

# TOUCHSTONE

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# TOUCHSTONE

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*Touchstone* provides the campus and the community with a tangible learning experience, a valuable forum for publication, and a stimulating collection of prose and verse.

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## **Awards**

### **Fiction**

Melissa Todd

"Flesh"

### **Poetry**

Wes Beal

"Crossing Boundaries"

## **Faculty Advisors**

Elizabeth Dodd

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## **Dedication**

This volume is dedicated to the memory  
of Professor Donald Stewart.



# DRIFT

Kevin Walters

After a day of rain and cold wind, the first snowflakes began falling at seven o'clock in the evening. When the storm started peppering the streets of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, I was eating red beans and rice with my mother. Neither of us had ever seen a storm with as much ice and snow and lightning as the one that evening. The sound of the wind made me think of the gales that blow inland from the Gulf during our summers. Those squalls kicked up plenty of trouble, splintering trees as they moved. But this one, with its snow and ice, bent our pines into inverted U's, then weighted them down like catapults. We had never seen so much snow.

At the head of the dinner table, my mother sat in a recliner my father's boss had given us. Even though we had no room in our den, my father took the recliner anyway. It was a free chair. He kept it in the kitchen until he could figure out what to do with it.

My mother soaked my beans overnight in a bowl of water before cooking them in a Crock-Pot from noon until dusk. Every time she Crock-Pots, my mother grows quiet and morose. Otherwise, she's squirrely. She will talk about the classes she teaches at high school then ask if I've noticed an advertisement in the supermarket circular that white, seedless grapes are seventeen cents lower in price this week than last. Spending all day checking and watching beans or stew or a roast in the pot makes her stoic. By supper time she refuses to speak.

At five foot three, my mother is exactly one foot shorter than me with brownish-red hair, a chiseled jawline, and drowsy, blue eyes. I like things around the kitchen when she Crock-Pots. She calms me. My blood feels heavier, and I concentrate on what I'm eating. I don't live with my parents anymore, but I always call to see if my mother has stewed anything so I can drop by their house for some peace and quiet.

That night, I had stopped off to feed a cat I was watching

for a friend. The cat rubbed herself all over me. I was angry about having fur all over my clothes and in my eyes, angry about this cat being alone all day in an apartment. There was nothing I could do for this cat.

There was fur on my face, in my eyes, and I couldn't stop blinking or itching. My eyes would tear up, and I swore with a mouthful of beans. I wiped my face with my shirt sleeve, but that pushed the fur deeper into my eyelids. I couldn't get away from it.

I yelled at my mother about the beans she had cooked all day. I yelled about the volume of the television, it was shaking my molars. Then I yelled about the newspapers being kept under the salt shaker. My mother listened. She watched me from the recliner, moving her eyes slowly from one part of the kitchen to the other, then to me.

"Go upstairs," she said. "Wash your face with a bath cloth. I put a clean one next to the sink."

Right then, in the middle of my meal, I got up and did like she asked. I went upstairs to my old bathroom, the one my brother and I shared when I lived at home. The bathroom smelled waxy and sweet like after-shave, and it annoyed me to think he was having so much after-shave and that he was having dates. When I crouched over the sink, I thought everything had been lowered. It had been a long time since I had been here. I washed and went back to the kitchen.

"Why don't you go home?" she said.

I could hear tree limbs scraping against the roof. I knew the roads must have been thick with ice. I decided to leave, so I thanked my mother and kissed her cheek.

The trip home was slow and tense. Just past my parents' house, I passed a red BMW that had jack-knifed into a grove of trees. I took my eyes off the road for a second to look over the car. It wasn't damaged, and there was no one around. Its hazard lights winked at me as I rode by it. When I got to my house, I couldn't stay inside for very long. After an hour of watching the yard, I had to get out.

The snow was an inch thick, the sky was brown. The longer I stayed outside the more the hair on my neck stood on end, the more my cheeks and fingers hurt, the more the dampness

soaked into my clothes. Gooseflesh covered my arms and legs.

I could hear my neighbors behind me, whooping in the snowfall. Their apartment complex's parking lot adjoins my property, with only a stream separating their asphalt from my yard. I decided to see if I could watch them.

The snow was an hour old. I crept through the underbrush and weeds, past my stone barbecue grill and wood sawhouse. I bent my knees as I walked so I could duck under the icy leaves and branches in my backyard.

Ice the size of baby's teeth collected on the fence wire. In front of me, the stream crinkled and clucked like new cellophane. I stood and listened to the stream, the neighbors, the wind. The neighbors' voices echoed off the cherry-colored brick apartment breezeways and the hoods of their cars and trucks. I couldn't see them. A girl called out: Don't come over here with that. And then she shrieked, and then there was another set of screams from other women, a man's voice, then laughter. No matter how far I knelt under the crooked leaves and limbs, the ice found its way down the back of my collar. Having damp toes and fingers and shoulder blades felt good, but after ten minutes I turned around and began walking home. I wasn't prepared to climb wire fence, jump the creek, or introduce myself into a strangers' snowball fight. The cold was intimidating as it was.

I walked back, looking for my footprints. Each step was shaky and uncertain. The snow, denser than I'd ever seen, made the ground look closer than it was. I wasn't touching the ground when I expected, and I was overcompensating. I stepped harder, trying to find good footing.

Going slow gave me time to notice how few smells there were. I couldn't pick up the brisk scent of the pine or elm or birch trees in my backyard. There were no smells in fact, no other sensations than the wet, stinging wind in my face and wrists, the ice on my toes and shins.

I stood in my front yard, the apartment people yelling behind me, and I made snowballs of my own, each shaped like six- or eight-sided dice. My gloves were inky from the snow. I make snowballs and threw them into my neighbors' yard. I connected one with her chimney, then another with her clothes line.

My neighbor is a tall, slender widow in her eighties. I

have seen her entire body once, when we were introduced, but since then I have only seen her hands. She is a seamstress and her sewing room window is at the rear of her house. In the evenings, when I open my door and walk around on my front stoop, I see her at her sewing table, working with her sewing machine, only her hands framed by her metal Venetian blinds. I watched her window for movement, maybe to see her raise her face looking out, but there was only the soft orange light from her lamp.

That night I heard bursts of power lines and transformers exploding through my neighborhood. Their cracking and splitting and snapping sounded above the wind. My lights were doused twice in the storm, but only for a moment.

The next morning, I went back to my parents' house, but this time I walked, out of fear of driving on the roads, and because I wanted to see the snowfall up close. There was more than four inches of new snow on the ground. The yards were as smooth and level, and brilliant white, as a cloth on a table. The houses looked like frosted cakes, with swipes of yellow and red under the white.

Two Arabic women were in my street with cameras taking pictures of themselves and our sparkling neighborhood. One snapped a picture of the other and they traded cameras. I stood behind one so I could be in their photographs, jumping when I thought they were clicking a picture.

Each car had snow on the hood and trunk and roof. I liked the strange angles the packed snow gave them. The snow-cars looked hewn from rock, like half-finished sculpture or a freshly-unearthed piece of pottery on the move. Wheels and lights and windshields were the only constants.

At first, I gulped the cold air quickly. After an hour, when I saw how far I was going to have to walk, each breath felt like the quills of a cactus on my tongue. The swatches of ice that filled the sides of the roads made me smile. I liked the way clay looked when it froze, mushy in places, crisp in others, like a sweet potato cut open.

At the tip of the hill, a yellow Labrador ran toward me. The dog was tawny and big, eye level with my belt buckle. He stopped and sniffed my shoes. I reached down and grabbed him at the collar. The ice on my gloves nestled in his fur as I took his

head in my hands. He had heavy jaws and wet, dark lips. After a moment of sniffing, he stood on his hind legs, and I grabbed him by his front paws. He tilted his head as the woman who owned him reached the crest of the hill behind us.

Her skin was doughy and her eyes were dark and expressive. She wore a sweat suit and galoshes. She smiled at me and her dog.

“He doesn’t know what to do in all this snow,” she said.

“He’s not the only one,” I told her.

“Sure, sure,” she said. She didn’t break stride for me or the dog. I let him go, and he was at her heels in a second.

I watched the woman and her dog walk until they were tiny like bedbugs on a mattress of white.

I walked until I came to the spot where I had seen the empty BMW. A man and a woman sat in a pickup truck watching me approach them. The man, who was driving, rolled down his window. Smiling, his teeth were straight and white, his mustache gray and thick. His plump head looked like golf ball. He had had acne at some time in his life. I didn’t recognize him, we smiled at each other, but he didn’t speak to me. I stopped walking and looked at this old guy and his wife. The woman had her mouth open, she looked scared. The man kept his eyes fixed at a point about five inches beside my shoulder when he spoke to me.

“I thought you were someone I knew,” he said. “But you’re not. You have a nice day.”

# FLESH

Melissa Todd

Mrs. Rczyche sat in her store smoking a cigarette sullenly in the liquid heat of early afternoon. The street outside was dead even of the running, screaming children who played practically on her doorstep in wild dirty throngs and left her complaining of headache. Her chin disappeared into her neck, breasts collided with belly, and ass overflowed the stool into huge thighs that barbelled out into calves stuffed with fat until the skin looked ready to burst. She was listening to Ruthie and Julie talk with flat eyes and a half-sneer curling her meaty cheek and lip.

As her daughters spoke the girl looked around the store. Green-lettered signs variously announced: "Find your clothes at Anything Goes," "They May Be Seconds But They Look Like Firsts," and "Anything Goes at Anything Goes —BIG SALE!!!" The crowded racks held clothes that were mainly for women and children; dresses and small T-shirts drooped off their hangers in the heat. The cluttered shelves held hats the girl would have liked for dress-up, with great wide brims and clusters of flowers or feathers in the bands, in every color the girl could think of and some she had never seen before. Besides herself and the sisters the store was empty of people.

"Marty!" The girl turned around, startled, and saw Mrs. Rczyche's flat eyes were regarding her with impatience.

"Marty!" Julie said in an important tone of voice, as if Marty hadn't noticed her the first time, "Tell my mother about us coming to your house."

Marty cleared her throat nervously, afraid to talk to someone so fat. "Well..." she began timorously, "..."

Ruthie shook her head vigorously. "Speak up," she said helpfully, her left eye looking at Marty, her right pointed toward the far wall.

Marty began again. "Well, I was wondering if Ruthie and Julie can come over to my house and play games with me."

Mrs. Rczyche flitted a glance over the little girl in her tight

cut-offs and orange Dolphins shirt. Each time she saw her she was wearing the logo and colors of some football team: the blue and red of New York's finest, the Giants; the black and grey of the Pittsburgh Steelers; the green and white combination of the Packers. She had an unending series of jerseys that summer, brought home by her father, a garbageman who also returned home that season with a battered radio, a seashell collection, and a John Travolta button that she did not wear but pinned to her pillow and tapped with her fingernails in the dark.

"Does your mother know the girls are coming?" Mrs. Rczyche asked, in her hoarse, startling voice.

Marty shrank back as if accused. "Yeeees," she said, drawing the word out like a question as she did whenever nervous, a practice that always made her mother think she was lying even when she wasn't.

Mrs. Rczyche's eyes held her a moment longer, suspicion lending them the momentary sheen of intelligence. "Awright," she said grudgingly, and as the girls flew out the oppressive store, she added, "and don't be late!" to her daughters who were used to the cries issued at them constantly, like the sawing of a maddened bird that chased them wherever they went.

Together the girls made their way to the huge apartment complex where Marty lived. It was ten stories raised into the sky, and Marty lived on the top floor, which made the frequently broken elevator not a mere nuisance but a catastrophe. It made both her parents quicker to scream, both at her and one another, and quicker to hit as well. Marty sighed when she saw the sign on the elevator; not because of the climb that she could make over and again without stopping or growing tired, but for the extra caution she would have to use around both of them tonight.

"Will you please hurry up," she called down the stairs to Ruthie and Julie who were both breathing loudly and clinging to the bannister. She danced around at each landing on her toes as she waited through interminable pauses for the girls to reach her; singing tough little songs of encouragement and scorn to them as they labored up.

"C'mon, c'mon, only four flights more. Whatsa matter, can't take it?" she hummed, and as the girls gasped their agony, she laughed. The girls bore it patiently, taking it as their due, the same

way they endured the taunts of all the other girls: “Ruthie Beachball! Ruthie Beachball!” they’d cry, and Ruthie, whose stomach did rise into a perfect taut oval above her shorts would stare at them through expressionless wall-eyes until they found something better to do. Or when Julie, the slightly less damaged of the two, would dare to play in the violent, dirty street games only to wind up in a heap for a missed ball or a deliberate shove, the girls would sing “Julie, Julie, you’re so fat, You fell down and you went splat!” as she lay unblinking in the dust. Marty always joined in these taunts with savage glee, pleased only that they were not directed at her and never for a moment imagining that these huge girls, with their flat emotionless faces and grotesque bodies, could ever feel anything like pain.

They entered into the welcome coolness of the apartment, where fans of all sizes and of every description whirred in every corner. Marty’s mother began collecting them in winter, when people cleaning out their closets and carrying the bundles to the Church would fling them out, despairing that warm days would ever surface again. Her father collected them as well from the garbage, to take home and fix; not musing, as did other garbage-men, about the amazing quantity of good things people threw away, but believing in the stupidity and wastefulness of the human race like a religion. The fans sang their metallic music into the apartment that was hushed, and Marty knew her mother would be laying down in her bedroom with a cool washrag over her forehead to stave off the heat. She turned back to the entrance of the apartment where the girls stood like monoliths and whispered, “We have to be quiet,” as she led them silently to her room, where she closed the door softly against her mother’s sleep.

Ruthie and Julie had been here infrequently, because they were terrible guests, kids she’d invite when it was rainy weather or when no one else was around. They sat slack-jawed in a corner as she laid out her meager treasures before them: first the board games that they played for perhaps ten minutes apiece, long enough to scatter pieces and paper money; her stuffed animals, fingered disinterestedly, then thrown on the bed; finally, the Barbies. This held their attention slightly longer than the others, but after Ken had been stripped to his dickless naked state and made to lay atop Barbie for some violent few minutes, they were again reduced to



silent, sulky behemoths, serene as Buddhas in the wreckage of her room.

Julie: "Don't you got anything else?"

Marty: "No, that's all my good toys."

Ruthie: "I'm bored."

Marty: "Well, after we clean up my room, we can go outside and play jacks or something."

Julie looked up like a saint receiving a vision from God. "I hear my mother calling us."

Marty: "I don't hear anything. Besides, she's all the way downstairs. How can you hear her from over here?"

Ruthie, one eye earnestly shining at Marty, said, "Oh, she is, she is! I hear her, too! Listen!"

Marty: "I don't hear shit. Help me clean up or don't come over anymore."

Ruthie and Julie: "Bye!"

Marty's little pug face turned dark; she scowled and spat as they lumbered to their feet and hurried out of the room. As they went through the living room, Ruthie's large hip sideswiped a coffee table, knocking over a lamp that fell tinkling to the floor. From Marty's mother's bedroom issued a high curse; the girls hurried out the door. Marty rushed to the door of her room to be met by her mother who slapped her roundly across the face, hurling her back into the room where she went skittering across play-money and doll clothes and fell.

Her mother loomed above her in her nightgown, hair askew and face contorted with rage. "Who did you have in this house?" she asked, spitting every word distinctly into Marty's face.

"I—I—," Marty began, but the look in her mother's eyes froze the words in her throat.

Marty's mother grabbed her daughter's short hair by the roots and pulled her up to a half-sitting, half-standing position. Marty issued inarticulate noises as her mother bent her face down to hers and said, "And don't you lie now, because I'll know it."

"It was Elizabeth and Teresa," said Marty, the names of the twins who lived on the first floor and whose father was the super.

"You liar," said Marty's mother, releasing her hair in a push that sent Marty again sprawling to the floor, "it was those two

retards from down the street. How many times have I told you not to play with those dirty Gypsy girls? Huh?" She stood up, and her eyes seemed to focus and take in the room for the first time.

"Look what they did to your room," she shrieked, as Marty cowered on the floor. Then she closed her eyes and gathered her breath; as the moments ticked by, Marty became aware of the bitter juice in her mouth, the beating of her heart, her trembling legs.

Finally her mother opened her eyes and said, "I'll tell you what you're going to do, right? First, you're going to pick up all the pieces in the living room and put them on the kitchen table and we'll see if your father can fix it, which I don't think he can. Next, you will clean your room until it is spotless, you hear me? Spotless. Then you are going to bed until your father gets home, and we'll see what he has to say about this."

Marty picked herself off the floor as her mother left the room. Slowly she walked to the living room and bent to pick up the pieces of the lamp, one by one, to the kitchen, where she lay them carefully on the table like treasure. Then she cleaned her room, stuffing Monopoly money into its box, lining the stuffed animals neatly on the shelf. She untied her shoelaces slowly, removed her sneakers, and lay down on her bed atop the covers, waiting for her father, who was somewhere in the city emptying garbage cans into a truck that ate their contents with huge steel jaws, to return home.

Three days later the heatwave broke in a light rain misting the city, and Marty went downstairs to the group of girls from her apartment complex that she always played with. They hailed her with "Hey, Tippy!" "Whereya been, Tip?" as she joined them.

She had been Tippy-Toes to these girls as long as she could remember. With their acute eyes for defects of all kinds the girls matter-of-factly acknowledged what her parents would not; her inability to walk full on her feet comfortably, but only on the balls. They would not know until Marty is fully grown that she was born with mild cerebral palsy; they cannot afford specialists or the orthopedic shoes Marty would need and that, as soon as her parents' backs were turned, she would never wear. All anyone knew then was that Marty walked funny, and if the adults in the neighborhood tactfully restrained themselves from discussing it, their children

certainly did not.

Marty immediately sunk down full on her feet as she did whenever she was reminded to. Immediately Maria broke out in a scornful shout, "Looka Tip, trying to walk like she was regular." Marty's gait had changed from the sweet grace like a bantam light-weight to a rolling old woman's walk that caused her visible pain.

Marty ignored Maria and kept on walking on the sides of her feet in the way that wore out all her shoes on the outer edges so that by the time she was through a pair it showed use only on the tips and far sides. Soon enough the children forgot about it, and Marty did too; flying on the balls of her feet she was as fast as any of them, faster, and she seemed with the rest to be an ardent young animal. There was Maria, treacherous, with the moon face of an owl and an owl's big yellow eyes; Kim, chattering and friendly as a monkey, and as mischievous and quick; and the twins, Elizabeth and Teresa, who were dual peacocks, proud of their plumage and uniqueness while being dumb as dirt. In the brilliant afternoon they gambolled on a field of asphalt concrete, and Marty moved among them with lithe ferocity as a big cat, until she remembered to try to be normal and became like the cats at the zoo, hobbled by too much food, too little room, and the stares of stupid pointing children every day of their lives.

Kim spotted them first, her mouth opening in a wide grin: "Ruthie Beachball!"

Marty's head swivelled up and her eyes got greener, her lip snarling up against her teeth. She stood silent as the other girls ran their circles around the two, who stood dumbly, following the quick girls with their liquid eyes.

"Ruthie Beachball," she said tasting the name, savoring the forbidden delicacies of the next, "you fat, fucking bitch."

The other girls immediately stopped their running and grew still. A different type of excitement began to make their way through them. Yes, their stillness spoke, it is time for something new. All heads swivelled towards Marty.

Marty walked forward with no hurry towards the girls. When she got right up to them she spoke again.

"Who broke the lamp?" she asked, smiling.

Julie's face visibly relaxed. She pointed at her sister. "Ruthie did," she said, "but she didn't mean to," she added as she

felt her sister's doleful eyes on her.

"But neither one of you stopped. You both kept right on going. I got my ass kicked for that," she said angrily, as the other girls moved in tighter around her. Now it was simple. Ruthie and Julie knew it too, and drew even closer, and Marty could see that they'd taken one another's hands.

She smiled again. It was beatific, glad and sorrowful all at once, and it made her face burn like the sun.

No more words were spoken. Inarticulate cries and grunts rose into the air, and finally howls, howls and sobbings that rose into the darkening sky, and then there was silence.

When she next saw Ruthie and Julie they were walking by the complex, and she was alone. She said hello in a shy voice, and they said hello back, and she got up from her perch on the stoop and walked with them as they went to get their mother's prescription at the drugstore. And when they invited her to their grandfather's house she accepted naturally, as would any of the other girls. After dropping off the package at Anything Goes they walked the few blocks together.

Their grandfather had a yard, a rarity in the neighborhood, and even a decrepit swing-set that stood in one corner. Marty immediately ran to it, and the girls followed. She sat at one end of the see-saw, and Julie to another, but it was useless; no matter how hard she pumped her butt she stayed aloft while Julie looked up at her forlornly from the other end. Marty gave up and left the see-saw to the sisters who rocked slowly and contentedly together, while she got on the seings.

She loved to swing. Her feet were not at issue; her good strong legs swung her higher and higher, as she leaned back into the wind with the sun on her face. She closed her eyes and swung, still higher, mind cleansed of thought by a fierce joy that propelled her into the sky and back again, she was free, there were no other voices but the wind's shout in her ears, and she swung. She swung until the creaking from the joists grew louder until it was deafening, louder than even the wind, and she became aware that not only was she violently lurching, the entire set was as well. Her eyes sprang open and she skittered back to earth, and when she was

stopped she saw the sisters were gone.

She walked up to the house, sweeping glances around the yard as she did, but there was no movement anywhere. The back door stood slightly ajar, seinging back and forth a little in the sporadic summer breeze. She went through it, past the empty grey kitchen, and into the living room. It reminded her instantly of her own — great square pieces of furniture with dark plastic-covered cushions and heavy green curtains that refused the sun. The smell was different; it was of old people, their medication and soft food.

It felt different, too. There was a silence in this room, like a room that had never been played in; where laughter was rare and arguments frequent, with curses levelled in foreign tongues. The arrangement of things seemed permanent, as if the thick wood pieces had grown from the mottled green carpet that was not wool at all but sick grass sprung from dying earth. Yet at the same time it seemed a gypsy encampment, a place from which the inhabitants would be chased from at any moment. Old country, the ponderous couch said. Immigrant, screamed the plastic plates lined up carefully, as though they were heirlooms, on the shelf where a mantle would be, if there were any fireplace. Creepy, though Marty, as the smells and visions translated themselves into a feeling of uneasiness as she peered around for the girls.

Suddenly, the grandfather came into the room. Marty had seen him sitting on a folding chair in front of the store on pleasant evenings, talking to other old men and smoking a large pipe. Now his face seemed empty, completely unlike the animated one which filled the air with insistent conversation in bits of Rom and English mixed together. He looked blankly at Marty, who after a nervous start came forward to explain her presence to him.

“Oh, hi, sorry I came in without asking; I was just looking for Ruthie and Julie. Have you seen them?” she asked politely. The old man didn’t answer, but his eyes stayed fixed on the space right above her head, and Marty drew up on her toes and waved a little, as if she had seen a friend passing by through a window and was trying to flag him down.

“Hi,” she said, a little louder. “My name is Marty, she said, extending her hand as her mother had taught her to do when being introduced to an elder. “Nice to meet you.”

The grandfather took her hand. Instead of shaking it, he

put it on the front of his pants and squeezed it, rhythmically and hard. The flesh underneath felt squishy, watery somehow, and her hand rolled on it like it was dough.

Marty withdrew her hand with a hiss. She stood still for a moment, what the old man had done looking for a way into her brain and finding none, so sure was she that it could not have happened, and in a very small way she again extended her hand, saying, "Hi, my name is Marty," only she couldn't hear her own voice.

Again the grandfather took her hand. With the other he unzipped his pants, his expression never wavering in the air above her head. From them he removed a piece of himself that was hot and gummy in the palm of her hand. It moved and changed as he again squeezed her hand. His breathing grew faster and more labored. Marty looked at her own hand and it no longer belonged to her. It was a picture of a hand, only a picture, like the ones on the wall that she now raised her head to look at.

As they stood that way something moved in the corner of Marty's vision. It was Ruthie. She stood peeking through the passageway from the kitchen, only half of her face and body visible. Though like Marty she was not yet ten there was a little breast that poked through the thin cotton of her shirt, and the large hip of a woman. Her shorts were too small and rode up in the crack of her thigh. Her face was solemn. Marty saw a hand sneak out from behind the frame and make its way toward her slightly open mouth. Ruthie began sucking her thumb, as she stared at her grandfather. Behind her stood Julie, who looked not at the grandfather but at Marty. And unlike Ruthie, whose eyes seemed glazed and whose face was expressionless, she was smiling.

Marty snatched her hand away again with a sharp cry. She raised to the balls of her feet, the muscles in her legs tense and vivid, and began to run. She ran past Ruthie and Julie, through the kitchen, out the back door and into the yard. She ran to the street that was full of children and people listening to radios on their stoops, taking in the cool air of afternoon. She ran past the huge complex and past the houses of all the kids she knew, never stopping, and every other adult who saw her rush pass remarked to himself or to the person he was with about how graceful she was, and how she seemed a beautiful child.

# SLEEPING DOGS LIE

Rachel A. Coffey

When Randy woke up he became slowly aware that he was surrounded by something. She was locked around him in a fetal position, arms clasped around his chest, knees clamped fiercely around his legs. She had once explained to him that the reason for this imprisoning sleep-style of hers was a stuffed cat named Sweet Kitty, her favorite toy, that she had slept with when she was little. When she became too old to sleep with toys her mother took the cat away. It didn't matter to her now, though, since she'd found Randy to clutch.

He had once found this very endearing, like her other small vulnerabilities. He still did sometimes, but on this particular morning it only reminded him how thick his body was becoming. Her arms no longer met around his middle as they did in younger days, and this depressed him. This morning even the blankets seemed to be against him as they twisted beneath his torso, threatening to keep him in bed.

He lumbered toward the small bathroom, stumbling over the robe and slippers she'd flung onto the floor before crawling into bed. She sure didn't keep house the way she used to. Or keep apartment, he should say, since they'd never done anything but rent. Apartments were big enough for the two of them, and as long as they rented they didn't have enough room to accumulate junk. He liked renting just fine.

In the bathroom he paused in front of the mirror, trying to understand what he saw there. A man was rapidly gaining weight, a man who used to be skinny. He looked down at himself, gathering up the rolls of fat that disguised his stomach, the flat one of his youth. The ugly flesh even hid his oldest friend; in the shade of this hideous umbrella it seemed that bodymate was lacking sunlight or some other element essential to its growth. It never stood up anymore, to greet him with a wave, reminding him of his potential. Not

## Sleeping Dogs Lie

even a “good morning,” even though it always used to rise long before he did.

Even after a cool shower and two cups of black coffee Randy still felt dead, as if he could fall asleep moving across the floor or leaning against the sink to brush his teeth. He felt this way often lately, as if he were lacking some important vitamin or mineral not available in a Flintstone chewable. The apathy in the apartment seemed mutual, at least when she wasn't suffering from PMS, and sometimes it seemed to Randy that this was all month long.

Women's anatomy and their strange cycles were all a huge mystery to Randy. It had been this way ever since Randy was nine and his divorced mother had given him a sketchy and embarrassed account of sex and the way boys and girls were different. Randy had never really thought much about girls before. Now his mother drew thick lines for him, telling him what he could and couldn't do. She often cast her eyes upward during the speech, as if looking for the husband who should have been around to do the task for her.

The explanation only lasted about fifteen minutes, and compared to the wisdom his adolescent friends handed to him during the following years he might have forgotten it forever, if not for one thing. When his mother fearfully asked if Randy had any questions, he asked about an item that had puzzled him for some time, and item he felt was somehow related to the current subject. He asked about white and pastel box decorated with a floral pattern his mother kept on the top shelf of her closet, a mysterious box that she tore into pieces and threw away as soon as she finished with its contents. When he asked about what it was, what was in it, his mother turned a deep red and demanded to know if he had ever looked into it. Randy insisted no, he never had, but he felt his mother never really believed him. She told him he must never, never talk about that box, not to his friends or to anyone. Randy, horrified, never did.

In the bedroom, Randy chose jeans and shirt while she slept in the bed behind him, arms flung out awkwardly. Although he tried to be quiet the metal hangers jabbered together, and she made a waking sound. Shrugging on his shirts he padded over to the bedside. She looked like a young kitten, eyes barely slitted



open. When she saw him her lips curled upwards to a smile, and her hand darted out from the covers to caress his navel and the mountain of his stomach. Quickly he buttoned the shirt and stuffed it into his pants, hiding the worst of his belly from her view. She frowned suddenly, looked ready to hiss.

Anymore their tender encounters ended up this way, with one or the other of them hastily pulling back. Randy wondered what had happened, what they had forgotten. Whatever it was, he suspected they must have left it behind in one of their moves. They always forgot something when they changed apartments.

Randy felt like a lump. She had rolled over in the blankets, pretending to go back to sleep. He didn't know what to do. He turned and moved sluggishly for the apartment door, then remembered his sunglasses were on the bureau top. he returned to the bedroom to retrieve them, and as he reached across the scratched particle board he caught another look at her from the corner of his eye. She had made herself a nest out of the bed-clothes; still she looked skinny and small. Suddenly it occurred to him. He moved to the bedside and tucked a pillow into her circling arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

As he headed home from work, Randy was more exhausted than ever. He was suspicious of the "Help Wanted" sign his boss had recently placed without explanation in the window of the print shop where Randy worked. With the economy keeling over the way it was, Randy knew there were plenty of unemployed guys walking around out there that would work for a lot less than he was getting. The boss's sour grin said that he knew this as well, and thus the two shared an uncomfortable knowledge that draped across Randy like a dead apron.

The truck felt as reluctant as Randy did that afternoon; the pedals were still and the gear shift stuck more than usual. Almost too soon, though, he arrived at the apartment. He went inside and changed to a pair of his favorite shorts and set the ancient window unit on "high cool." On this particular setting the plastic box rattled loudly, as if it were trying to implode, but Randy didn't care as long as the air was frosty. He sprawled in the couch's tired swag and welcomed his partner, sleep.

The clump of the door falling shut was loud in the dim

apartment as she swept inside. As Randy struggled to sit up, fighting blearily with the sofa cushions, she reached across his floppy body and snapped the air conditioner off with a sharp jab.

He blinked and rubbed his head, noting that her hands were full of mail, most of which she dumped into the wicker basket on the hall table. This was one of the most irritating habits she had, throwing everything into that basket, as if bills and other correspondence would automatically take care of themselves in the confines of the wicker. When he wanted his mail, Randy had to paw through outdated circulars and last month's cable guide to see if any of it was for him. Today he was tired, and his head felt overstuffed with sleep. He suddenly felt too out of patience to let her get away with this.

She was sitting slumped over the table, looking glum and reading the only piece of mail she'd pulled from the pile. He tried to call up some affection for her, to be glad she was home, but all he felt was tired. She looked depressed. Randy wondered if she was looking at the American Express bill, the one that had her new boots on it. She'd purchased the boots in the feverish grip of PMS, insisted they were the only thing that could make her feel better. Randy had warned her at the time of the purchase that it was just impulse buying; she didn't even look good in boots. Well, he'd told her, and he didn't feel like listening to her whine now, especially since she'd taken him out of a good nap. He searched for some patience.

"Any of that mail for me?" He tried to sound cool, as if it weren't important. He peered toward the envelopes as they mocked him from between the wicker slats, they way the boss's grin mocked him from behind the inky tables. Randy licked his lips. She didn't answer.

Silence games. What could she be pissed about? Probably the air conditioner. He leaned over and kissed her lips; they didn't respond at all.

"Guess that's all the mail, huh?" He motioned towards the paper in her hand, desperately trying not to lose his temper with her, trying to play it casual. He could feel himself losing.

He reached over the basket and destroyed its glinting, mocking eyes with a sweep of his hand, discovering his bank statement and a notice from the Columbia House Record and Tape

Club. She just didn't think he was important. His arms felt heavy as he batted the basket onto the floor, dumping its contents and sending advertisements skidding, where they came to rest beside the ailing sofa.

"What's that you're reading? American Express? Or a note from your lover? He knew the last bit was unfair, but he couldn't help it. She remained silent, her favorite punishment when she thought he was being too harsh. An image of his boss flew into Randy's mind, the silence underlined with knowledge. His brain seemed to float loose inside his skull. He reached across the table and ripped the paper from her hand.

It was a report from the women's clinic where she was a patient. He struggled to decipher the complicated jargon and the doctor's scrawled handwriting. Nothing made sense to him. Twenty years after the lesson from his mother, Randy had looked at the insert pages in a box of tampons. He'd stared at the cut-away view of a woman represented on the pink pages, feeling embarrassed by his curiosity so many years later, ashamed of knowing so little. He felt this way now, looking at the piece of paper with a letterhead that looked like a hand mirror.

He looked over at her. Her face was moving around, like she could cry. He didn't want to see her cry.

"So what's this? Dysplasia? What's this mean?" His hands flapped the paper in the air.

She did begin to cry, just a little. Randy felt panic form in his stomach. "Is this bad?"

She swallowed, trying to speak clearly. "Dysplasia is an abnormal build-up of cells on the cervix. It's a pre-cancerous condition. The doctor wants to take a closer look. I could have cancer." She paused, then really began crying. "I might have to have a hysterectomy."

Randy felt his overstuffed head growing bigger. He felt dizzy; the room was too hot. He reached out and placed his hands on her shoulders, murmuring to her that maybe she should lie down in the bedroom for a while. He didn't know what else to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was asleep, curled up on the edge of the bed, her back towards Randy. She had been asleep almost four hours. Randy thought that after a couple of hours of sleep maybe he should wake

her, or her sleep schedule would be all out of whack. Then he decided that it really didn't matter; she'd probably be out of whack no matter what.

Randy wan't sleeping. He hadn't slept since his afternoon nap. He felt helpless, lying in bed, looking at her back and listening to the air conditioner rattle.

Finally he rose from the bed, looked down at her, left her sleeping. He found the keys to the truck and took off, stopping to pick up a six-pack of Schaeffer's that grew warm beside him on the pickup's seat.

Randy drove to the print shop, which looked even dirtier and smelled even inkier when everyone was gone. He sat in the back room with his feet propped up on the boss's greasy desk, drinking his warm Schaeffer's and pretending he was the boss. He imagined himself taking beer breaks instead of coffee ones, while his employees slaved in the front part of the shop. He pretended that his co-workers belonged to him. With great pleasure he imagined handing his boss a pink slip.

When he finally left the shop it was completely dark. Randy drove around, looking for hints of life on the streets, but there were none. The houses were mostly dark. The signs on the businesses were turned off, and only dim, ghostly lights penetrated past the front windows. Everyone had gone to sleep. Randy felt abandoned.

He knew he should go back; it would look like he was cheating, a thing he had never done. He wanted, though, to find somebody awake, somewhere. Even the gas stations were dark.

Finally Randy saw a bright stripe of lights ahead of him. He knew this area; he came here whenever a friend had a bachelor party, to ogle the women that stripped for money. Slummy decadence was everywhere, a cinema and several bookstores. The theater was having a "Buy two, get one FREE!" sale on videotapes. A large neon sign in one of the windows read "ADULT" in bold pink. Trash pieces of things nobody wanted lay in parking lots and between buildings.

Randy drove aimlessly, noticing the details, the people, everything. He saw two young women parallel-park a black car outside the bar. They stepped out in their evening finery, all black like their car. One of them was wearing boots.

It seemed to Randy that women were everywhere. He noticed a knot of them standing outside another bar, outside the chicken restaurant. There were no men with them. They seemed very intent on their business as they circled among one another.

At the end of the street Randy turned the truck around. It was time to head back, he decided. He would find nothing here. The pink letters "ADULT" burned in his mind.

When he finally arrived back at the apartment she was still curled up on the bed. She looked like the little preemie baby he'd seen on the news last night, all pink and shiny. He watched her. Usually she snored, but now she slept silently. He pulled up the folding chair from the corner and sat down, slithering through his gut, adrenaline pumping along behind it.

Randy found himself remembering their third date, the one where they'd gone to that Italian place that closed up years ago. He'd really been hoping that his date wouldn't end at midnight or one, that maybe there would be more than just snuggling and feeling. After dinner they had gone back to the house he shared with three of his friends, who had cleared out for the evening. They had curled up on the sofa in front of the television, and instead of passion he had imagined, she had fallen asleep with her head on his chest. When his roommates came home he had taken a lot of hell because her clothes were still on, but she looked too perfect to disturb.

With these images in his mind his blood pumped rapidly; he could feel his pulse in the palms of his hands. Panic and energy surged through him. He slipped onto the bed and curled around her, finding the places he liked to put his hands. Warm and cool, soft and hard mingled as their bodies did. She turned towards him and pushed her face into his chest.

# SOBRIETY

Tom Lister

Zach is sober. This he realizes as he pulls his van into his hometown, Sylvia. The dirt swirls up from the road around the van's wheels, and Zach takes another empty sip of his Fresca. He's been sober for two months now, and he wants to maintain it. For six years, he'd been a blistering drunk in Kansas City, reporting the police beat for a paper and spending evenings in seedy bars with Bad Company on the juke box.

Things will change, he understands. No longer will he be a bad man. Officials at the rehab house told him he needs to reevaluate his priorities, see things in a better light. Now instead of chasing down car accidents and murder stories, he will teach English at his former high school. Instead of painting gross pictures of drive-by shootings, he will teach young kids the virtues of Stephen Crane and Shakespeare.

His throat is dry. Zach takes another sip of his Fresca and pretends it is sweet bourbon, swishing it between his teeth, uttering an airy "goddamn." The soda has grown flat. He carefully lays the can on the floorboard, keeping his eye on the road.

The town seems smaller than Zach remembered, virtually deserted. On the edge town he finds the house he will live in.

Billy, one of Zach's high school buddies, scored him the job. Billy's wife Evelyn, the high school's regular English teacher, had gotten pregnant and chosen leave to position open for the spring semester. Billy, the football coach, had kindly visited Zach at the halfway house after he heard about Zach's DUI trouble.

"It's a one-time opportunity, pal," Billy had said, putting his arm around Evelyn.

After reciting the twelve steps for a month at the rehab center, Zach was nervous, shaken and lost. And as he smoked menthols with Billy on the steps of the center, he'd accepted.

“Thanks, man,” he said.

Now Billy and Zach smoke their menthols in the janitors’ office at the school. After Billy stubs his out, he’ll go back to his biology class and read *Sports Illustrated* while the kids study. Zach will hold out longer, jokingly hoping to find heroin in the filter. When he finishes, he will return to his class and try to explain Shirley Jackson and basic grammar. And as the students subside from feigning attention to feigning study, Zach will fight his own battle. He will strain against daydreaming and try to plan the next six months of his life in lesson plans.

The things Zach has forgotten. The kids here are so young, so unaware, walking around with baseball caps on backward. Rigid rules let him know the fear of Jesus has entered the classrooms. Zach finds himself wearing a tie each day, feels the close burr of his hair cut on his neck.

Things are also different, though. Rap has replaced the classic rock in the speakers of the cars parked out front before school. Zach cannot, as much as he hopes to, smell marijuana lingering from the bathroom doors during lunch break. He can only smell the clinical smell the janitors have left behind with their cleaning.

Nor can he smell it in Sylvia’s pool hall. Afternoon naps have substituted weed.

When Zach is in town for a month, he has become a regular at the football games and takes to chopping wood for entertainment. He likes the deep breathing, feeling the strain on his arms. Occasionally, he will walk down the street to watch Billy drink beer and watch football tapes. He will drink his own diet soda, feeling the evening fade away.

One evening, on the way back from Billy’s, Zach decides to go for coffee at the local cafe. While he’s there, he meets Judy, a young waitress. She’s got red hair and fingernails to match. She points out he’s skinny and needs to gain weight. Zach ups for sticking with the coffee instead and drinks it until the place closes down at ten.

After Judy punches her time card, she smiles at Zach and wipes the lipstick from her teeth. She asks Zach to walk her

home. He talks to her that night, explains he is a recovering alcoholic and watches her drink piña coladas. As the evening wears on, and as Judy slips further into a haze, Zach finds himself describing the accident that landed him in rehab. For a moment, his voice is quiet. The TV seems to die away. He tells her about the party they'd had after work that night. He sees the crumpled metal of the other car, remembers how frozen and slippery the grass was when he tried to run away.

As Zach finishes, he feels the silence and reaches for his Fresca. He can see that Judy feels the silence, too. She exhales her cigarette and tries to fill it. She talks about Garth Brooks and Travis Tritt.

"Garth'll be in Wichita next month," she slurs. "Maybe we can go."

Zach's tongue hits the ice cube in his soda.

"Sure," he says.

Things have scared Zach in the past: unemployment, his drinking, packs of young kids who wanted to beat the hell out of him. Now Judy scares him, because Zach looks into the future and sees her bathed in blue television light. He sees her on the couch, knocking back piña coladas with her feet resting on the laundry basket she bought at Wal-Mart. He sees himself gazing into her prairie green eyes each night after he comes home from the high school. She will rush to meet him at the doorway, uttering a breathless whisper to his hear:

*Honey, let's go to Garth...*

This night Zach sleeps with Judy, although their words never meet on the same plane. Zach hopes his form is improving. Afterward, Judy sleeps effortlessly, her drink resting on the nightstand. Zach cannot sleep as he lies next to her. He watches the rhythm of the shade blowing back and forth and compares it to the heave of Judy's sleep. Several hours go by. Zach rises and dresses. On his way out, he hoists the pitcher of piña colada and takes a whiff. The smell of coconuts and vodka hits him.

"Piña coladas," he says. "Jesus."

Out of habit, he tells Billy about it all in the janitors' office. Billy laughs and says "goddamn."

"Well, I think I'll stick with Evelyn myself," Billy says.

"Judy's a good person, Billy," Zach explains.



Billy pats his paunch and walks to his classroom. Zach and Judy will be town news within three days.

\* \* \* \* \*

A month passes. Zach has been visiting Judy during this time, feeling the nights slip by and listening to her talk about the Garth concert, which will be in a week. Each night Zach and Judy trade stories, which end in slow silence. Judy tells Zach about her high school days and the moments she remembers seeing him. Zach tries to dwell on days in Kansas City. He watches her attention drift to the television set.

"Make me another drink?" Judy asks flirtfully. Zach mixes them strong, as he would his own, and watches her drift to bed quicker. Still, on these nights, he cannot sleep. He watches her sleep until late and leaves.

Zach begins noticing the kids in the parking lot more. At first, he is hesitant to approach the kids there. The rap leaking out of the car windows seems so aggressive, tribal. And these kids, with their caps bills hanging down like long hair, have such... attitudes.

One morning, as he's walking across the parking lot, Zach gives the kids his usual, brief glance and heads to the building's doors. When he gets there, he sees Billy walking to janitor's office for the morning smoke. Zach looks over his shoulder at the kids in the parking lot and notices his own apprehension. He walks up to them.

In time, the kids aren't afraid to talk to him there, and later they don't mind smoking in front of him. Zach takes his menthols with him, smacking the pack against his palm, smiling when the beat has joined the bass line on the stereos. He talks to the kids like a beat reporter and tries to see what makes up their lives.

One kid, Anthony, sticks out from the others. Zach talks to Anthony often, seeing the other kids have already chosen to congregate around him. Anthony has the cap, like the other kids, but he's managed to grow a goatee. And he's big into music. As Zach talks to him, Anthony drums his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Anthony," Zach asks once after bumming a cigarette,

“just what in the hell do you plan on doing with your life?”

“Music, man. What else is there?”

Zach smiles and takes a drag.

“I guess you could smoke crack.”

On evenings when he returns home, Zach finds himself taking his portable typewriter out of the closet and starts writing about Anthony and the others. He weaves what they've told him together, hearing the syncopated beat in the background. Eventually, he regains his appetite and starts reading and eating more.

As he writes, he'll think of Anthony, seeing the kid's fingers flying across that steering wheel. Then he looks down and sees his own fingers going frantic at the keyboard.

Judy sees Zach writing down notes on napkins when he visits her. She seems concerned.

“What are you doing?” she asks “What's the matter?”

Billy sees Zach changing, too, and Zach can feel his eyes upon him as he strays into the high school from the parking lot.

“You know, Zach,” Billy tells him one morning in the janitors' office, “you shouldn't be out there with those kids.”

“Hell, man, they're the most interest I've had in a while,” he says, approaching the window. Billy follows.

“Well, you shouldn't be out there, and for Christ's sake, you shouldn't be joking about drugs with them.”

“You heard that?”

“I hear everything.”

Zach sees Anthony among the others, talking and waving his hands while the others listen. He seems so alive.

“Well, just look at Anthony,” Zach tries. “That kid is amazing.”

“Yeah, he's amazing, all right. Next week he's turning sixteen. He's decided to drop out.”

Zach turns away from the window and crushes his cigarette.

The night before the concert Zach decides to visit Judy, although he'd planned on being at the junior college doing research for some classes. He walks down the street, feeling for the first time in a while how fresh the air is and thinking about the kids in the parking light. He smiles inwardly, picturing them with their baseball caps on backward and remembering the long hair he had years ago. Then he thinks of Anthony and looks down at the street.

Zach knocks at Judy's door and hears silence in return. She must be in the kitchen, he thought, unable to hear him. Zach opens the door and walks through to the kitchen. Then he peers to the left to Judy's bedroom.

Zach had never really noticed how hairy Billy's ass was. For that matter, he'd never really seen it between Judy's legs. But now as he sees it, he feels like telling Billy to join a health club or start running. That or ask him why he bothered leaving his wedding ring on Judy's nightstand next to her piña colada glass. Instead he returns to the kitchen.

The light from the fridge shines on Zach's face and his tired, red eyes. He sees the pitcher on the cold shelf inside, and he hears Judy and Billy's rustling. Their voices mix confusion, then concern.

"Zach?" Judy tries. "Zach?"

He raises the piña colada pitcher to his mouth and takes a few gulps. Judy comes to the doorway then, covering her breasts with the sheets. Zach sees her now, tries a smile and wipes the foam from his mouth.

"Hi, my name's Zach," he says, "and I'm an alcoholic."



IN 1979, I KILLED  
MY RATTLESNAKE  
AND WENT BACK  
TO SCHOOL

Soren Kraag  
The University of Kansas

Because I wanted to be that kind of man  
who keeps a rattlesnake in his bedroom,  
I kept a rattlesnake in my bedroom,  
in an aquarium that shined at night  
in the basement apartment we had in Tahoe,  
the snake and Diameter and I.

I 1979 I went into the Laundromat where Diameter  
worked and I said I had good news and bad, first  
of which was I had killed the snake.

She said O good.

And then she told me, emboldened, the other  
details (where God is) of my habits and property  
that irked her — she swore never to mention  
until then, because obviously I was a new  
person, a hero, a victor, and when she was done,  
and the dryers' motors churned only,  
I said Ja, well: I'm walking out on you. Keep the stuff.  
I left and drove east, the direction of learning and prayer.

# SERENDIPITY

Ken Wells

White on black,  
lazy fingers  
dancing across the smiling teeth  
of the electric keyboard.  
Mind thinking but also dreaming  
of the notes streaking by.

The hands pause.  
The mind rewinds.  
Extended fingers carefully tap out  
an encore performance of  
their nearly random sequence from  
a second ago.  
A little faster,  
an octave higher  
on the plastic ivory playground.  
The barest of smiles cracks.

Guitars growl, electric predators  
guarding the pack of drums and 'boards  
from musical oblivion.  
the slow, steady waves of the drums  
crash on the stage's shore.  
Now, first two, then three fingers begin.  
They will soon be joined.

The synthesized flute's notes  
ring and hang in the air,  
soap bubbles of uniform harmony  
broken only by their replacements.

When the lights rise again,  
the fingers slip from their  
field and curl around themselves  
feeling the warmth  
they invoked.

# THE EYES

William McKeen

The lucky one walks through the world easily,  
Born rich from his parents,  
The gift of two perfect jewels at birth  
Blue spinning suns, warm earthy balls, hot green globes,  
There for all to see  
Windows to outerspace, another place  
Siamese twins telling what is out there

Gouge them out and see ugliness,  
Some couldn't care less or not even notice.  
Those wondering through the world wasting,  
The god-gift, the soul-window

Look both ways before crossing,  
And up, and down, and crossways, and sideways,

Listen to the touch they give,  
Feel how they can speak,  
Can't you see?

# ON THE SUDDEN DEATH OF A BLUE JAY

Bob McDevitt  
Pennsylvania

The Jay lies twitching on the kitchen floor.  
Scrawny black feet clutch the air  
in pathetic convulsion.  
Then nothing.  
On my hands and knees  
I peer into the half open black beads  
which reflect the light  
of a naked bulb.  
It looks like a pallid moon  
in a tiny night sky.  
The purple mohawk and the interwoven  
blue and white feathers  
resemble a coat of arms  
which lie wretched and trifling,  
against the linoleum floor.

Cold, spring night air filters  
through the open window  
where moments ago  
a blue of cat & bird  
streaked into my evening.  
The cat scratches and meows  
from behind the bathroom door.  
I smash the door with my fist  
no thought, all instinct,  
my hand throbs: hypocrite.

Gingerly, pincers of finger and thumb



lift the dead bird.  
His head hanging limply  
brushes the back of my hand.  
I start...as if he might fly away.  
Cupping the brown paper bag  
I slide his body in,  
settling the bag outside my window  
for an AM burial.  
I peer into the black night,  
where, alone, a she-bird waits  
quiet and alert.  
Her rapid heartbeat belied  
by the barely perceptible movement of her chest feathers,  
mine by the fluttering of a cotton T.

# CATCHING BLUES

Corey Lee Lewis

The harp player  
with bangs,  
black bangs hanging  
down his skinny  
white boy face, begins  
paying back, by  
playing black  
man's blues,

his hands are flapping  
like wings of birds, feathered  
fingers dancing,  
a butterfly's dance,  
hiding his face  
his chrome and silver  
harp peeking through  
the fluttering fingers,

harp man's hands and  
lungs, are bending, ripping,  
and pulling music from the air,  
a bent-n-tattered  
hat lies upside down  
brown and worn  
but not worn now  
becomes a basin, catching  
coins and dollars  
a pair of smokes and notes,  
random notes  
dropping from above.

# RUE DES CHATS

Cindy Oliver

The tower bells follow one another  
down the narrow cobbled streets,  
plodding patiently, deliberately the hours.

A stray cat stretches long and thin,  
unconcerned but alert in a streetlamp's circle.  
Approaching footsteps click and it slips into shadow.

Wooden shutters are thrown wide at daybreak.  
People sip chocolat chaud from bowls and the  
boulangerie breathes warmth into the morning.

An old man rattles down the cobbles on a rusty bicycle.  
He speaks to the cats as he dumps craps in a dish.  
They watch him, wide-eyed, but dare not go near him.

Gruff laughter and the scent of cigarettes, beer and coffee  
drift from the corner cafe, where the men spend  
most of their lives discussing politics and women.

Framed in a window socket edged by jagged glass, a cat  
balances on the crumbling sill and bares its teeth in a yawn.  
Curtains reduced to gauze ribbons haze the room's decay.

Each toll of the bells sounds like a round stone  
thrown into a still lake, pulsing  
in concentric fading waves.

# TWO DAYS

J. Proctor Knott  
University of North Dakota

There's something  
to be said  
within these arms.  
The night,  
it stands alone,  
moon shine  
down these snowy  
streets.  
Snow flaky stars  
hanging  
in a streetlight, a  
galaxy  
descending. You  
are here  
with me, by the  
kitchen window  
painted by frost  
from an  
unsealed breeze.  
Dinner  
is over and has  
stuffed full  
the dish drainer,  
dripping blue.  
I wash, you dry and  
put away.  
The house is warm,  
the tree  
needs decorated  
after we finish  
this.

## YULETIDE

Tom Lister

Mom had basted the turkey that  
*She'd been drinking wine since five*  
morning. By noon it was almost  
*that morning, pretty soon she was*  
cooked, and Dad would reach to the  
*way drunk, her face pressed in a dull*  
top of the tree. We'd put an angel  
*smack against the picture window*  
there for everyone to see. Then Dad  
*Dad jumped the fence to go screw*  
would grab Mom and kiss her under  
*the neighbor lady. My brothers held*  
the mistletoe. Your uncles and I  
*me down, put a hot iron on my back.*  
would laugh and open our presents. I  
*We opened our presents alone. Late*  
remember the new, plastic smell of  
*that night, I tried to sniff glue upstairs*  
my toys. Dad always did say be good  
*by myself but you can't sniff glue when*  
for goodness sake  
*your nose is stuffed up*

# NICHOLAE

Robert Richter

Bound by darkness  
Facing the small assembly  
The sickly-sweet smell of tobacco  
Scarcely covers the stench of burnt powder  
As both careen through the still morning air  
Infiltrating flaring nostrils.

Standing straight  
Honor and pride endure.  
Fingers slowly trace  
The dimples in the worn concrete;  
The pock-marks of a diseased ideology  
Passed on from the bedridden Mother  
To her decrepit children.

A frail figure  
Leans against the noble's frame  
Seekin comfort in the arms  
Of a lost soul.

The rapid beating  
Of hearts and drums  
Signal the culminating  
Of a night of revolution.

Silence falls over the assembly  
As they wait for the hammer to fall.

# CROSSING BOUNDARIES

Wes Beal

\*

The calico cat runs across the street  
not noticing the truck till the fender  
eclipses her tail and the sun.  
Underneath she pivots, dodging the first wheel  
then dashes for the light  
and is crushed by the second.  
The cat squirms, still trying to cross.

\*

When my dad and I go fishing  
we climb under the bridge  
that crosses the river, arms  
grappling for something to hang on to.

Then while waiting for a hit  
from a channel that lurks  
just below the surface,  
our lines get crossed.  
And its never been an easy struggle,  
untangling who each of us are.

\*

In the Wareham Opera house  
he watches girls  
dance to the slide  
and twang of a blues  
guitar. But something about  
an old acquaintance discriminates  
his sight. And even though  
their bodies bend like bluestem,  
she can't help but  
cross his mind.

# TALISMAN

Cindy Oliver

I walked to the outcrop where the creek had cut a cliff,  
exposing bare rock to the elements.

Small creatures lose their grip and roll from ancient beds,  
weathered from the limestone layers, as though the hill has  
shrugged.

I sifted through rubble at the cliff's foot,  
exhuming earth's memory in bits of shell and coral.

I could construct an entire sea floor from  
the remnants I found.

But it was all too long ago. Now  
some flawless pieces sit atop my shelf among

other trinkets, similar treasures, mine alone:  
A smooth driftwood sliver, a coyote's skull, a shimmering feather,  
a bright stone.

These are objects I have found.  
Together they form a whole.

They are the elements,  
the bones, of my world.



# UNDERGROUND

Cindy Oliver

In this city of constant clouds, the thunder only moves underground.  
 Strung along its sunken track, a crowd stands.  
 Pale hands hold folded black umbrellas.  
 A cigarette, still glowing, is tossed into the pit, where  
 tiny black mice flit in the rail's shadows.  
 At the slightest vibration, they vanish.  
 Seconds later, the monster hurtles from its burrow with a rumble of  
 wheels  
 and the shrill screech of metal against metal and shudders to a halt.  
 One burden is exhaled while the waiting crowd restrains,  
 then funnels in to rill the space. Packed in like ribs of the segmented  
 beast  
 whose burrow is this passageway, we don't intrude; it lives for us.  
 Inside, I scan the faces: some pale, some painted, all translucent.  
 Across the aisle, a weary child slumps against his mother,  
 who stares through me. I am a spirit, invisible.  
 Close by, another ghost, atattered man, sings softly off-key  
 to his own image, reflected in the darkened window.  
 His illusion stays even when the mirror falls away as  
 we emerge to artificial light, still deep beneath our destinations.  
 The creature lurches to a stop; we sway in one motion, find our  
 balance,  
 and disengage from its serpentine lenth. I glance back at the beast.  
 Pressed to the glass, people stare with inward-focused eyes.  
 As the departing train gains speed, faces flash past faster  
 then blur to one like colors merge to monotone on a spinning top.  
 It disappears down its lair, slithering below the grey city's sight,  
 and I start my winding ascent toward the blunted sunlight.

# ROSH HASHANA

Melissa Todd

In September, when the leaves are dead,  
the ground strewn with red and gold remains,  
we ready for winter, which comes despite hope or belief.  
Growing dimmer yet more lovely in the sky,  
the quality and color of the evening light  
changes, it burns down like candles.

We reverently remove the Rosh Hashana candles  
from the dusty backs of cupboards, and prepare to honor our dead.  
As a child I watched the wind-defiant light,  
and a part of it remains  
in the hidden cupboard of my heart. The sky  
scrolled to darkness as I sang with that belief.

I would guard them through evening, in absolute belief  
that if I watched their shadows long enough, the candles  
would guide the dead home. Through a hole in the sky  
they would float to our kitchen, my dead  
ancestors. To claim me, their living remains;  
to praise me, to wrap me in benevolent light.  
As I grew older, I made light  
of my early devotion, and childish belief  
that the dead had transcended their mortal remains,  
or that dust could take flight. The candles  
were put away. The dead stayed dead,  
though secretly I waited for their lightning from the sky.

I think of them now, lost in the sky,  
searching the darkness for my earthly light.  
Searching, they gather: the armies of dead  
are waiting for me to rekindle belief,  
the fire igniting those candles  
the only flame that ever remains

eternal, all that remains  
of them on this earth. It burns the sky  
with its radiance, candles  
are humble before that rich light.  
They are only wax and string. Belief  
keeps them burning. Without it, they are dead.

The memory of the dead is what remains.  
That, and love: the belief our light can be seen from the sky.  
More than they ever will, we need our candles.

# THINKING IN AMBER

Melissa Todd

The sun becomes too bright,  
so over you oozes a second skin  
where you might ferment a lifetime.  
It is a slow process.  
One day you oversleep, and you  
think, I've missed the appointment,  
this responsibility; but look, there's  
the sun still shining, nothing has stopped.  
So one by one things fall away,  
more days are sleep, and  
the parcels collect around you,  
brown with neglect, wizened  
by the terrible, still-shining sun.  
They gather quietly, quietly around  
a door you don't answer anymore.  
When you raise your head there are  
too many to count, the task is too  
great, no person could be expected  
to open each and examine its contents.  
They pile so high now,  
even the sun is gone ...

Alone here, with no sound, no light,  
behind a door permanently barred,  
you supposed there might be peace.  
But there is a noise rising from you  
that cannot be stopped. It rises  
and splits until the original skin  
cracks and falls away.  
Now not only is there light,  
you are made of it.

# MY OLD MAN COULD FIX A CAR

Wes Beal

The gray sky and I looked on  
ready to jump at his voice  
to supply his hand with a tool.  
Hands with thirty years of engine grit,  
the wrench, an extension of his arm,  
making the iron of a bolt obey.  
Commands boomed from under the hood:  
“Start it. No, no! Slower!”  
The engine whined under his touch,  
this head cocked, listening  
for the slightest imperfection.  
I could never please him.

# ONCE

Tim Aumiller

When I venture to look into your head  
When during moments of sobriety I  
Still have the nerve and the desire,  
It is this time I know that I was once  
Truly in love with you.

During those extended seconds of  
Orgasm, with each building and broken, each  
Moment when I would feel my blood  
Through my neck, when I would feel you  
All over me  
Like there was nothing outside of ourselves.

It is like that, now with my keys and my screen  
Only me and nothing else, only the blare of the  
Darkness, like darkness can blare.

When I sit and wonder what life is like on the moon  
And the sun is somehow made blind to us by it,  
Even though much smaller, we can realize we  
Are much smaller than it.

And in mornings, when there is no bread for toast,  
When the coffee hasn't been made, and the dishes  
Unwashed, I sigh and release, and realize  
There is nothing as big as you and I were  
Once.

There is music, music that howls and evades,  
Music with a beat, the only thing that connects me  
To it. The only thing that connects the world.

The drums resound, there is sound only in silence;  
the mutes hold all the voices.

# SHE WAS A HORSE PERSON

Bob McDevitt  
Pennsylvania

Crickets sizzle in the distance,  
and fireflies glow green  
in the affable darkness of summer night.  
Heat lightning flashes above me,  
and I'm not sure if the rumble I hear  
is thunder, or the sad semis  
barreling down Route 1 in the distance.  
Horses rip and chomp  
the grassy hillside in front of me  
sometimes uttering a labial sigh,  
which reminds me of a girl,  
the way a song might of childhood.

She is a horse person,  
and I used to sit on the ragged stone wall  
as she brought the horses in from the field  
as nonchalantly as little red wagons.  
Surrounded by moist dung, yellow hay,  
and bleached timber, I'd wait my turn,  
impatiently, as she paraded the sleek animals  
into the barn for the night.

I'd watch her brush and unbuckle,  
shovel and fork with the same poise  
possessed by the Black Lab  
splayed on the cool, dank concrete.  
I'd wonder at her bold mien,  
3,000 miles from home.  
At 18 she picked up and left her home,

## She Was a Horse Person

in Washington State, just like that,  
something I can't do at 30.  
She was as dauntless as the white oak  
that shadowed the farm house,  
and as deft as the barn cats  
that slid in and out of the hollow eyes  
that passed for windows  
in the muted shelter of the wood barn.  
A portent breeze rattled in my ear  
as I sat there, mesmerized.  
But I didn't listen, I never do.

Later we'd exchange moist kisses,  
and send spider fingers  
behind cotton tees and denim jeans.  
A dog bark, or a long, lonely goose honk,  
maybe cattle lows or fevered whinnies  
would seep into our distracted minds  
like the cold dark waters of the Muddy Run  
to be recalled later with fondness,  
like other floods,  
like other disasters.  
When sweet sweat mixed  
with sweet sweat,  
fragrance with motion,  
there was no other world  
just a farm and a girl.

The shadowy horse figures clomp  
softly down the hill toward  
the silver ribbons of a stream.  
Like cobwebs dangling in a forgotten nook  
the filament of summers gone by  
sticks in my throat,  
and makes it hard to breathe.  
She'll take your breath away they say,  
and sometimes what they say is true.







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