sideways, not forward and boring like the rest. Once we hit Houston Street, Nana would hold on to me as I strained to pull the nylon cord that would sound the bell and signal the driver to stop and let us off.

If it were a Monday in January, we might be found at Kress Department Store on Houston Street for their annual White Sale. The wooden floorboards would creak under our

feet as we searched through piles of bath towels, trying to find the perfect color to match Nana's bathroom. A trip to Kress would not be complete without descending into the depths of the bargain basement that held treasures from every department, reduced to a price you could hardly resist.

If it were a Tuesday in March, we might be found at F. W. Woolworth at the corner of Houston Street and Alamo looking over the souvenirs the five and ten-cent store had to offer. Lone Star flags, bumper stickers, thimbles, spoons, and T-shirts, geared toward tourists, also supplied a native a way to remember Texas Independence Day on March 2. Nana and I, of course, wanted to do our part and have our flag ready to wave.

If it were lunch time on a Wednesday in June, Nana and I would definitely be found perched on the red-padded swivel seats at the Sommers Drug Store lunch counter across from Woolworth at Houston and Alamo. Even though Sommers had a reputation as the premiere drug store downtown, according to Nana, their best product was the Wednesday Blue Plate Special, consisting of three stringy, longhorn cheese enchiladas, smothered in chili con carne.

If it were a Thursday in September, we might be found at Joske's Department Store on Commerce Street, looking at back-to-school clothes. Nana had a charge account at Joske's of Texas, my first glimpse at buying something on credit. Nana had always paid cash for everything, that is until she got her gold and black card from Joske's. She would show her plastic card to the sales lady, and then go home with a shopping bag full of merchandise. I thought it was magical. It wasn't until years later that I found out she had to pay real money for the items.

If it were a Friday in December, Joske's was indeed a magical place. On the rooftop of the store, a large Santa Claus waved Merry Christmas to everyone. Each December, occupying a large part of the third floor, a place called Fantasyland miraculously appeared. Where Lazyboy recliners usually resided, a winter wonderland materialized, complete with Santa's workshop run by mechanical elves busy carving, sawing, or hammering a variety of Christmas toys. The Santa Express, a child's train ride, circled Fantasyland and would bring Nana and me to our final stop, a visit with Santa.

The last time I sat with Nana on the green-slatted bench, my feet sat flatly on the surface of the sidewalk, but Nana's feet still dangled above the concrete. Nana is gone now, as is Kress, F. W. Woolworth, Sommers Drug Store, and Joske's of Texas. I can still go and sit on the circular bus bench on New Braunfels Avenue. If I close my eyes and lift my feet off the ground, I can feel the slight pressure of Nana's hand on my wrist, signaling me that our bus to town is rounding the corner, and anticipation wells up inside of me as I board our magic carpet, wondering what adventure we are off on today.

Old Habits

Katherine Green

Rain pelted the concrete, rippling into deep puddles. The fat drops did nothing to cool the sultry fog, and I squinted. Beads of perspiration mingled with rain on my face. *Not the best night to be looking for shelter.* A nearby sign read "Lakewood Hills" - the name of some upper-crust neighborhood. I wondered whether they'd even let me past their electronic front gates.

After dozens of doors slammed in my face, my fears were confirmed. But something masochistic in me kept going, and I finally reached a one-story house lined with ivy and wild roses.

Perfect.

The stoop was cozy and dry. I took a minute to just rest on the porch swing before reaching up to push the doorbell. Chimes inside played the hook line of an old Broadway hit.

Suddenly, I wondered whether I deserved a house with roses and door chimes. But a smiling middle-aged woman opened the door, and ushered me inside before I could utter a word. My wet coat was exchanged for a towel, and I watched as water ran off my jeans onto her rose-colored tiles.

"You are completely soaked," she murmured. "What were you doing out on a night like this?" Her words deepened my shame, as she guided me to a wooden dining chair in a yellow kitchen and prepared a mug of instant cocoa on the counter.

"Thank you," I whispered, clutching the towel close. "Why are you doing this?"

"You rang the bell, didn't you? Something told me you weren't selling Girl Scout cookies," she chuckled.

"But you don't... I'm just some punk who showed up on your doorstep!" Her neighbors had said as much with their eyes. "How do you know I'm not a hooker, a burglar, a murderer?"

She tilted her head, like a robin. "Are you? Wouldn't

that be interesting." I gaped at her. That sent her into gales of laughter as she popped the stirred cup of cocoa in the microwave.

Crazy. The woman was beyond bonkers. Maybe I didn't want to stay here, after all.

She opened a door behind her, saying, "You can take some of the clothes from the laundry room, and change in there."

Beyond speech, I obeyed. All her clothes were soft and warm from the dryer. Upon returning to the kitchen, there was a steaming black mug before my empty chair at the kitchen table, and the woman had taken a seat across from it. I slid into my seat, asking bemusedly, "Who are you?" The cocoa burned my fingers. I set it down quickly.

She smiled, her eyes dancing. "My name's Amilee Parks. What's yours?"

"Lauren." I waited, but she didn't ask for my last name. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"Perhaps you didn't hear from the neighbors, but I'm the eccentric old novelist who never leaves her house," she giggled. I never imagined someone of her age as capable of a giggle.

Despite confusion and fatigue, I found a responsive smile warming my lips. "Novelist- that's like writing books, right?" I asked, leaning my face close to the cocoa to inhale the steam.

She nodded. "Yep. Can't remember a time when I wasn't one- or didn't *want* to be one."

"Are you any good?" I asked, curious.

She shrugged. "I get by."

I looked around the dark interior of her home. "What about your husband? Where does he work?"

"Oh, I don't have one," she said simply. "My lifestyle never left room. Can you imagine the poor man? Coming home expecting Donna Reed at the stove, cooking in pearls? Instead he'd find a frumpy little packrat -1Xholed up in front of her computer."

"Still- didn't you ever want to get married, have kids and stuff?" I asked, confused. "I thought that was what everybody wanted. It seems you'd be kinda... lonely here."

"I wanted kids, sure- dozens. I even considered

adopting them, but no agency would give a child to a woman like me." She stared into her cup, thoughtful. "Yes, it does get lonely. But I took what I was given, and lived with it." Her eyes met mine, and I felt the strange sensation of my soul being read. "The way you do."

I straightened, frowning. "Me?"

"Yes," she said. "You chose this life for yourself, didn't you? It must get lonely as well."

"Sometimes," I admitted. "Never had any other options."

"Well, what would you do if you had options?" she asked. "I always wanted to go to Paris, myself."

I thought hard. "I used to dream about someplace glamorous like New York. That way I could just disappear for a while, in a sea of faces."

"Indeed," she said, raising her eyebrows and smiling. "You'd love New York. But... do you ever consider going home again?" She was stirring her cocoa, carefully not looking at me.

Fury and betrayal filled me. I jumped to my feet. "No, that was never a choice," I snapped. "And don't think you can trick me into going back, either." My hands clenched into fists.

She made no move, following me with her eyes and blinking in surprise at my words. "I had no intention of that, Lauren. But you know it's always there if you change your mind."

I glared at her. "Not for me."

She shrugged. "All right, never mind," she sighed. "But at least hear me out: No matter what happened before, you can always change. Nothing is ever final."

I said nothing, my jaw set mulishly. She hesitated, then apparently decided she wasn't getting anywhere. "It's getting late. Let's get some sleep, and we can discuss this in the morning."

"I'm *leaving* in the morning," I hastily assured her. "Don't worry about me."

"Oh, but I will anyway," she promised. "Now that I've met you, I'll probably never stop wondering where you got to."

"Yeah, well, that's sweet, but I'll be fine," I snapped.

She hit on my weak spot, mentioning home, painfully reminding me that no one could be trusted. They all hurt you

eventually, one way or another. And I didn't want to stick around long enough to see Amilee's calm warmth turn into disappointment. I didn't think I could stand watching that happen again.

Amilee let me sleep in a dusty guest room, with dozens of beautiful gilt-edged crystal figurines clustered on what looked like an antique dresser. My gaze was drawn to them as if against my will, remembering a pawn shop I passed on my way into town.

No, I thought forcefully, and turned my back on the crystal. Amilee was pointing out the bathroom. Then she left me with a simple "goodnight."

Sometime after two a.m., I still paced across the room in agitation, staring at the glimmering crystal. Their shining facets whispered of an easy two hundred bucks, at least. I unconsciously reached for my pillow, pulling off the linen pillowcase and staring at it. My hands shook. I dropped it back onto the bed.

I don't want to do this. I can't. I won't. But... "I've always wanted to go someplace glamorous like New York... start over..."

Sighing in resignation, I grabbed the pillowcase, tumbling the crystal in and tying it up securely. Tears stung my eyes at my weakness, and yet I ignored them. I scampered toward the front door. The key was in the lock; I opened it with shaking fingers and dashed out into the night, pretending it was only raindrops that ran down my face. Some things never changed- least of all trash like me. It was her own fault she didn't realize it.

Old habits die hard.

* * *

"I can give you fifty for the whole bunch," a paunchy, balding man leered at me. "Count yourself lucky."

"Fifty?" I cried incredulously. "This stuff is quality. Worth at least a hundred."

"When it's as hot as this, it's worth fifty bucks," he snapped. "Now do you want the money, or not?"

I stared down at the statues, and something in my stomach trembled. I wondered what I could sink to, when I would sell my soul for fifty measly dollars. I swallowed hard.

Remember New York? A voice hissed at me.

Remember the reason you left? You're already trash- it's not like you can be any lower. Amilee probably woke up, saw you were gone, and filed insurance claims for the crystal.

The man was waiting for me to hand him the bag, pudgy fingers extended. His other hand drummed impatiently on the glass countertop.

I can't! I jerked the bag back; the contents clinked loudly.

No good pretending you'll be absolved somehow by refusing to take the money, my thoughts sneered. At least this'll buy you a bus ride to the Big Apple. You'll be on your way.

But if I really believed that, why did I wait a week before coming here? I should have just gotten it over with the moment I left. It was the longest week of my life, with the heavy jangling bag a constant reminder at my side.

But her words haunted me. *"No matter what happened before, you can always change."*

"Look, I ain't got all day," the man growled, his dark brows pulling together over a putty nose. "I don't like waitin' on no street trash. I might just change my mind and call the cops."

My head was spinning. *"Nothing is ever final."*

I turned and left the pawnshop, lugging the bag after me.

* * *

The house was definitely purple by daylight. I walked up the sidewalk, my heart pounding. What would she say when she saw me? Would she yell? Would she slam the door in my face without a word?

I lifted the brass knocker and let it fall, pushing the bell. It seemed an eternity until Amilee came. When she saw me there, she paused in pulling the door open, eyes fixing on my face.

I was probably an interesting sight- ash-pale save the red guilt rimming my eyes. "I-I'm sorry," I fumbled.

She nodded. "I hope so." She looked at the huge bundle in my arms. "What's that?"

I held it out, accompanied with the sound of wind chimes as the crystal shifted within. "Something that doesn't belong to me." My voice quivered, but I lifted my chin and

prayed I wouldn't cry. "I'm sorry."

She took it, knelt, and opened the top, drawing in her breath sharply when she saw the contents. Raising her face back up, she squinted through the sunlight at me.

"I shouldn't have taken them," I rushed on. "I know you can't forgive me, but I just wanted to bring them back and tell you I won't bother you again."

"That's not necessary," Amilee said, hefting the bag so that she could set it on a hall table. "Come in."

My step never fell inside her door. I merely gaped at her, wondering for the dozenth time whether she was slightly touched in the head. "Why don't you hate me?" I stammered, my eyes brimming. "Why didn't you scream and slam the door after what I did?"

"Everybody deserves a second chance, Lauren," she said, guiding me through the door. Within moments I was whisked back into the cozy kitchen, much more cheerful by daylight, with the sun streaming in the windows. She sat me down in the same wooden chair, while I just stared at her. "Something tells me you haven't gotten a lot of second chances in your life," she said, sitting down across from me and planting both hands face down on the table. "I don't care about the stupid statues. They're pretty and all, but they're a pain to dust."

"I didn't want them," I pleaded. "I really didn't. I just wanted to get away-"

"And you saw your one-way ticket," she smiled. "Who cares? If you want to go to New York, I'll give you the money. You can go on an airplane- much faster. You'll like it better, and then-"

"I won't take your money," I said stubbornly. "I might have broken a few- I'll pay for them, somehow." The table had deep scratches from years of use. I traced every mark with my eyes rather than meet her gaze.

"Who cares?" she repeated, a definite shrug in her voice. "A couple marred ones add character. Why don't you stay here to work off the cost?"

I was so stunned, I sat there without replying. The only sound was the hum of the wall clock.

"I need someone to help me out around here: help clean up, cook stuff, while I do my writing. Minimum wage-

maybe six dollars an hour if you work hard. Could you do that?" She made it sound like she hired homeless punks as housekeepers every day.

"You mean s-stay here?"

"Sure. Same room, if you like. And then when you're done, if you still want to leave, you can. Or you can stay a while longer and get enough set aside for that trip to New York. Keep an old woman company. I won't charge rent, but if you burn a TV dinner the way I do-" I detected a smile in her voice-"you're out, okay?"

I laughed, unable to control the tears. They spilled over without my permission. "Okay. Deal."

She grinned, but her eyes were glimmering. "Good."

Old habits die hard. But when they do, the burial is sweet.

Abuela's Cooking

Érika Andrade

I smell mesquite trees.
I am five
waking up to a black rooster's
version of the buzz
from an alarm clock.
Mother prepares the familiar
bowl of Tony the Tiger corn flakes.
My tiny body growls.
Oso, the wolf dog, looks up
and whimpers at my loud stomach.
"Tengo hambre."

I want a Mexican lunch
made hand scratched.
Great grandma knows
my favorite, pollito.
The old fashioned way?
"Quedate alli, mijita."
I do not listen to Abuela.
I follow the sounds of dishes,
crashing. I push Oso
to the dirt.

"Stay. Quedate alli!"
I whisper. My skinny
arms and legs fit behind
the mesquite tree. It falls
the branch hits my head,
I step back and hear
a crack. The chicken's neck
is hanging! The blood
drips on the dirt.
She chops off his head
on the circle tree bark
like Mom's cut board.
"Esta muerto, Abuela?"

On Daughter's Day

Érika Andrade

Dear Daddy: I wanted to cry so much, but for the first
time

I held it in tightly, caught in my throat. Looking out the
smudged
window of your Ford pick-up, lost as I stared at the gray
clouds.

My heart
racing as always before the rain blurred my vision
your little *chiflada* sitting on your lap, smelling insulation and
cement mix.

"I should have left you after you were born.

I was able to see you take your first steps and say your first
words

and play inside the little green bucket. Remember that, *mijita*?"
Your stubborn, confused seventeen-year-old daughter, "I don't
want

to talk or see him." Eighteen long stemmed red roses, my
favorite,

but you were the true present that day. I hold the receiver
lightly

on my shoulder, rolling my eyes at your deep accent words;
my arms

are limp by my ribs as you embrace me before leaving,
responding only with a nod.

"It would have been less painful for you, but I don't regret it."

I yelled out the wrong things, Dad. I had six months to forget
the scent of plywood. I shut the front door and stare at the
dead grass; I leave

with the familiar hug from you pulling me out of the soapy
water.

Refugee

Érika Andrade

He is only three
tossing and turning
as if leaves tickle him, until
the bumps of the ride soothe him.
His round head full
of masked faces lies
heavily upon his mother's full thighs.
his eyes are not shut.
Wide open, richly dark,
black as coffee gazing
at glimmering spots
of sunlight breaking through the dead trees.
His curled lashes hit
the brow's inner arch.
Raised eyebrows
wrinkle his wide forehead.
His bobcat-shaped nose shines.
His chapped lips, slightly open
as if awed by the sun sparkles.
The child's dark circled eyes
open and close, weak
lids craving slumber.
A glimpse. It is a mirage,
that is what his eyes tell him.
He holds on to her pinky,
peaking through her transparent skirt
red-faced people walk on the gravel.
The chapped lips crack,
the dust rises as he drags
his body forward.
"Hello."
He glides his dirty fingers
over her white dress, slowly
he embraces her.

The Man in the Work Shirt

Diane Gonzales Bertrand

He was my father, the man in the work shirt.

He was a man who was proud that his daughters learned to sew, a talent that his mother had used to put food on the table when he was a boy.

That summer of 1967, my sister, Christine, and I had taken sewing classes at the *Singer* store in the new mall. We had been taught to use modern machines that could change stitches or make buttonholes with just the turn of a knob. At home, we raved about the speed and convenience of the *Deluxe Singer 200*. Daddy promised we'd go to the store next Friday evening and that *maybe* he'd buy a new sewing machine.

That Friday had been a long one. A customer kept him at his shop, *Gilbert's Welding Service*, past six. By the time we had eaten supper and went to the shopping mall, it was after seven and I knew the store closed at eight.

The sales lady was a thin, older woman. Unfortunately, she wasn't one of the ladies who taught the sewing classes to young girls ages 10-14. She raised a smile for our group as we surrounded one of the best (and most expensive) machines in the showroom.

Dad told her, "Good evening, ma'am. We're interested in looking at this sewing machine."

The sales lady studied all of us. My sister, Christine, wore a red shirt and flowered skirt she had sewed herself. I was in a faded sundress that my sister had once worn. Mom was in a plaid cotton dress with a belt. It was her customary style when she worked around the house. And Daddy wore his work clothes like he did everyday.

The sales lady pointed behind her. "We have some other machines over there."

The know-it-all that I was at eleven spoke up. "No, this is the sewing machine I've used in sewing class. It's the best one."

Daddy put his hand on my shoulder. He said. "Can you

show me how this machine works, ma'am?"

Her blue eyes opened wide. "Well, this machine is very sophisticated. You might want a simpler one back there." She pointed to the sewing machines that were on a side counter near the shelves of spools of thread.

"Can you show me how this one sews?" Daddy said. "I'd like to see some of the stitches it can do. And buttonholes."

This woman just didn't understand. Daddy knew about sewing machines because of Mama Josie. He had not only watched his mother sew, but he had also helped her oil the machine. He had also seen her rubbing her arthritic fingers after she had spent hours doing fine needlework on buttonholes, hems, and collars.

"Perhaps you might want to look at *Wards* or *Sears* for a sewing machine."

My father frowned at the sales lady. "Don't you want to sell this machine?"

She seemed unable to find words, so he told her, "I brought the money to buy *this* machine. This is the one my girls want. Can you show me how it works?"

The sales lady's eyes measured up my father. Was it his brown face or the work shirt that made the woman think he wouldn't carry three hundred dollars in his wallet?

My father's steady look made the sales lady finally sit down at the machine. She began a sales lady speech, but she didn't seem very enthusiastic. She seemed more interested in the other sales lady who had gotten her purse, waved good-bye, and closed the sliding doors of the store so no other customers would come in.

I looked at the clock and saw it was a little after eight o'clock.

"Could I try it now?" Christine asked.

The sales lady stood up and Christine took her place. She grabbed another swatch of material and started doing buttonholes and zigzag stitches. "Look, Daddy, see how it sews! If you adjust the dial, it triple stitches over the same spot. And this slim stitch here is perfect for sewing a zipper into a dress."

I showed Mom the little light above the needle, and the box of bobbins, extra needles, and even a cleaning brush and

tiny oil bottle that were tucked into a side compartment. The sewing machine bobbin ran out of thread, but in a couple of quick motions, Christine replaced it with new thread, and sewed an invisible stitch for a hem.

The sales lady said to my dad, "Do you repair air-conditioners?"

"No, I'm a welder."

"That's too bad. I need someone to fix my air-conditioner. It's so hot this summer."

My father could have recommended a repairman to her since he had so many connections in the small business community, but all he said was, "We'll take this machine," and then he ran his roughened hand over the back of Christine's brown hair.

"Oh, thank you, Daddy," I said.

My sister jumped up from the sewing machine bench to hug him too. The woman nodded, and I took my turn at being a better sales lady than the one standing beside us.

"Daddy, what about the cabinet? Can we get the cabinet too? See, it has this neat bar down here that makes the machine run with just a press of the knee. It's so much easier than a foot pedal."

"This is the way we use it in sewing class," Christine added.

"How much is the cabinet?" my father asked the sales lady.

"Well, I'm sorry, but it's eighty-five dollars," she said.

I could tell she still didn't understand. We wouldn't have even walked into the *Singer* store if my daddy didn't have the money to buy the best.

"We'll take the cabinet too," he said.

The sales lady huffed out a sigh, and practically stomped her way back to the cash register. She re-opened the machine after the manager had closed it for the night. She wrote up the ticket, and Daddy gave her the cash. She frowned when she had to give him some dollars and change back. I'm sure the sales lady earned a -1Xgood commission from the sale, yet she didn't look happy about it. At the time, it didn't matter because my daddy had just bought Christine and me the exact machine we wanted.

Today the man in the work shirt is my husband, Nick. His shirts are always stained from the oil of the machines he fixes on our self-service car washes. The stains are permanent because his wife doesn't have the patience to scrub them out.

On a warm evening we're off to test drive a new 2000 car minutes before the *Buick* dealership is ready to close. Even though my husband doesn't have the cash in his wallet, I know we have the money in the joint savings account to pay cash for the car.

I feel like a proud, excited little girl again. I'm eager to show my husband the blue car that I had test driven earlier that day. The salesman, a man in his early thirties, explains the mechanical features of this 2000 car to my husband, while I show our children the lighted mirrors, extra leg room in the back seat, and the CD player.

When we return from a test drive, my husband tells the young salesman, "It's late now. We'll call you in the morning." And on the drive home from the dealership my husband tells me, "My dad always said to sleep on it before you make a big purchase." (His father had worked hard for his money too.)

In the meantime, the salesman measured the length of the man in the work shirt and formed his own conclusions. He called me at 10:00 the next morning.

"I have a used car in great condition. It's a '98 with only eight thousand miles."

"I already own a used car. Why would I want to *buy* one?" I answered

"Okay, I understand that," he said. "I also have a '99 Demo car. It doesn't have power windows or a burglar alarm. It has a radio, but not a CD player. It's less expensive too."

The 2000 model *was* the car I wanted. Not a used one, and not a *simpler* one. The salesman's words stirred something familiar inside me. I was taken back to the summer night in the *Singer* store. My father had taught me a lesson that day that I only now understood.

I thanked the salesman for his time. Later that day, my husband and I went to another dealer, found the same car we had wanted, and even negotiated a better price—stained workshirt and all.

My father didn't walk out of the *Singer* store despite the sales lady who thought a man like him couldn't possibly have money to pay for the best machine in the store, much less deserve a chance to buy one. Like my father, I know my worth. I work hard so I can have the best—and like the man in the work shirt, I deserve nothing less.

Where Creativity Beckons Me

Becca Lange

In an antique trinket box, with a blue elephant painted on top,

 This is where my creativity lies.

In my left brown penny loafer, somewhere near the toes,

 That is where my creativity hides.

In a Tupperware box of paints, mixed with the Chili Red Acrylic
and clear gloss

 This is where my creativity sleeps.

Pressed somewhere between the bottom bunk of my bed and
my wall.

 That is where my creativity burrows.

Crouching underneath my blue and white checkered rug,

 This is where my creativity hibernates.

In the tea-stained mug that sits on the refrigerator,

In the wooden key basket that hangs on the doorknob,

In my second drawer mingling with the colors and brushes for
my eyes.

Curled up in the map of the world in my closet,

In my top desk drawer flirting with the staples and string,

In every load of wash that mixes a Downy sheet and fluffed
towels...

THIS IS WHERE MY CREATIVITY LIVES.

Not in a pen, not in a book, not in a box of instructions from a learned man...

Behind the obscure little fairy dust sprinkles, resting on a pile of feathers,

Screaming to be found, to be pressed like gold leaf, and shaped into a ball of pliable goo

The JellyBean Tie

— ***Presidential Debate***

October 11, 2000

St. Louis, Missouri

Nicole Moore

He laughs with his shoulders shaking
up and down like jelly,
a marionette racing
a trotting horse.
One eyebrow hangs
over the other like a cliff.
The tensions of his concern teeters
on his brow.
He laughs
like a panting hyena,
top lip turned
down like the arc.
His smile
cool air rising on a storm front, brief
snap it back, speak
of the death penalty.
A golden twinkle in the eye,
a seeping beam which spreads
like a numbing stroke.
Tell-tale crinkles
underline his eyes.
One week later he is old,
drawn beaten and gray, now
I'm not making political statements, simply
a few physical observations.

My Kangaroos

Sandra L. Kennison

One curious toe
Peeks out of the hole
In my Kangaroo tennis shoe
Making its debut to Miss Kinney's class

The laces gather brown-gray dust
From the school yard so it can
mingle with our back yard dust
and they can be friends

The rubber tread – little triangles,
Grabs hold of pink Gadzook bubble gum
That will kiss the ground with each step
And travel to my porch step

The Velcro straps flap like chicken wings
The sticky part so cluttered with
carpet lint and thread my mother cut
with her teeth while patching Daddy's elbows.

My Kangaroos squish squish from the puddle
We found by the hardware store. "Time out,"
I tell my shoes as they sunbathe on
the plastic picnic table to dry for later.

In a Dream

Melissa Sandy Vela

Red-orange
blue buzzing bird,
you hum for me
zipping past sagging,
wilting petals,
desperate for the taste
of budding blossoms.

But I see...
the bees sting
your sticky honey-coated claw,
nonono
don't touch *That*,
This, *There*.
I see
you, her,
kissingkissingkissing.

Your black feet
walk my white sands
salty whispers sting my ear...
Let's wait for the prints to dissolve
and you sink back into haze
of fogged, forgiving gray.

Dairy Farmer, 1936

Sandra L. Kennison

Sighs erupt from over-bent
backs moving toward
the baritone lowing of
swollen uteruses

My one o'clock wedding
was strategically placed
between morning milking
and evening round-up

Each summer day
I baled hay, harvested oats,
pumped troughs full of water
for their winter food

Sniffing, stuffy-headed, and
coughing a throaty cough-
stumble to the stool, forehead
against churning Jersey stomach

Old Friends

Roberto Pachecano

Today was no different than any of the other Saturdays that I had gone to Ricardo's house. I had been doing it monthly, now, for twenty years, just checking on my pal. Actually, this was his mother's house, the place where Mrs. Sanchez continued to indulge her fifty-year old son's dependence upon her. I met her late one night when I returned Ricardo home safely after "quaffing brewskis." Ricardo always used this term for drinking beer to punctuate his penchant for alcohol.

"Thank you for bringing him home; his father and I worry about him. *Gracias a Dios* he has a friend," Mrs. Sanchez said.

It had been many years since I last joined my long-time pal for a few brewskis. These forays had always begun with "let's go quaff a few," but they usually turned into hours of serious beer drinking and "blah-blahing," Ricardo's term for meaningful conversation. With Ricardo, everything had a specific term, almost as if his whole life was something other than what it should be—a humble reality.

Alcohol finally took its toll on Ricardo. His unregulated quaffing brought out a meanness in him which sometimes led to physical violence. In fact, his antagonistic ways fueled more than one barroom brawl. I stopped going to bars with Ricardo when the blah-blahs became insults, now aimed at me. He threatened once too often to "kick my butt." Yet, when Ricardo was sober, one could not find a better friend. Those times, however, became rare.

On this particular Saturday morning I timed my arrival for a little before noon, allowing Ricardo enough time to sleep late, knowing well that last night's thirst had been quenched only after "last call." I entered unannounced through the unlocked door at the rear of the house. Ricardo's mother always left it unlocked so that her son would have no hassle with it when he came home drunk on Friday nights.

I walked into the kitchen, knowing full well that I would find Ricardo's ninety-year-old mother, a widow for ten years,

standing next to the stove. The acrid aroma of reheated coffee dispersed about the room, as if to mark the boundaries of Mrs. Sanchez' sanctuary.

"¡Buenos días, Señora Sanchez!" I greeted her as I gave her a hug.

"Ay, mi hijo. ¿Cómo estás? How are you my son? she asked, each word dry and deliberate and barely audible. "¡Siéntate! ¡Siéntate! Sit down," Mrs. Sanchez offered, clearly fluent in both English and Spanish.

As I turned to sit down at the table, I was stunned— Mrs. Sanchez had replaced the old table and chairs with a new set. I noticed for the first time the close, cramped quarters, jam-packed with bric-a-brac, revealing the *corazon* of the woman now placing a steaming hot cup of coffee before me. Where was the nicked, time-worn, wooden table and chairs I remembered? I felt strange, so I didn't say anything as I slowly sat down in one of the new chairs.

Mrs. Sanchez retraced her steps to the stove to pour herself a companionable cup, returned to the table in her slow, cautious way and smoothed her faded-pink apron as she sat down in the chair next to me. Finding a topic to talk about was never a problem, but somehow we always began with the weather. Today, we both just sat in silence.

"Well, what do you think?" Mrs. Sanchez whispered, breaking my stare at the faded velvet *Last Supper* on the wall above the table.

"I think it's absolutely beautiful!" I answered, hoping she hadn't detected the disappointment in my voice.

I remembered Mrs. Sanchez' telling me once during one of our many conversations, that her husband had bought the old table and chairs a few months after they were married. Prior to this, she and her husband ate their meals on a tablecloth spread out on the floor. Neither minded, since she was only fifteen, and he, eighteen.

"Yes, I think it's beautiful," I said once more to emphasize my approval. Mrs. Sanchez' face lit up with a big smile. "But what about your old set? It was just as beautiful, and it seemed to be in great condition!" I knew after asking that question that I had struck a nerve. Mrs. Sanchez' smile disappeared.

"It broke, *mi hijo*. It broke last Friday night." She sighed.

"Oh, Mrs. Sanchez, I'm so sorry," I replied, knowing well there was nothing I could have added to make her feel any better. She got up from her chair and walked back toward the stove for more coffee. The silence was loud as I feigned a struggle with the hot coffee in my mouth.

Mrs. Sanchez turned around and mused, "Many conversations ended last Friday night, *el viernes pasado*." She returned to her chair, sat down and stared at me for a few minutes. Finally breaking the silence she said, "You know, I've been thinking about the old chairs. Since you are the only one who still comes to see me, I want to give you two of them—one for you and one for me. That way you will always remember our visits, old friend."

Ricardo staggered into the kitchen.

Waiting for the Music: A Composer's Day

Becca Lange

Empty room.
Closed piano.

Black.
White keys.

Red blouse.
Black stool.

Bronze pedals.
Black piano.

Empty.

Red Felt.

Feel Red?

No.

Feel Ivory.

Under Padded Fingertips.

Combination of Fingers and Keys.

Soul and Music.

Heart and Rhythm.

Beat, beat, beat, beat.

Bleed, bleed, bleed, bleed.

Comfort.

Comfortable.

An uneasy comfort.

On flat, black, wooden stool.

Back humped.

Under a red blouse.

Black stocking feet.

Slip on the bronze pedals.

A working piano, perhaps.

But it is closed.

I see fingers moving.

But I don't feel them.

I hear the music seeping.

But I don't know it.

I feel it.

I can't know it.

It's not mine.

Mine is the relationship.

The kinship of human and object.

Man and the piano.

The closed piano.

The red heart, the seeping music, the cold
pedals, the warm felt, the white keys, my
callused fingers.

I call these mine.

They are not. They belong

To the Closed Piano.

Or the unwritten Melody.

Cowboy, Take Me Away

Pearl Melody Salinas

We dance.

The newly steamed brim of your ivory cowboy hat

Tips downward

Revealing your shy, slanted smile

And the shadows cast by your long lashes.

Your eyes tease mine.

They appear to be little globes.

My mind wanders and I see

Myself in your arms... *I mean your eyes.*

I am swimming in the waters of their blue rims

Strolling through the fields of their green irises

Sleeping in their brown earthy folds.

Your voice makes me smile

Soothing like a full body massage

Sweet like Shiner Bock beer.

Your slow, Texas twang

Is country music to my ears.

You two-step closer to me... *but not close enough*

As I inhale deeply while trying to be discreet.

Your Armani fragrance fills my senses.

Your left hand hugs my right and they begin to move

Until our fingers are intertwined like puzzle pieces

Meant to be.

Your right arm wraps around my waist to

The curve of my back where your hand rests

The meeting of your soft fingertips with my bare skin

Gives me a chill.

Cowboy, take me away, the slow song says

As we hold on 'til the very last note,

Closer to you.

Bedtime Run

Elena Bagge

Time for bed.

Say good night to mom and dad,
we're big girls, we can tuck ourselves in, turn
the corner to the long dark hallway, holding sweaty hands
past

the closet with gold circle handles and sliding doors
past

the dark bathroom with green-striped wallpaper
into the room, quickly

turn on the lights

beds on both sides of the walls

white bedspread with blue flowers hanging
to

the floor

hiding

what's underneath

lots of room to hide down there

Your turn off the light

I don't want to walk in the dark

Let's go

together

soft carpet cushions our quick steps

take a deep breath

One

Two

Three

GO

slam down the switch and run

away from the darkness

chasing us

jump two feet

before the beds

land stomach down with

a bounce

so the hands won't

pull us in.

Cologne Kisses

Olivia Lani Bazan

I'm five again,
swirled through the air,
spinning around to loud
accordion music singing through
the small gray radio
atop the microwave.

We're surrounded by people
clapping and laughing to the beat of the music
dancing around us
stomping their feet
in the kitchen filled
with thick aromas of rice, beans and caldo de pollo.

I feel dizzy
as I inhale
his kisses.
They smell like Old Spice and Polo.
I close my eyes and brush my face against his
rough and stubbly cheeks
I wrap my arms around his pudgy waist.
My lips touch his skin,
I feel a tight tug
on my girl cheeks
his teeth biting my skin softly
his laughter echoes through my ears.

He lets me down slowly to the bright orange
linoleum floor and my feet touch the ground.
I look up at the towering
five foot seven man,
his silver hair flying around
his cheeks pinkened
by the exertion of his
rusty muscles.

Walking into the
kitchen, years later
I am greeted with sounds
of music and laughter.
He twirls the five-year-old
princess around and around
and pulls her near.
As he bends down,
aiming for her rosy cheeks,
I close my eyes
and remember.

This piece is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather,
Indalecio Maldonado who is still very much alive in our hearts
and in spirit. Te queremos mucho mucho mucho, Granpito.

Indalecio Maldonado
March 11, 1926-September 26, 2000

Spotsylvania, 1864

Eric Cruz

Did you ever dream, sleeping soldier, this would be your bed?
The rank belches of cannons silencing your ear
drums like swollen melons
as Ewell's mandate remains the last beat?
Did other soldiers drip
under the heat of Winchesters?—Soles clomping side by side
as leaden raindrops pelted final relief for the last time.
As you knelt to Heaven, did you cup your holy water
wrenching your fingers over the oozing pits of countless Grays
gurgling your peace to God?
When your wilted body plopped into weariness
stiffened arms and legs no longer able to bear the weight
of shackles choking a brotherhood
did you ever think May would feel so cold?

*Spotsylvania- battle site in the American Civil War. The Confederates sustained heavy casualties in three days of fighting.

Jogging, Time and Fairies

Steve Calogero

Thump, thump, thump ...
my jostling bounce of long slackened muscles
laboring to hold my ground, slipping.
I'm 40 now.

Then the butterflies come,
hundreds of them fluttering on the breeze,
aloft on golden wings, their presence
reminding me, a determined rationalist,
that I don't know what butterflies really are.
They could be fairies out to say hello. . .

Every morning when I carry my Sarah
from her crib to her changing table,
she reaches out for her wooden fairy,
suspended from the light string,
her bright golden wings and impish smile
beckoning us to play, forgetting our routine.

We pause just long enough for
Sarah to touch her hello and feel
her wonder at fairies, their impish
goodness, the same goodness I want for Sarah,
the kind of love that plays
and has enough sense to break the routine.

Yes, my impish daughter,
still safe for the fairies, watchful fairies,
playfully loving her as I do.
These fairy borne thoughts bring a smile,
As I jog my wooden jostle, my thump, thump,
still aloft, suspended from a string,
laboring to slow my schedule long enough
to help my daughter fly her fairy flight.

Mija
To my daughter

M. Alicia Miller

I know you will not listen
to me
when it matters.
That only when
it is too late
will you see truth
in my words,
But
let me tell you
what I've learned:

There is strength
inside us
that we
don not know of. When you
need it
you will find it.

As I cradle you
in my arms,
I ask you
not to worry.
Even though
my time of need has come,
even though
we are now alone, there is nothing to be afraid of.
For I have found
the strength I need.
When I hold you
I feel it course
through my blood and
give me power.

You look into my eyes,
the strength that I see in you
mirrors my own.

PTSD
(Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)
Roberto Pachecano

Tickets to the play tucked in my coat pocket,
parking lot full, I tip the porter, waited thirty days.
Corner of St. Mary's Street and Houston,
my wife and I wait for the illuminated man to start
his walk, soon there after, we walk.

Holding hands, my right her left, we cough,
our other hands politely covering our mouths,
we stand waiting for the illuminated man.
With his amber hand bigger than he, he signals
Don't Walk, taking a month of Sundays to change.

And there we are, left in the exhaust, a plume
of carbon monoxide, as the bus proceeds to the next
pre-determined stop, watched by a lanky
but once plump man, the notches on his dangling
belt do tell, standing at the next corner, Utopia.

Bending his arm chest-level, staring
at the Timex on his wrist, the short hand
on the seven, the long hand on the thirty,
the approaching bus is running early,
"good job," the driver's supervisor thinks.

Slyly and slightly he turns his head, straining
his left eye as if to seize the moment of the *pshhht*,
the airbrake signal that it's okay to board.
With great aplomb, he strokes the Bic on his report,
his hat hangs low upon his sweaty brow.

And here we stand, my wife and I, coughing,
while the illuminated man holds his nose,
breathing through his mouth, the stench of diesel.

My hand is damp, warm droplets run
down my forehead, some becoming beads below
my nose, I wish I had a mustache.
My wife's stare fixed upon my ashen face,
and feeling me shake, she asks, "What's Wrong?"

I feel sick, feel like running, dormant butterflies flutter,
I try to find the nearest manhole.
Growing sicker, I turn us back toward
the car, the illuminated man leaves his hutch, Walk, don't run,
ninety dollars worth of vomit left on Houston Street.

Three days later, while looking in a drawer, I find
a picture of Dong Ha, the 'hood where I
became a man, home of the original "drive-by."
A tank moves down the road, leaving its exhaust,
Marines breathing through their mouths, the stench of diesel.
My hand is damp, warm droplets run
down my forehead, some becoming beads below
my nose, I wish I had a mustache.
My wife's stare fixed upon my ashen face,
and seeing me shake, she asks, "What's Wrong?"

I feel sick, feel like running, dormant butterflies flutter,
I look around for the nearest foxhole.
I see the photo and can still smell
the stench of diesel, through my mouth,
three hundred and seventy days worth,
I vomit.

(Dong Ha, Vietnam, '67-'68, 9th Marine Infantry Regiment)

Climaxes of Two Masterpieces ***(for Trisha)***

Eric Cruz

The flame sways like a cobra
when moon light dances on your furrowed brow. Flowing
from your lips are the hums of Sonatas
kissing the darkness while your slender fingers press
on the surface to coax pitches from this Masterpiece
that struggles like waves against
your Ivory touch. This Interlude
quakes your breath into embers, stoking
your sinewy back to arch,
muscles to twitch
in those arms. Your head swoons like Harmony
to that private Climax in your mind and body.
The cloak of night rustles to the gentle breeze
around the room, and nostrils flare
when gusts invade your frame
to rock as Alto rhythms pour
from this place that was once hollow. Still
your strokes never waver in these moments,
your fingers like streamers pressing the Movement
to your bosom, causing the hairs
on your neck to become pins. Beads
of sweat trickle from your forehead
as the final thrusts jolt
you to wilt. Don't sigh
as the flame finally bows out,
and your ears and chest
moan for the lost Beats.

Next Life Shuffle

Natalie Suarez

Feeling a sudden warmth on his head, the shape on the ground opened his eyes. The first thing that greeted him was concrete, right beside his cheek. Instantly, his mind began to work. Why was he laying on the ground? Thinking that perhaps he had just fallen, he tried to pick himself up, but found that he couldn't even move. This seemed like a very odd way to begin his day, and he decided to remain on the ground for a minute until someone passed by or he could figure out what to do.

As he lay on the sidewalk, being warmed by the sun that was lazily inching its way out from behind the clouds, he gathered his thoughts. For some reason he was having trouble remembering the details of his morning, such as the ones that would have told him why he was staring at the pavement. However, the bigger things were coming to him, slowly. A name...Sean Curtis. As far as he knew, that was still him. But as for where he was or why he was there, nothing was revealing itself. Sean tried to sigh, and found that his mouth felt strange, as if it were shaped differently than it had been that morning, when he had brushed his teeth and headed for work.

Stranger still was the fact that although he should have been at least a little upset about his current situation, he was actually feeling pretty relaxed. The sun felt good, warming his entire body and face as if he were wearing nothing at all.

Looking up, a task that seemed too great to undertake lightly, Sean saw a corner nearby, and heard a pair of voices approaching. Relief, an entirely new warmth, washed over him as he relaxed a little. He hoped that one of these people could help him. Maybe one of them had a phone.

"I don't think so, Todd. The boss was very clear in stating what he wanted for us to do with the Johnson proposal." A woman in a gray business suit and black pumps was walking around the corner, accompanied by a young man in a similar suit and tie. They looked as if they had just come

from a business lunch, and were completely involved in their own world. Sean tried to find his voice, but found that no words would come.

"Come on, Maria, I don't think he'd mind if we just tried a couple of new things...I just know it would clinch us the deal!" The man's face was extremely animated as he spoke to the woman called Maria, and as Sean watched in shock, they walked briskly past him.

"Well, I'm not willing to risk my job for it," she said as the heel of her shoe hit the pavement just in front of Sean's eye. In a matter of moments they had passed him by, and Sean's eyes widened. What was going on? Why hadn't they helped him? They had to have seen him lying there, no one could miss a full-grown man lying on the ground... could they?

Gathering his strength, Sean managed to move his body a little. Much to his dismay, all he could do was crawl a little on his belly. It was discouraging to say the least, and Sean lay still again, staring at the cracks in the pavement and wondering why those two people hadn't helped him. A few fuzzy memories were drifting into his head, watery as cheap drinks and probably just as pointless. He remembered leaving home, getting in his car and realizing he was a little late to work. But...then what? The memories stopped abruptly and while he was trying to remember more, he became aware that another person was coming around the corner.

This time it was a teenage girl of about fifteen or sixteen, the kind who are notorious for helping out wounded birds and calling the paramedics for injured men. She stood near the corner waiting, and was joined a moment later by a second girl with brown hair. Wriggling his body around a little on the ground in order to attract their attention, Sean tried to move closer to the girls. As he did so, the girls began to walk towards him. For a moment it looked as if they were going to walk past him, but Sean pushed himself a little further towards their feet, close enough to hear their conversation.

"I hate the bus. It's always so late...and dirty too."

"Oh, me too. I just can't wait until...eeek!" The brunette shrieked and leapt away from Sean, who stared up at her querulously. Her friend was immediately concerned, and she leaned towards the frightened girl.

"What is it?"

"A lizard! Get it away!" Kicking at Sean, she made a face that clearly expressed her disgust, and her friend pulled her away from the offending creature.

"Gross. I didn't even know they could live in the city." Before he could move any closer to them, the girls had hurried away in an attempt to put as much distance as possible between them and the lizard.

Sean sat motionless on the pavement, unable to comprehend what he had just heard. Lizard? Suddenly finding his strength, he moved to the corner, then around it. It seemed to take forever, but it was worth it when he discovered a shard of mirror that had fallen out of a trashcan. Looking cautiously into it, Sean was horrified to find that there was a little green lizard staring at him, the same kind of lizard that he took great pleasure in squirting off the fence with a garden hose. Backing away from the mirror, he looked around. This was insane. How on earth was he supposed to believe that he had actually turned into a lizard?

"Sorry I'm late," a voice said above his head, and Sean looked up to see two businessmen shaking hands. Was he downtown now? "There was an accident on the main street so I had to find another way."

"Bad accident?"

"Pretty bad. One of those sport utility vehicles hit a little sports car, and from what I heard the driver of the sports car was killed."

"Talk about lousy luck..." The conversation continued as the men walked away, but Sean didn't hear any of it. Like jagged bolts of lightning, memories of the crash were returning to him, jolting through his skin, and he froze in place as the images pulled him in every direction.

He had been late for work and driven through the red light, so sure he would make it in time. Unfortunately, he had misjudged the distance between himself and the other car. The sounds of breaking glass, screeching tires and tearing metal were among his last memories, along with a burning pain and a bright flash of light, then...nothing. The next thing he knew, he had woken up on the sidewalk disoriented and unaware of what had happened.

So he had died...and been brought back as a lizard? But why? A basically nice guy like himself should have headed

on up to heaven or at least been brought back as another human being, right? Could this be some sort of huge celestial clerical error? Suddenly, another wave of memories began parading through his mind, this time of all the little things he had done in his other life...

There was that... and that... and then there was... oh man, he didn't know that was gonna cost him... and oh yeah... oops... He hadn't figured there were quite that many. And then of course, there were all the little green lizards he had so thoughtfully spritzed off the fence with his garden hose.

The sun was getting too hot now, and he suddenly wanted a nice cool place to rest for a little while. Scuttling away on his new feet to a darkened corner of a nearby alley, Sean managed a tiny sigh. He wondered how long lizards lived.

2020

Yvette Marie Gonzalez

A political swing of chestnut hair
And piel canela to rock your vote
Not the politician they may have wanted
A simple change to make 'em choke.

A flavorful mix of Tejana and class,
A "Handful of earth" and *All that Jazz*
Bohemian mystery wrapped up in gauze,
And, oh, one striking difference: menopause.

Streak of artista,
Libro of song,
A linguist at heart,
Fearless and strong.

Jack of all trades, master of few
Determined Latina with a world-eye view.
Whip full of testament to the future of Hope,
Agile feminist, no longer a joke.

Now trusted as president as so many before
A run for your money
A wide open door

Fear nothing for your life's in good hands
I have visions and dreams and a million new plans!
I'm a rocket to Pluto, off with a blast,
A stone to hang on to—
 A woman!
 At last!

Red

Christine Rives

your smooth lies
tear through me
like a broken finger nail
caught in my favorite
fuzzy sweater.

don't get cocky and think
I didn't see
the warning.
her lipstick must have bit
your tongue

like that one pepper seed
that surprises you.
it hurts so bad
even water won't extinguish
the sting.

let me paint you a jealous picture:
what made you stop-
a new dress? new eyes?
confident sex?

"Our love has no boundaries,"
you would say.
funny, 'cause you're the one
who nailed the Exit sign
above my door.

yeah, well,
it wasn't love
anyway.
that's something children draw
with new markers.

Aspiring to Barbie

Elena Bagge

I had collagen injections
in my thirties
to get fuller lips
like Julia Roberts
that attract more men
at forty-six
the skin on my face
upper and lower eyes
was pulled back
and tightened
to keep my eyes
wide and alert
my face stiff and surprised
two years later
I had the fat sucked
out of my thighs
stomach and ass
so I can fit
into a size two
and share clothes
with my daughter
then I had fat injected
into the lines
in the sides of my nose
to get a better profile
since my ears stuck out
I had them fixed
and pulled in
as a fiftieth birthday gift
to myself
and I'll have more
still
I don't consider myself

What They Don't Say ***(Fitness gurus gather)***

Melissa Sandy Vela

Hunger growls
Tame your food!
Flaming energy glows in
Metabolic Magic.

Amber acid churns
peel me, heal me
sizzling against the silken lining of
screaming emptied stomachs.

Take along a lil less fat,
pulsing waves
demanding as a heart
dissolving pills that promise

Legalize it.
The control is calming
Serenity now,
forget thinning hair

keep losing.
Stand up, crumble
under the weight
Resize your thighs

they taunt,
judging as careful as teaspoons
resiliency, you must
eat to beat

win the game.
Choose your sick days wisely
you are still
so far behind.

Moment

Katherine Green

She sat at the kitchen table, drinking black coffee with fruit and bread dipped in cane syrup. The lines crossing her face gave a roadmap of her life. I saw her dusty childhood sunshine etched in her crows' feet as she looked across at me.

"Come sit awhile, keep me company," she smiled, imprinting ten new lines in powdery cheeks. They leaked past joys as I scooted my chair closer.

"You're awfully young to be sitting so quiet," she commented, curling brown-flecked fingers around her paring knife. "What you doing all alone over there? Scribbling?"

I hesitated to show her my notebook, lifting one corner, but careful to hide the few scrawled lines. "Writing."

"Writing what?" she peered closer, cherubic in her curiosity.

"A school assignment," I lied, not knowing why I didn't want to be showered with praise for my talents. "An essay for History." Every other accomplishment in my life that exceeded breathing merited praise in her eyes. And while it was fun at first, I tired of it, fearing her insincerity, wondering whether her censure would be as extreme when I made a mistake.

I didn't want her to know I was writing about her. She might demand to read the pages and not appreciate the mirror I held there. Few people did.

She lifted one shoulder and returned to her bread and fruit, the coffee long-cold on the table, as she sipped it once every ten minutes. "I used to write, too. Didn't want nobody to see it."

I stared at her. "Really? Why not?"

"No one felt it like I did." She slid me a glance. "I guess you got that from me."

I looked down at my page, stunned. I never knew. "You know, Mom writes too."

"She does?" Beaming, she nodded. "I thought so. Such a bookworm, your mama."

I grinned, feeling a thread hurl across generations and

snag on the past, drawing it adjacent to this moment. "How come you never showed your writing to anyone, even Mom?"

She shook her head. "Some of the things I wrote, a young person could never understand- things I taught her in words rather than pages, later on."

"Do you still write?" I asked, laying my notebook face down and resting my arms on the table.

She nodded. "I have more time now, but I don't really want to do it anymore. It was too hard."

"But- but it's easy," I protested. "You just put down the first thing that comes into your head, then keep writing until it's done."

She shook her head. "You take one emotion- one moment- one picture," she said, squinting into the middle distance and lifting one hand partially curled, cradling her words. "And then you capture it, purify it, crystallize it," she closed her fingers around them, "and set it loose on paper. Let it shape, grow, but never release that moment. Build around that moment."

"How do you know which moment?" I asked.

"You just- know." Her eyes focused again and she looked over at me, a strange intensity resonant in her gaze that I'd never seen before. "It might not have come to you yet. You have to wait. Because the one thing you can't force is that moment. You'll try and fail a thousand times, thinking you've found it, but the first instant you catch that moment, you realize that all the others were dreams. It's like putting on glasses for the first time- you didn't realize what you were lacking, or even that you were lacking at all, until you find the clarity for the first time. And after that, other attempts are just a paltry substitute. And waiting for it, building it, is the most exhausting thing. Because once you've done it, you've pinched off a bit of your soul and spread it thin. It -1Xonly takes a little. But it's exhausting, watching your life pan back to you. If you're true to it, you might see things you don't want to see."

I watched her for a long time, but she said no more, her attention riveting back on her coffee. She fiddled with her food, as she had all day, reverting back to the wizened, simple woman I'd seen my whole life.

"Thanks," I said, unsure of where I stood.

She smiled again, patting my shoulder. "You're me all

over again, honey, just luckier," she murmured.

A jolt sizzled along my nerves, and I felt it. That *moment*. Grabbing my notebook, I left the table and went back up to my room to capture it before it faded.

The Absurdity of Living in a Tourist Town

Michelle P. Piña

You are on your lunch break
trying to relax in the
light sunlight and
cool breeze
of the day.

You are absorbed in your book
bare feet on a chair
even though it is probably
against mall rules in the food court
but who cares anyway?
you're outside for heaven's sake.

You forget that you
still have
your nametag on
when the large man in the silly-looking cowboy hat
approaches you
and tentatively calls your name.

"I love the color of your skin,
are you from here?
You seem so native
and you
look like this city.
Do you mind if I take your picture?"

You figure-
What the hell? Why not?
He wants you just as you are he says
relaxed, feet up,
reading your book with a small smile.

"Wait!"
the man startles you.

“Your nametag...”

You take it off
irritated with yourself
for doing so.

Who cares about his stupid picture anyways?
Why shouldn't you have a name?

You hear the click of the camera
The man takes off his hat
thanks you politely
and leaves

You are irritated with him.
He wanted your image,
but not to see you as a person.

You continue reading
and think
only in this tourist town
would he,
or you,
get away
with being such an idiot.

Visitor

Monica M. Ramirez

Looking out the window,
Out where the cornfields
Touch the sun's ray
The cling-clangs of the old truck,
Heard from down the road.

An unfamiliar face sits by his side
He walks to the other side
The truck door squeaks as it opens
The passenger gets down from the Ford.
Dust encircling the steps of high-heeled shoes,
Her blue eye-shadow matches her clothes.

"She cannot stay!
How dare you ask if she can lodge here!
She's not here to help with the daily chores!
I will not allow her to stay in my home.
'Our home, the home we have made for our family.'
Our nine children, who are playing outside."

Her plan is to stay here,
With him.
The father of our nine children.
Sacred vows broken.

Her bags have been thrown out on the porch.
I stand in an empty house
And the laughter of children from outside
Fill the room with sound.
They are clues of the guest
Who is now getting back in the truck.

A rusty door closes and
The cling-clang of a truck driving away
Is the last thing I hear.

She is now gone.
You are now gone.

I know you will be back.
In the early hours of dawn you will lie down
Beside me
The overpowering smell of alcohol
The noises made
While you try to undress

Yes, I will know when you return

Looking out the window
I cannot see the cornfields touch
The sun's rays
All is blurred by the rears.
Darkness fills up inside of me,
It surrounds me.
Sacred vows that were once taken,
Sacred vows broken.

Mushrooms

Karin Jo Dunham

(I am afraid)

Massive obsidian room, sinking into a plush ivory sofa, lone candle wincing wildly, living, breathing with every beat of bass, every stoke of electricity, a voice-a shrill shrieking scream, walls moving, living, breathing, with every flicker of light.

What's going on?

Concentrate

Concentrate

Lights on,

(I am afraid)

Laughter bounces across the ceiling, mantle, enters my mind, like a never-ending pinball journey racking up so many points that the line of kids has since disappeared, I fall back slowly against the cool ivory leather. I'm sitting up, brother beside me. How is this possible? How? Pee, I need to pee, I must stand up, "Can I turn on the TV?" sure but why? I must stand up, I need to pee, tingling, stumbling through the hall.

Concentrate

Concentrate

(I am afraid)

There I am, familiar eyes timidly looking back at me, put water on your face, clumsy hands scoop cool water upon my chubby crimson cheeks, back to the boys, dry your face first, turn off the light, wait, I still need to pee, sitting there I can't.

Concentrate

The paisley wallpaper crawls up the wall like crazed ivy attacking the house, peeing...finally, now go back to the boys, they're outside, go outside.

Concentrate

Concentrate

(I am afraid)

We are all outside, it's so late, why are those three girls out by themselves so late, holy shit it's only 8:30, they don't know we are insane, to them we look like three pals chilling outside smoking cigarettes, not me though, even when I am insane I don't smoke. I want to scream out WE AREN'T NORMAL! Our brains are exploding everywhere, spewing out onto the front lawn, inter-mingling with the lush grass and hidden poop. The poop is waiting for my bare frightened feet to leave their friendly concrete home.

Concentrate

Concentrate

Jackass is on. It is quite possibly the funniest thing I have ever seen. Finally I feel only partially insane. I might be able to be normal once again. Two hours worth of Jackass later I am hungry. That's got to be a good sign. Concentrate on inviting pools of rust-colored grease sitting atop the pepperoni and *Mushroom*

Pizza. Quite strange how this little fungi chillin on my salivating tongue won't send me to a hellish insanity, like his earlier c

This is for you

Nicole Moore

This is for you.

He hands her a piece
of cylindrical wood thick
as the slenderness of a middle finger,
a tiny Montana fence-post, vast
possibility,
sandpapered-smooth by rain,
whittled by elements but cut
by man.

*It's what we have done to this world.
Yes. I understand.*

We tramped through woods
of Medina Lake,
among sticks and stones
of abandoned septic tanks,
porcelain bowls
and old stoves,
freshly cut
Oaks –

We found a chunk,
a slab
of life,
grayed-dead like roast,
browned in the center
like fresh meat exposed.

This section of a tree
may have contained
a secret map
to some ancient sea ingrained
in its four leaf clover shape
and fine topographical lines that skate
a surface sliced by saw.

Now it is nailed
to a wall
as a piece of art,
for all.

Looking North

H. Palmer Hall

I am up much too early today
not to watch the sun rise
but because of some restlessness
some desire to move from
this one spot where the earth

is parched, where water
hides beneath the cracked earth.
The sheriff of Kennedy county
leads journalists on a trail
from the Rio Grande north

to a small highway. The tourist
spots are dry holes near scrub
mesquite, sand dunes with rattle
snakes. He points out each
depression in the earth, each

depression that once held dry
bones in a dry country. "Nine
people so far this year," he says.
"Illegal aliens walking from
so many miles south to some

north they've never seen." They
used to drown in the river, now
their skin shrivels as they walk,
turns darker, their tongues dry.
They lie down beneath dunes and die.

Here in this withered borderland
no oasis offers relief, no ranchers
put water out as they do food

for ranging cattle. I stand beneath
a bright night sky, looking up

at stars undimmed by city lights
and gaze across a barren land. I do
not see a woman fall, posed between
two dwarf trees, hear the rattle
of a snake, of a last breath of air,

only, some small cough, some
desire that floods across the border,
some search for life, to take and drink,
to kneel and stretch up and out. This
is the end, the last days of pilgrimage,

blisters on face and back, feet cracked
like patches of hard clay. José y Maria,
what child must come, what rescue
from a dry land, what hope for clear
water and the soft brush of cool breezes.

Daughter

Gwendolyn Díaz

Soft, smooth golden
skin smelling of cream.
Long wavy tresses
flowing like a stream.
Eyes
as deep as the Amazon is green
looking at me
with the wisdom of a queen.

When you swelled out of my womb,
your piercing cries
splitting the sterile room,
I was shocked by the force of your anger
as if knowing the world
threatened danger.

A red-purple bundle of fierce emotions,
arms flaying backwards
rejecting such contortions.
That life within me
for whom I now felt devotion
made it painfully clear,
I am here,
your own creation.

An infant Madonna blessing a new world.
Now, almost a woman,
mind bright and unfurled.
I lay next to you, watching
dreams flutter in your eyes,
full of wonder
a daughter's heart could be so wise.

Shadows

Humayun Zafar

She was sitting right next to her brother's grave, the air too dry for tears. Her eyes red and swollen, as the memories of her brother passed before them. Just like a sailor on a sinking ship, seeing his life just before his death. Was she going to die, would her death be like that of her brother? Such a thought ravaged her already weary mind, as the memories heaved with renewed vigor.

Azucena and Peter had a typical brother-sister relationship. Both seemed to argue almost all the time, yet the bond between them was of love and tremendous respect. They would squabble at the most incredulous of things. One would go for "Friends", while the other would gun for "Millionaire." Yet laughter and good times came often, especially when they would.

Not much separated Azucena from her brother as far as their birth dates were concerned. Peter was born on January 2nd, while Azucena had her day on the first of January. He had 1980 plainly marked on his college ID, while she had a birth certificate that stated 1983. Peter was always a protective brother, who on the outside seemingly had no care for Azucena at times, but on the inside he cared for his sister enough to give her the world if possible. When he saw his sister for the first time, he immediately said that she looked like a little flower. Hence the name Azucena, a flower... a lily.

Peter, was the brains of the family, as their mom had so often reiterated time and time again. At Ellen Wilkinson High, Peter aced every subject he took. He took part in debates and gave numerous speeches, each time coming out breathing determination and passion. When the time came for Azucena to attend the same high school, the teachers immediately looked at her as a successor to her brother, one who would set even higher standards. No matter how hard she tried to live to the extraordinarily high expectations, Azucena never really made par with her brother's achievements. She struggled with the concepts of trigonometry as Peter started to show promising signs in college, not that anyone expected anything less from him. She

worked her heart out, but even then the gods would not relent. The parents began to worry, as their daughter became obsessed with fulfilling her dream...the dream that one day she would be just like her brother. She was cutting herself off from the rest of the world. Whenever her friends called, and asked her to tag along with them to the mall, she would decline: she had homework to finish. When Peter came back from college for a brief break, he was crushed to see how pale his flowery sister had become. He tried to humor her with all the old tricks, but Azucena would have none of that. She had locked herself away, trying to follow the shadow of her brother. The shadow it seemed, always had the last laugh. Still, she was determined to keep on going at it. Peter soon left for New York not feeling too great himself.

A call had come in from New York. Peter had been taken to the hospital after suffering from chest pains. According to the doctors he was suffering from a rare genetic heart ailment, cardiomyopathy. The disease had been mistaken for a mild fever not too far back, but unfortunately it was a lot more serious than that. When Azucena heard the news, all her blood was drained away as the parents choked on their tears. Nothing had prepared them for such an event. They had always been a family of four. A family who enjoyed their life to the fullest; now the beloved son and brother was on a hospital bed.

Taking the red eye to New York, Peter's parents and Azucena reached the hospital, but by the time they arrived the ICU, the family of four was no longer a family of four.

The air is now a little moist as fresh tears fall on the concrete grave. There is a little haze, as the sun shows signs of bidding farewell for a day. The shadows lengthen and Azucena casts an eye on them. She hates them. They are responsible for not letting her appreciate the presence of her brother. How foolish she had been, chasing her brother's shadow instead of him, and now he took his shadow to the grave, but the new found light brought no joy.

A Haunting Memory

Nettie R. Lucio

His calming voice,
her soothing touch,
brought on by nature's love
As the three of us
watch the stars above.

But, like a flash
it was all gone
for the serpent altered that.

Over me he flew,
I, not even two.
Coiling round her neck,
venomous, he spat.

Nostrils flared, eyes a-glare
I, not even two.
Her screams first loud
soon trickled out
I, not even two.

Sea por Dios,
her voice a whisper.
Sea por Dios,
her voice a whisper.
Uncoiling, he released her.
Slithering away, once she passed out.
I, not even two.

Returning for another try
this haunting memory
came bursting through.
I, then twenty-two.

Road-Stop Angel

Katherine Green

"HailMaryfullofgracetheLordiswiththee..." She gripped the steering wheel tighter, the radio long since cold and silent. Its jabber and jangle was soothing at first, but it distracted her. She needed to focus on street signs and somehow hope to grow a sense of direction.

"Blessedarthouamongstwomen..." The mumbled prayers started as a rosary, meticulously counted on her fingers, and ended in string after string of frantic Hail Marys once she lost count and concentrated on the road.

She didn't let her eyes stray to the clock. She was supposed to be home an hour ago, and she didn't want to think about her parents waiting in the living room right now.

It started out as an adventure—finding her own way once she realized she didn't recognize the street signs. It was only when she tried to U-turn and get back, and wound up hitting an unknown highway, that it turned into stubbornness and a determination to do this herself, rather than running to Daddy like she hated doing. He always made her feel so small. And her roommate didn't know Houston—it would do no good to call her.

The car in front of her switched out of its lane. Did it think she wanted to pass?

A huge roll of dirty carpet lay directly in front of her, and she shrieked and jerked the wheel sideways. Her tires protested, someone honked, and fresh cool droplets fell onto the backs of her hands where she hunched over them, mingling with the nervous perspiration of her palms and making her hands slip.

A sound broke from her lips, half sob, half fear, and she pinched them together. When she was capable of frightening herself, it was time to shut up.

She pulled off the freeway and into the nearest gas station, determined to get directions. This had gone on long enough.

There was one girl behind the counter, listening to earphones and singing with eyes closed. A man slumped by the door had a paper bag in his hand, the top crumpled around the neck of a bottle. He took another swig, then stumbled to his feet when he saw her coming. She swallowed the sour gasoline air.

"Lost your way, sugar?" he asked, stretching out the hand with the bottle in it. His welcoming smile wobbled, just like his stance.

Terror turned her feet around and saw her safely back to her car. She slammed the door behind her. The engine growled to life, and she retreated.

She'd never considered that she might be in danger here. Sure, lost, but not at risk. It was difficult to imagine that merely stopping for help might get her jumped by some wacko with a penchant for tearstained teenagers. It was obvious how out of place she was, and who would defend her?

Then again, it might be dangerous on the roads. A drunk could come crashing over the double yellow lines and make her a statistic.

Was this it, then? Was this how it was going to go? Disappearing into the night like a runaway, with no one the wiser that she was lying in a ditch? Her parents would forbid her little brother to drive until he was fifty. Her friends would just cry.

A light on her dashboard flickered on. A little yellow E glared at her, smugly dancing next to the gas gauge.

"Oh, *crap!*" she said aloud, her voice breaking the eerie rushing silence. That was what she needed to make her decision. She moved into the right lane, seeing a brightly lit Burger King down the road. It was right next to an Exxon, and looked vaguely familiar. Had she passed it before in her blurry-eyed panic?

First things first: she fed the cash in her wallet into the nearest pump, and put gas in *p-1Xher tank. Then she locked the doors, and walked into the bustling, fragrant arms of Burger King.

The woman behind the counter looked at her strangely as she approached. Her brown hair was bouffant, giving away that this was far from home. Her tag read "JoAnne."

"Hi," the girl said uneasily, planting her fingertips on the

counter standing between them. "I was wondering if you could tell me where I am."

JoAnne's heavily mascaraed eyes widened.

"Richmond?" she said, only it was more like a question.

"Richmond?!" *Just how long did I drive?*

"Richmond, Texas?"

She sighed in relief. "Okay. Do you know how to get to Houston?"

"Um..." JoAnne looked down, then glanced over her shoulder. "I'm not sure, but there's a guy in the back who lives in Houston, so lemme go ask him..."

When JoAnne walked away, the girl took a moment to look around the restaurant. The inside was a combination fast food joint and gas station. A black woman and her three children ate in the corner. Two truckers were talking over coffee. A grungy man in his fifties or sixties (she couldn't quite tell) slouched less than twenty feet away, following her every move with his eyes.

She unconsciously edged closer to the counter.

JoAnne returned, saying as she walked toward the counter, "He's comin'. Just a minute."

"That's great... where's there a payphone?"

"Oh, do you want to call home? I bet you can use the employee phone... it'll be a lot easier." JoAnne offered a smile, and reached behind her to the white cordless on the wall.

The girl dialed, then turned her back to the counter as it started ringing. The man was still watching her. Her eyes darted away, and then furtively crept back again and again to study him. He wore torn blue jeans, and a gray t-shirt. His hair was dirty-white and wild, like his beard. The intense way he looked at her made her shift her feet and pretend she'd been staring at the wall behind his head the whole time.

The call to her mother and father was by no means brief, or without lectures. Several minutes later, another one of the Burger King employees drew her a -1Xmap leading to the beltway, and showing how to get home from there. Her father said for the third time that she should have called sooner, told her to take the toll-road to avoid getting lost again on the feeder, and hung up.

She chewed her lower lip and thought about her empty wallet, and half-full tank of gas. She asked, but Johanna

couldn't cash a check. The man behind the Exxon counter wouldn't, either. Her eyes were filling with frustrated tears again when she heard shuffling footsteps behind her. A five-dollar bill slid across the counter, and a cotton-throated voice said, "Give her about four dollars worth of quarters."

She felt almost ashamed when she saw the old man in his torn jeans. "Thank you, sir." Her checkbook was still open, so she quietly asked his name, pen poised.

"That's all right." He didn't touch her, but his eyes made her put the checkbook away with another shaky thanks.

As the Exxon man counted quarters into her hand, the old man added, "I'm taking highway 183 m'self, so you can follow me there if you like."

She nodded, forcing a smile, feeling about an inch tall for all her assumptions.

"I'm in the gray Ford pickup, around this side." He pointed.

"I'm over here." She gestured vaguely, her eyes beginning to feel salty from the trauma they'd endured in the past few hours. She suddenly felt very, very tired.

"I'll come by and meet you, then we can head off together." He smiled, revealing yellowish teeth. Dirt settled into the creases in his face, but she prayed she could remember that face.

* * *

In her old bedroom, after tearful greetings and "welcome home"s, she was dressing for bed. Six quarters still jingled in her pocket. She drew them out, looked at their dulled shine for a moment, and almost smiled. She didn't have a way to thank him.

But she put the coins in a jewelry box, surrounded with cotton. She'd never spend them. She might use them as a good luck charm, though. Just as a little reminder that angels hung out at Burger King.

Tree of Life

Cyra S. Dumitru

A tree grows out of my left side,
roots tangled with the arteries and veins
feeding my heart, my lungs.

In can't recall the moment
when tiny roots first pierced the sleek throbbing
of my heart, a tender thrust

into the core of my being. Perhaps
it happened when I first tasted air
like a surprise upon the palate,

a surprise that plunged quite invisible
into the spongy cavities of lung,
where it swirled, startled the rise and fall

that accompanies every moment.
Neither can I remember
when the sapling,

so hungry for light,
nudged between my ribs
pushed through dermis, epidermis

split the final layer of skin,
such pale and porous ground.
It might have been when

I held my first-born, her own skin still chalky
as if swathed in fading strands of holy linen.
More than anything I can no longer remember

what it is to be only a self, unrooted
by the burden of love, children
who turn toward me day and night.

Burst by burst,
branches grow from this thickening.
Some bear the weight of fruit

that ripens and decays with the faces
of those I love best,
those I struggle to embrace

with hands ready to gather, tend, receive.
My tree surges again
when my son, striding alongside me

through the striped light of a juniper barren
stops and says softly,
"Sometimes I feel like this world is a dream."

A Death on Village Creek

H. Palmer Hall

The lightning struck directly in the center of the creek. We could not escape the glare of it from our too small house on the slope. The sound rushed up through dripping woods and we cowered as the shock of noise rolled over us for much too long. That's how the summer went all that year.

September tricked us, made the flowers bloom: azaleas filled with pink blossoms, giant hydrangeas in both pink and blue though we had been told the soil determined that; tomatoes fruited out and mulberries and blackberries. We picked and ate, stopped and drank. We talked about the lightning.

Village Creek rose high and strong that night. Dark waters dug away the banks from outer bends, under-cutting beech and magnolia trees, digging from beneath the bank. When a tree fell, the water washed around, stripped it of leaves, left branches behind to capsize unwary canoeists who thought the creek always slow and placid.

My father said "The creek's too much this time. You can swim tomorrow. Too much current, too many snags. See how that limb floats along and then dips down, caught in an eddy behind the submerged branch." We watched. We all agreed, then found a secret place to swim up the creek, above the bend just off the racing stream. Yet still

Billy died there. He dove into the water and hit a tree that could not free itself from broken roots. His head stuck beneath the creek in the fork of two not-yet-rotted limbs. Three days later, our dark green Oldsmobile traced the path of hearse and grieving family members. This was the first procession for the dead.

My father drove slowly, watched the lights of the cars ahead. "It's a shame beer's not right for this," he said. The cars passed so many bars: Yvonne's and the Red Lion, LouAnne's and Thibodeaux's. A drive in the thicket like so many others except for the boy just five cars ahead. I should say I did not know him well; we rarely played except that day.

An educational experience, but more than that. Of all my friends, I remember Billy first though knew him least of all. What I knew was the color of his hair, his skinny frame, his neck wedged between two limbs I never saw, the odd appearance of his face when we looked inside the casket. It did not look like Billy, rouge dotting his cheek, a boy who would never be a man.

Out to Dry

Dedicated to Dad's Saturday mornings

Melissa A. Quintanilla

Forest green V neck sweater

that matches

new Wrangler jeans—

only two nights

out in the town.

Hung in the closet for months

until it made it to the box of Goodwill.

Then dad snatched it.

Dipped, dripping with bubbles,

Pressed against a charcoal gray hood.

Left to air-dry on the

criss-cross

silver metal points

on the fence.

***Hummingbirds:
My Psychopathic Little Friends***
Bart Clarkson

I have three hummingbird feeders hung around my house, and these charming creatures keep me endlessly entertained, I must say. This is not like fish, folks. I've heard people talk of how peaceful fish are, how they just relax people and give voice to their dreams of a more perfect fusion between body and soul, or some other stomach-churning garbage. My question to the fish people is, frankly, how lame can you get? Let's talk hummers here. There are no delusions of Utopia in the hummingbird world, no Towers of Babel. Perhaps that is why I like them so much. I mean, they'll stab each other in the back, but at least they're up front about it. Hummingbirds are very capitalistic birds.

About the only thing hummingbirds have in common with fish is vertebrae, and such criterion would pretty much put them on a par with humans, for the most part. Hummingbirds, in contrast, have their minds made up without exception. A day is not a day unless it is spent doing mach 10 after another hummingbird. I'm convinced that from an evolutionary standpoint the only reason they became so fast and acrobatic was to better pursue one another, like a roadster enthusiast souping up the monster under his hood.

If you've heard that hummingbirds can fly upside down, you've heard right. I've seen it. It was very exciting, actually, and rather humorous. One hummingbird, having broken the sound barrier, was bearing down on another one on the feeder. He came right up from under the feeder, the sneaky devil, and the hummer who had been slurping down some chow had to immediately execute an emergency twist into an upside-down gain of altitude. The other unfortunate twist to the story is that the murderous speedster went right the heck into the window, and fell to earth, down for the count. How the crash didn't break its crazy little head, I have no idea; that hit must have knocked the living bejezus out of him. I think the physics explanation is that the smaller you are, the more

lenient Mother Nature is when you screw up. Anyway, I went to go get some kleenex, the burial shroud of choice in such situations, and as I was approaching my fallen compatriot he suddenly perked up, re-established the com-link, and took off. The upshot is that I'm fairly certain he didn't learn his lesson. Death is the only thing that slows down a hummer.

I remember a story one of my relatives once shared with me of his childhood. His brother had assured him that hummingbirds never land. "Oh yeah?" spoke up my relative critically, then fourteen, "then how do they have sex?!" No doubt this speaks eloquently toward the state of a young boy's minds at such an age. Perhaps a more obvious question would have been an inquiry into hummingbird sleeping arrangements, but then, I'm speaking from a less hormonal stage of life, however slight. And I'm not sure hummingbirds couldn't mate in flight, but that's a really bizarre thought which I'm sure my mother warned me against expressing while I wasn't listening.

I must assure the reader, though, that I happen to know that hummingbirds do land. They like to perch on the top of trees overlooking hummingbird feeders, like little snipers, waiting for another hummingbird to have the absolute gall to seek sustenance. The thought pattern at that moment is fairly simple. "Ah, you seek to drink from the great Bottomless Flower. I feel anger over this. You die."

Sometimes you will catch three of them on the same feeder at once. The tension is akin to that of a cold war about to get just one heck of a lot hotter. Just how long will their thirst overcome their hatred? It's always hard to tell, but sooner or later, the air is rent asunder by hummingbirds putting down the pedal, intent on harpooning one another with the sabers attached to their little skulls. I like to call those moments the Hummingbird Standoff, those calm seconds before the fury of Hell bursts free.

Sometimes, though alone, a hummingbird will never quite get to the feeder. In his mind, you know what he must be thinking. "No, man, no. It's just too quiet." And he'll fly off, afraid of a sniper. I can't say that I'd blame him. I'd get the same way if I had to worry about somebody putting a javelin into the back of my head every time I wanted to grab some grub.

Frankly, getting back to my relative's question, I really don't know how hummingbirds have sex. The hate within a single member of this little avian would be enough to fuel the entire campaign of a fascist leader bent on world domination. I'm sure a biologist would assure me that hummingbirds must, in fact, call a truce and take care of business every once in a while. I myself suspect that hummingbirds have simply existed from the beginning of time, and every once in a while, when the hatred within one of them becomes too great for a single body to hold, it bursts into another hummingbird, which it immediately tries to kill.

But in any case, hummingbirds are extraordinarily beautiful little creatures, and it's a pleasure to have them around the house. It's always sad when they head South for the winter. The place isn't the same without the furious beat of their wings. It's getting near that time of year when they return. I'll be getting the Bottomless Flowers ready to go again. Forget the fish.

la Colchita (The Little Blanket)

Gabriela Seidner

When I was born, many people came over to the hospital to see me. I know this because my mother has a scrapbook in which she recorded the names of the visitors and what gifts had they brought to give me. There were the usual things listed: bottles, pink pajamas, boxes of safety pins for diapers, diapers, sweaters, and all the essential things a new baby might need. My mother's best friend gave her a blue baby blanket. I guess they were all expecting a boy, so I had to settle for blue and not pink. What I didn't know then, was that this blue blanket was going to become my best friend and companion for many years.

It's true and maybe not that original, but my best friend was a security blanket or "colchita" as I called it. It was really an ugly thing when I look back, even in its early days, when the blue and light blue pictures of kittens were not faded and the hem was not frayed. It wasn't even made of a nice, soft material. It was just a blanket.

Still, it wouldn't leave my side for anything in the world. When I scraped a knee it was right there to dry my tears. When I watched TV it was right there to cuddle with. When I played with dolls it was right there to tuck them in. At night, it was right there to battle away any monsters (or so I thought). When my mother went on trips or had to stay over at the hospital (she's a doctor) and I missed her so much my stomach hurt, my 'colchita' comforted me.

It became my trademark. My aunt would always find ways to tease me because she hated babysitting for me, so she would call me "Linus, Linus." She said I looked like the cartoon Peanuts character Linus because he was always dragging his dirty blanket around. Well, it wasn't so far from the truth. I would drag that blanket everywhere because I would put it over one shoulder so that it hung behind me, trailing on the floor and picking up dust.

It was impossible for my grandmother or my mother to separate me from my colchita in order to wash it. I suffered

when they would sneak it out while I slept and put in the washer. When I found out, I would cry and stomp and sulk. I would look at them contemptuously as if they had drowned the last princess on a fairytale. I remember we didn't have a clothesdryer back then, so all the laundry was hung on the patio to dry. I would sit under the linens, watching it sadly, waiting for my colchita to dry. After every wash, it was not the same. It would take us a couple of hours to get reacquainted.

The day my grandmother decided it was time to sew on a new border on it World War III began. I begged her and begged her not to do it, but she would not listen. It has been one of the few times she has been stubborn with me. I would always know how to get my way with her. Not that time! She said,

“Gabrielita, I have to mend your blanket or it will keep on fraying and fraying from the borders until it all disappears. It's going to look fine, you'll see.”

She got through to me when she said it was going to disappear, so I finally relented. Afterwards, it wasn't that bad. It looked kind of strange because the border was too thick and too blue in comparison with the faded fabric of the rest. Still, we were best friends.

After a while, I guess I started growing out of it like I grew out of Cabbage Patch Kids and Barbies and My Little Ponies. I started going to school and making real friends who would invite me over to play. Suddenly, I guess it became “uncool” and babyish to be carrying a little blanket around. On really depressing days, I would sometimes dig it out of my closet to sleep with, but it was not the same. I think it resented me for ignoring it for so long. As I got older, and we moved to another house, I thought I had finally lost it, but I was wrong. It was still there with all my clothes.

A couple of years later, when I was packing for college and realized I didn't know one soul over there, I couldn't resist. I needed moral support. I grabbed my colchita folded its thin, old body and brought it with me. I guess I never really grew out of it completely. It still sits in my closet, patiently waiting to get me through some other small life crisis.

Summer Vacation: At Home With the Children

Cyra S. Dumitru

Time unbolts from clocks

washes out and in windows

collects crickets and katydids

and leaves them nesting

inside drawers of loosely

bundled socks so they come

brightly leaping while your son

rummages for Spiderman underwear.

The hidden things can startle

almost as much as what

emerges in the open –

a ruby-colored snake

gliding among

damp swim suits.

Even the books,

usually dependable as rain,

tumble backwards

from shelves, the poetry

clamoring to be stashed

between the world atlas

and human anatomy.

One morning you waken to find

your optic nerve where your aorta

should be, and all you can see

is blood pulsing from

your own heart

as the children

smear peanut butter

along the banister.

Even the August moon unhinges

itself and rolls slowly

up the river a perfectly

glowing stone, too full

of humor to sink

no matter the season

circumstantial dearheart

Whitney Johnson

towers of ribbon-dawned girls wait for their toad to carry them off into the sunset, where they conceive their first born welfare check. they jump from complex to shag, shag to pussy willowed pond. make carrot stew in umbrellas. you want to join the other kids in the pool but, cant. youve been infected with the virus. they buy you a wading pool to soothe your five minute infatuation. tuck you in at night, kiss your forehead and cheeks, dropping tears of joy and regret. they brought you into a world of shame and struggle. dead end jobs and never ending stacks of pancakes. they produced hamburger helper babies, and theyre ashamed. kool-aid kids that cant taste the sugar cause mom wont have enough for the cookies she has to bake for the in laws. who by the way, dont remember you cause their son has suddenly acquired permanent residency at the state pen.

flashing back you rewind to that instance when youre playing in your dolls house. he slobbers how you radiate sweet vibes. they quickly scorch him, and now youre just selfish. his awkward words march you over to mom, where you disclose the latest attack. he stumbled in his underwear looking for a light. open your eyes, man. its in your mouth. down the drain.

you visited the blue room on account of his cravings. 4 ounces of orange juice in flowered dixie cups next to a heroin baby. you saw the videos. its not your fault, child. no, but its my problem. you dont know what its like scrubbing dinners, feeding floors, scraping mirrors, climbing walls. hiding cigs only to discover moms not as clean as i thought. honey, ive seen the light and ive been burned. so dont give me that shit about everyone being good at heart, wanting me to succeed. cause you know i dont compare to your honor roll student with braces and training bras. summer trips to london and the caribbean. she comes back with braids that dont become her so i tear them out. yeah, i tore them out. so now your babys scalp is bleeding. it wasnt her scalp. dont wear whats not

yours, i kept telling her. she wouldnt listen. not to the wrought iron sugar estate trailer park chick. the girl who came to school with knotted hair, and expired lime green lunch cards. the ugly kind that people knew hadnt been payed off. displaying hand-me-downs, and goodwill grabs. a ducktaped backpack, with patches and threads waving their arms, spreading her mess all over the joint. still everyone knew she was a rainbow. she didnt belong there. she knew that.

In Between Seconds

Melissa Sandy Vela

You've realized
you're not alone
in the bathroom, she heard
everything
and stays to smirk
while you scrub your hands.

It's the second after release
or before, when spasms
ripple your lips
and you forget, or remember
his name and what it does
or doesn't mean to you.

The moment when your eyes focus
through filmy lace veil,
and all that's wanted is mother.
Past the hour after milk sours
the stillness of hearing truth,
and for ticking hands
that count footsteps
you can never retrace.

Poem

Debra Innocenti

This is an orchestra: listen. The words
draw breath through you like an instrument,

shine the gullet's inner metals,
through bent pipes, steam.

The conductor taps his music stand
and the room is suddenly caught

in a revealing gesture. Listen. What pulls through you,
plays you, isn't the words but what is behind

the words: the longing, which is a vacuum,
which begins this lengthy purchase.

Let me begin another way. You drive the long way to work
to see the autumn trees in flame, like candles behind flypaper,

and all day the vision is burned on your cornea
so that you see it in the face of the young woman

you give directions, the letters you slowly unfold
from the mailbox. And when you read that images

are stored not in a place in the mind but *are*
the mind, it all begins to make sense: the burning

that was always you, hiding itself as the trees,
the world, everything you thought you could lose.

Americana

Steve Calogero

It was a Kind of Blue night.

Typical, with the music celebrating everyone's private pain, and enough booze and smoke to take the edge off it, so we could savor it slow, like a good whiskey.

Yeah, wallowing.

Maybe that whiskey was more like Southern Comfort — too sweet to be a real drink but still tasting good enough — Not one of those cheap pink wines — No, not that adolescent, not Kenny G syrup, but maybe more Harry Conick, Jr. than Miles Davis.

There was some respect in the scene, though. Not that I'd be one of those guys getting his fingers all out of whack from plucking bass strings his whole life, or cheeks like Louis Armstrong, or something wholesale like that, but, I mean, this is America, and jazz and whiskey are about as real as we get. The Land of Opportunity needs a lot of bars like this one.

So I felt real enough, even knowing self-pity was part of the mix.

It was probably there with the guy, too, the one in the diner — if you think about it — the one Hopper painted, though he didn't paint it that way. I mean in America everyone can grow up to be president, but sometimes you gotta wait a long time till it's your turn.

Poem
Dylan Thomas

Amazilia
Steve Copley

It was a kind of blue night
Typical with the moon
and enough down and wind
so we could never know
Your window

It was a kind of blue night
Typical with the moon
and enough down and wind
so we could never know
Your window

It was a kind of blue night
Typical with the moon
and enough down and wind
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*Featuring
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of
St. Mary's University*

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Eve McQuade

Claudia Bejarano

Matthew Landers

Maria Ureste

Eric Cruz

Stephen Acevedo

Anabella Alvarado

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Michelle P. Piña

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Sandra Vallejo

Katherine Green

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Rebecca Lange

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Melissa Sandy Vela

Roberto Pachecano

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