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confluence

the ipfw art and literary magazine



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All submissions must include the name and contact information of the photographer, artist, or author. Photography, artwork, and manuscripts will be returned only if the sender includes a SASE, or may be picked up at the Department of English and Linguistics.

For other information about the magazine or about sponsorship, contact Richard Ramsey, Department Chair of English and Linguistics.

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letter from the editor

Over the past few weeks, I have been watching the buds form on the trees and the tulips emerge from the ground. I have seen the grass become greener and I have been enveloped by the idea of new growth.

Then I began thinking about this particular collection of work. As a whole, the pieces are dark – with speakers searching for answers about life, death, and failed relationships. Yet, there is something redeeming in their darkness. There is a small glimmer of hope, perhaps encased in bitterness, but nonetheless, existent – like the tulip bulb that hasn't bloomed. These pieces speak about the strength found in humanity and the fragility of the human condition – a beautiful dichotomy.

I chose the pieces that I did because they spoke to me and they spoke to each other. I saw a dialogue emerge in front of my eyes through photographs and words.

The pieces that were unfortunately not included this time were still noteworthy. This magazine is better because of all of the submissions the editorial board received. And so, I say, keep submitting. Keep writing. Keep making art.

Peace.

Sarah E. Sandman, Editor

acknowledgements

First, thank you to all of the artists and writers who submitted this year. Without your work this magazine would be nothing. Also, thanks to all of you reading and purchasing the magazine – we, the Confluence staff, appreciate your support.

Thank you to Dr. Ramsey and Dr. Amidon for making this venture possible and plausible. Your advice and words of wisdom have been invaluable to the staff and me. Without your support, many new voices would go unheard. In your words, Dr. Ramsey, “Cheers!”

My readers – Lynamne and Rachael, thanks so much. I was frazzled and your ideas and rationale made the road less bumpy. Brian – your work has been much appreciated and your encouragement has helped me to keep looking toward the finish line. Rick – this magazine literally wouldn’t exist without your help and creative ideas, thanks. John – where would I be without your experience and your advice? And last but not least, Beth – you made this project doable. To all of you, thanks.

Thanks to the other English professors and instructors who encouraged their students to submit, especially the creative writing instructors, Mary Ann Cain, George Kalamaras, and Beth Simon. For all of you who hung posters on your door, I appreciate it.

Thanks to the Department of English and Linguistics at IPFW. Thanks to Janine Moore and Kate Butler for answering questions, especially when I had no clue what I was doing and thanks in advance for distributing the magazine. Thanks to Yvette Zahir for making the website happen and also thanks in advance for distributing this year’s magazine.

Again, thanks to our sponsors. Finally, for those who may not have been named here, I have not forgotten what you have done for the magazine or for me.

Sarah E. Sandman, Editor

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creative nonfiction



Daniel Dienelt

Musings of a Distressed Camp Counselor

by Rosemary S. Imrick

“Shesatonthehillsideandstrummedherguitar, strummedherguitar...” Oh, of all the songs to have stuck in my head. Of course, I was sitting on a hillside, strumming my guitar, so I guess it makes sense that the song would pop in. It’s like I tell my coworkers, “Don’t you hate it when you get Bach’s Fugue in G Minor stuck in your head?” And then they look at me funny, which, of course, is the point. But, anyway, I’d much rather have my old buddy Bach pounding a fugue theme through my brain than have that little ditty wandering through there with its gads of verses. “He sat down beside her and smoked his cigar, smoked his cigar...” Well, at least I didn’t have to worry about that part of the ditty coming true—not at a girls’ camp.

It’s just that they were driving me nutty. I’m going to say pecans, maybe walnuts. No, definitely almonds. See, that’s what working in the kitchen of a girls’ camp for two weeks does to the brain; it makes it nutty with a slight flavor of onions. How was I to know that I’d be in the kitchen for practically the entirety of the girls’ camp when I volunteered to help? I didn’t see any fine print! I guess no good deed goes unpunished.

But it was my girls who drove me to the hillside to escape into my music for a blessed half-hour. Ah, one blissful, still, half-hour--with that darn song. “Hesaidthathe loved her, but, oh, how he lied, oh, how he lied...” Well, I wasn’t lying when I told my two roomfuls of girls I was escaping into my music for a while. Woe betide the youngun who tried to tag along.

They weren’t bad girls really, though the one who sneaked away to smoke and fell in the swamp might have fooled me—and she was supposed to be one of my aids, too. They were just your basic 11- to 15-year-olds. Of course, I soon found that there is no “basic 11- to 15-year-old.” Some were still scared of the dark, and others cared about the same things as my college classmates. The goofy giggling of the latter might have been sobered if they’d really listened to the next line of that infernal song: “They were to get married, but somehow she died, somehow she died...” What in all tarnation did 13-year-olds care about that stuff anyway? From my perspective as the seasoned 20-year-old counselor, they were little kids, not bad girls, but so desperately young.

Of course, that was the problem. The desperately young were driving me to desperation, a desperation augmented by the incessant echo of my knife chopping vegetables. It was worst at night, when I had to corral the whole herd and get them to the bathroom and then to bed. But, honestly, I grew up on a farm. I’d rather herd chickens than try herding girls. And chickens,

for the uninitiated, don't herd well. Try it sometime.

"He sat by her tombstone and laughed 'til he cried, laughed 'til he cried..." A few more nights of herding and my jolly campers might be laughing by my tombstone. I didn't think I was draconian, but they did. Maybe it was because I stayed up each night in the darkened hallway with a flashlight and C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, waiting to pounce on any unauthorized passerby. Little girls, I found, have innumerable reasons to leave their rooms at night, and innumerable reasons to giggle loudly behind their closed doors. Never mind that I was looking out for them, trying to make sure they weren't zombies the next day by becoming one myself. No good deed goes unpunished.

Even when I finally turned in, the bunks were, well, a bit weird. I kind of hoped Edgar Allan Poe wasn't around when they were designed. "The tombstonefellover, and, smish-smash, he died, smish-smash, he died..." Yikes, that was it. The creaking and groaning of springs, plus being on the bottom bunk, made one wonder if a malevolent plot was shortly to be unleashed. "She went up to heaven and flittered and fled, flittered and fled..." I should have told them to say their night prayers if they wanted to flitter and fly when their bunk was the first to go in the dark of the night when all good little girls are tucked away--or herded to bed by flashlight and threat.

One of them did somehow slip through my primitive security system one night. I couldn't say who, though I had my suspicions. The firemen were suspicious too, and as we were out in lines in the lot by the fire trucks, I think they suppressed their more colorful thoughts about being called up in the middle of the night. The rumor was that there was a smell of cigarette smoke in the bathroom in MY hall. "He went down below her and frittered and fried, frittered and fried..." Well, lucky for the perpetrators I didn't catch them, or I'd have frittered a whole lot more than their dinner.

Oh, how short one half-hour was. Time to get dinner, and it wasn't going to be frittered girls' fingers. That would have made up for mopping the cafeteria floor umpteen times. Well, I'd volunteered. But if I'd known that song was going to be entrenched in my psyche, that girls would sing it backwards to savor it from every angle, would I have given my word?

"The moral of the story is never to lie, never to lie... Zoom, plucky, plucky. Zoom, plucky, plucky. Zoom, pluck, pluck, pluck." I would have given my girl-herding flashlight to have Bach's Fugue in G Minor stuck in my head.

The Warmth From Grandma's Kitchen

Deborah Morris

No one entered Grandpa and Grandma's house by the front door. "Only pesky salesmen come to the front door," Grandpa used to say. And it was true. Family and friends always came to the back door, some knocking before entering, but most of us knew to just walk on in. We knew that we would be welcome. That's just the way that it was at Grandpa and Grandma's house.

From the moment we stepped onto the back porch, the warm, wonderfully sweet aromas from Grandma's kitchen would wrap around us like a comfy quilt on a chilly day. Warmed, welcomed, and loved, we would enter through that back door and find ourselves in the cozy little kitchen. We would usually find Grandma there, her bright eyes and warm smile showing her pleasure in our visit, and her plump cheeks rosey-pink from her exertion at her latest labor of love. There was usually a freshly baked pie or some warm cookies on the counter that Grandma would say need "sampling" before she'd shoo us on into the sitting room to "get comfortable." No matter what she was doing, Grandma would stop to visit when company called. "Work can wait," she would say with a smile; "it'll still be there long after you leave."

Somehow, time seemed to stand still in that old farmhouse. The hectic pace of life in the outside world never managed to barge in. Amidst loving attention and stories about the years they had known, Grandpa and Grandma's house remained a place of respite, a retreat from any present stresses or problems.

While more "formal" visits were enjoyed in the spacious sitting room with the large davenport and assorted easy chairs, the family always piled snugly into the kitchen for dinners. No matter how few or how many of us were in attendance, we always managed to somehow fit around the kitchen table. Once seated, however, it was nearly impossible to move from the table until the meal was finished and everyone else was ready to move as well. Grandma often joked about needing a larger kitchen, but she actually seemed quite content to have her entire family so closely together. And we were often together, especially during the summer months.

Part of the "magic" of Grandma's hearty, home-cooking was the result of the ingredients used within. Grandma still used lard and real butter in her recipes. She also used fresh fruits and vegetables that were grown each summer in their own well-tended berry patches and garden. Perfect row after row of every imaginable vegetable made up Grandpa's verdant garden. Of course, Grandma dictated what was planted where and how much of each was planted, but that garden was Grandpa's pride and joy. Neighbors

always complimented him on his beautiful garden, and Grandpa would simply smile in response.

While the picturesque garden and berry patches were always credited to Grandpa, they were actually a cooperative affair. All of us who lived nearby were expected to help with maintaining them. We would help pick, and then process each ripened fruit and vegetable type. Sometimes we would joke that Grandpa had planted enough garden for the entire county! And, in truth, we usually had enough for ourselves and plenty to share as well. Working together, though, it never seemed to be such a huge task. We spent hours together outside, harvesting, and then we moved inside, into Grandma's kitchen, to process and preserve the food for our enjoyment during the rest of the year. It was hard work – usually very hot and tiring – but those vivid memories remain as some of my fondest. It was Grandma who cheerfully taught me how to make raspberry jelly and strawberry jam from our own deliciously-fresh berries. It was Grandma who taught me the secrets of how to can the tender green beans and how to blanch peas, broccoli, and corn to maintain their texture and wonderful taste for storage in the freezer. Grandma taught me how to juice red-ripe tomatoes and then add a colorful variety of vegetables to make vegetable soup to can for the long, cold winter. Grandma patiently and lovingly taught all of these special things to me just as her mother had taught them to her so many years before.

I still faithfully help Grandpa with the garden and the berry patch every summer, but now I have to rely on my many memories of Grandma's "lessons" when I make jam and jelly or when I process the continual abundance of vegetables. Grandma has been gone for nearly eight years already, yet she somehow seems very close to me as I work in my own kitchen. I still do things the old-fashioned way, the way that Grandma taught me to do them.

Every December the entire family still gathers early on a Saturday to bake iced sugar cookies from a special recipe that has been passed down through generations. Similar to an Amish "work-frolic," our "cookie day" had its start nearly 50 years ago, and has included at least five generations of Grandma's family. We still use lard in the soft dough and real butter in the icing that eventually glistens on each cookie. We still roll the dough out on Grandma's kitchen counter and cut out simple shapes with cookie-cutters that are as old as the tradition itself. It might be easier to move "cookie day" to my own kitchen where there is more space and a few more modern conveniences, but somehow that idea just doesn't seem right. We continue to gather in Grandma's cozy kitchen, drawn in by the history we all shared with her there and the wonderful, warm memories that we now treasure. What Grandma "made" in her kitchen during her lifetime cannot be bought in any store; it truly was "home-made."



Before the Call Kelly Lynch

Chasing My Religion

Dave Alexander

I want to tell you how I lost my religion.

I

When I was a one-year-old toddler, my family moved from the heavily Polish Millgate neighborhood in South Chicago to the more diverse far south side. Unlike my older brothers, I missed growing up surrounded by friends and extended family all of the same national heritage. I missed the perogis, the kielbasa, the duck soup, and whose mother made the best tasting pastries. I missed living where everyone knew everyone; where many of your neighbors were also your relatives. This was 1955, and the City was changing.

I did get to share 1 cultural standard, though. I was baptized into the Roman Catholic Faith. I became a soldier of Christ before I even learned to talk.

II

In the 1960's, at Gate of Heaven Parish, acolytes, or altar boys, were taken from the ranks of boys grades 6 through 8. Upon entering Mrs. Findeisen's 6th grade class in 1965, I eagerly signed up for this great honor, along with a handful of my classmates. In addition to learning "the moves," it was necessary to memorize all the liturgical responses in Latin, as English hadn't yet invaded the sanctuary. I was the first pupil picked from my class to serve, due to my ability to mimic the sounds I had heard at mass throughout my childhood. I didn't understand a word, mind you, but my phonetics were perfect. Church logic in action.

One unfortunate thing about being among the youngest alter boys was the tradition of paying your dues. As the junior crew, we sixth graders were scheduled for the earliest masses, 6:15 in our church, or the dreaded 5:00

pm mass on Saturday evening. We young ones served our appointed masses dutifully. We trusted in these traditions, believing that better days, and times, would come.

July 14, 1966 was not a better day. At 5:45 am, I walked my normal route to church for early mass. How could I have known that as I walked past the townhouse at 2319 E 100th Steet that Richard Speck had just murdered 8 student nurses inside its walls. At the time I had finished walking the last block to church at 99th Street, Corazon Amurao, the only survivor of the massacre, crawled out onto the townhouse's balcony in an attempt to flag down a passing motorist. The passing motorist was Officer Dan Kelly, my brother Ray's partner on the Chicago Police Department. Budget cuts had reduced the patrols down to one-man cars one day per week. My brother mercifully slept through the discovery of the unbelievable carnage within 2319.

After mass, instead of retracing my route, I had returned home down 99th Street. Not until around 9:00 am. did my mother switch on the television, and the "we interrupt this program..." report on the slayings. My mother knew without even asking exactly where I had walked that morning. Her completely white skin tone reflected her inner thoughts, understandable even to my immature 12 year old mind. Did I see anybody? Did anybody see me?

For the record, Richard Speck was convicted of 8 counts of first degree murder and died in prison during the 1990's. My aunt, an employee of South Chicago Community Hospital at the time of the murders, still speaks of losing a couple of very bright students who worked with her in the X-ray department. My brother Ray, unknown to me or my mother, had gone to the crime scene, after a call by Officer Kelly, to witness the slaughter first hand. He wasn't able to describe to me what he saw for 30 years.

He said there was no sense to what he witnessed. God was not there.

III

Like millions of other teenage boys in 1968, I played guitar. In addition to "Louie Louie" and "Steppin' Stone," I learned a little music theory and chords structure along the way. Rumor of this skill spread, and soon I was pressed into further service of Catholic Liturgy. I was to provide the guitar background to a chorus of thirty 5th and 6th graders in their presentation at

an inter-faith musical. I put in extra time for rehearsals for a few weeks until I finally found myself on stage in front of hundreds of smiling faces of all nationalities and colors. A truly wonderful experience was topped off by hearty congratulations offered by Fathers Lynch and Tobin, priests in residence at Gate of Heaven parish. Along with the Fathers was Louis Wapple, a young musician who had recently become involved with our church's efforts to modernize its focus, initiating a folk mass at the church hall on Sundays, and updating our hymn selection during regular services. Louis immediately asked if I would be interested in assisting him. Without a second thought, and awash with flattery, I said yes.

Louis, a mature 18 to my 14 years, was everything I wanted to be at the time. Heavily invested in church work, he and I ferreted out new music, set up tables and chairs for church functions, and met with our two priests on a continual basis to brainstorm new way to bring the liturgy to the parishioners. Louis was fearless. I couldn't imagine myself standing up in front of the congregation, teaching reluctant pew-sitters the latest in hymns and songs. At folk masses, Louis always performed one solo tune for the congregation, something of deep spiritual meaning, but often culled from the works of Jesse Colin Young or Peter, Paul, and Mary. I sat and watched, wishing for the courage to stand in front and sing.

During no particularly memorable summer week in 1968, Louis proclaimed, "David, this Sunday you're going to perform the solo." Offering up as many reasons as I could think of against the idea, Louis finally got me to at least consider stopping at his place and going over some music. Louis, I knew, lived with a few other people somewhere in the area along with the 8th grade teacher and his wife, and a couple of artist types. I agreed to at least look over some music for the proposed solo and asked his address.

"2319 E 100th St.," he stated.

The Speck House, as we had come to call 2319, had been surgically cleaned, sanded, repainted, and declared fit for human habitation in 1967. I had no idea that my friend and others had taken up residence there. Not telling my parents where I was headed, I met Louis one afternoon at his home. Maybe because you just don't argue with someone in a building once the scene of one of the most gruesome mass murders in Chicago's history, I quickly agreed to perform "Let it Be" the following Sunday. Then I looked Louis

in the face and issued the regrettable statement “You know, I just don’t see how you guys can live in this house.”

Louis explained that all the residents, Bob and his wife, Rod, Jerry, and some guy whose name escapes me, had come as a group from Colorado, and had no idea of the house’s history. After a few months, a neighbor had filled them in on the notoriety of the building. Louis took me up to the largest bedroom, showing me the deep crimson stain on the wooden floor. The blood had soaked so deep, it was impossible to remove it all.

Louis and his friends had all agreed, upon learning the truth, that they would stay and try to bring “...a positive vibe to the house, you know, to try to erase the negative.” With that, my role model became even larger in stature.

During the fall of my freshman year of high school, Louis called to ask if I would take over full control of the folk mass and new liturgy work at the church. Out of nowhere, he announced that he would be leaving, moving way up to the north side. I was stunned. Forget the church stuff, I was losing a friend to a far away neighborhood. “It’s not that bad, I do have a car, you know,” was Louis’ way of minimizing my discomfort.

I walked to the rectory to get advice from Fathers Tobin and Lynch, all of it consisting of statements of confidence. They would be there for me if I needed them, they assured. The church had a regular organist who was always willing to help, they explained. I reluctantly agreed to do what I could without Louis.

A couple of weeks later, I got a call from Louis from his new place on the north side. He had spoken to a couple of guys we knew, and it was agreed that we would make a trip up to visit him. I was beholden to John-George for the ride, as I hadn’t yet begun to drive. We arrived late at Louis’ in the Wrigleyville neighborhood on a crisp fall evening. In true musician fashion, we sat on cushions and talked among the still-packed boxes. Only the stereo had been unpacked and set in its place of honor. As we chatted about music and told stories of the old neighborhood, Louis told us of his new one, and his search for a job.

“Louis, if you don’t even have a job yet, why did you move all the way up here?” I asked naively.

“I had to go, Dave. Rod and I broke up.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to cry. I heard right. They stood there looking at me in all my silent confusion. I was the only one who didn’t know. God damn it.

IV

I want to tell you that trying to negotiate school work, my budding social life, and involvement in the church was not easy. As time moved forward into 1969, I was begging off involvement in the church, working and playing at the folk masses with less regularity. The priests seem to understand, and soon the special service was reduced to once per month. It wasn't too long before the priests at my high school, Mendel Catholic Prep, learned of my dedication to Gate of Heaven. Soon, I was setting up the music for our high school liturgy which consisted of a mass in the school chapel once per month. I was asked to solo 2 or 3 songs per service. Once terrified of the thought, I somehow gathered the confidence to sing in front of 400 males at the 8:00 am service. Some thought I was crazy for doing it, others admired my guts. I had been asked repeatedly where I got the courage to sing in front of 400 judgmental, male, and mostly, upperclassmen. I told them it was a gift. I lied.

My involvement in Gate of Heaven activities fell to zero during that freshman year. When the news that Father Frank Tobin was quitting the priesthood to marry Sister Joan Stucker, and that Father John Lynch was marrying Sister Lynn Swanson, I just laughed. Good joke, I thought. No joke. The priests and nuns who had helped strengthen my faith throughout my childhood were "taking it back." A do-over.

I had lost it, whatever it was. I no longer saw the god of my formative years active in my life. I needed logic in my life. I needed something that would explain 8 slaughtered nurses, a friend who had turned into an alien being, and nuns and priests who betrayed a whole congregation.

I promptly planned a going away party for my soul.

V

Father Tom Martin was an easy-going, soft spoken man with a laissez-faire attitude toward student's personalities. His fervent wish was that everyone at Mendel Prep would just behave. Father Martin was my moderator for all things liturgical, reviewing and invariably approving my choices for music used during chapel services. For the May 1969 service, I proposed a rock mass.

My idea was to load the altar with drums, electric bass, 2 electric guitars, and use the huge pipe organ to present full versions of Buffalo Springfield's For What It's Worth, Blind Faith's (!) In the Presence of the Lord, and The Who's See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me. I counted on the fact that Father Martin was unfamiliar with the music, especially The Who. Father Martin had rubber stamped my previous choices, and the idea of a rock mass slid past him in like manner.

We rehearsed at the bass player's house. We all agreed that rehearsal at school might alert the faculty to the rather raucous presentation we planned. The biggest concern was for reprisals. Would we get into a very bad place if our presentation was judged "over the top?" I insisted that if what we did was quality, we'd be OK.

On the pre-ordained Friday, we arrived at the school early and began to set up our stuff in the chapel. No classes for us this morning, as Father Martin was lobbied heavily for prep time. No one's fool, the priest agreed that better prep equaled better results.

As students filed into the chapel at 9:00 am, nothing short of a din accompanied the sight of a full rock ensemble set up on the altar. The chatter subsided completely as the disbelief of what they were hearing took hold. With enough watts to rattle the gym, we filled every crevice of the chapel with electrified sound. Father Martin, presiding over the mass, never batted an eyelash. This event was the only time I had ever heard wild applause following the final incantation, "go in peace and may god bless you, amen."

After the service, Father Martin pulled me aside from the rest of my band mates. "David..." he said and simply shook his head. I responded quickly, "Father, some of these guys will never forget this. There's a lot more power to music than chanting some words that nobody even thinks about."

It was my last mass. I never played at or even attended one again, at least not voluntarily.

VI

I've been standing on this stage for 5 years. 12 songs per set, 5 sets per night. How many more choruses and verses? How many more notes per measure? How many more nights? How many beers can I drink during the break?

I don't hear the music anymore—it's just numbers of notes and counting to keep my place. Math problems by Steely Dan and Led Zeppelin, presented for your entertainment. Structures, not songs; I keep counting until it's over.

5 more years and many more stages. I keep counting, but it's getting harder to keep my place. More math problems, this time by Foreigner and Hall & Oates. Can I buy you a drink? I'm having two. Is that my wife? I've got to count those, too.

Another 5 years. I still count, but so do my bandmates. They count the number of times I get lost each night, and the number of beers I drink. Finally, I just let it go. I'm tired of playing equations. I need to clear this haze because I can't see anything anymore. No more counting; I'm through.

VII

Frank G accepted his 35 years coin with characteristic humility. After the meeting, I stood waiting to shake his hand, and congratulate him on so many years clean and sober.

He smiled, his eyes radiant. "I couldn't do this without you, Dave."

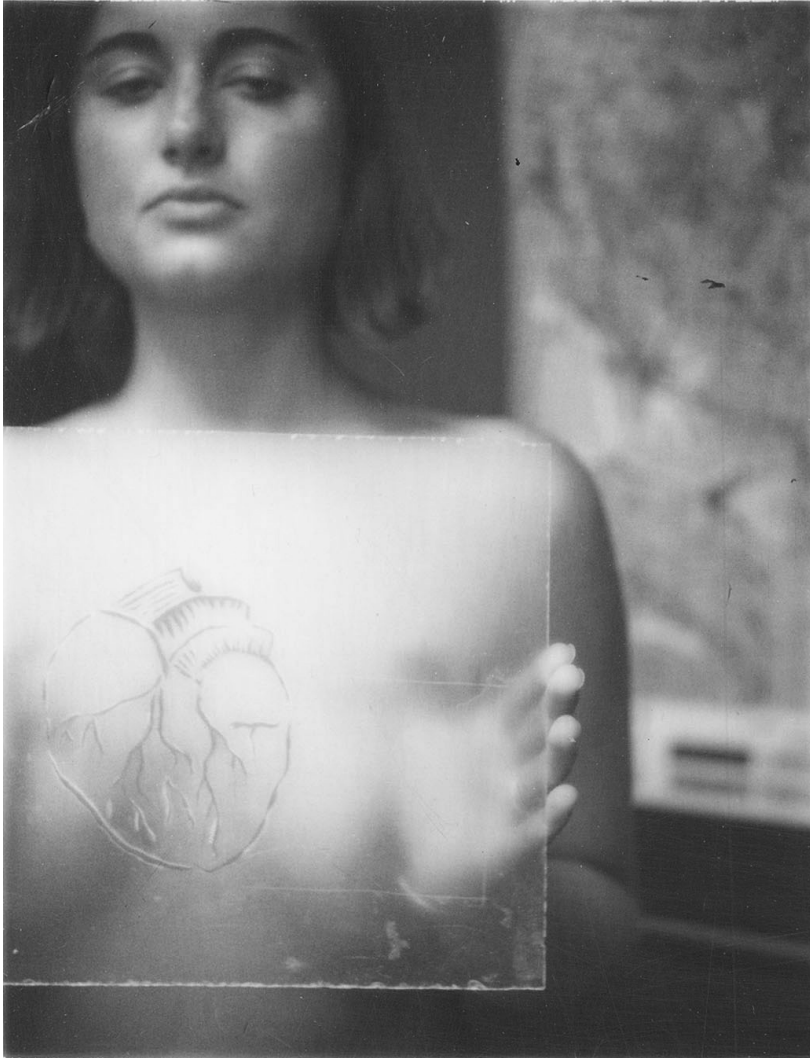
"I don't see how, Frank, but thank you."

"Dave, you've been around for, what, three years now? Keeping my eye on you has kept my eye on me. We all keep watch for each other as I've seen you with these new guys. That's what we do. Keep vigilant for each other and we'll all walk with our heads up. I'm counting on you because I believe I can."

"Thanks Frank. It feels good to be counted on."

I lost my religion, but I was born again.

poetry



Daniel Dienelt

Template of Yesterday

Rachael A. Wiegmann

I follow a template of yesterday, waiting
In my lady-gown. Candles sleep
On a window seat, as the moon fulfills
My absent iris. Suicidal petals
Are given to the solstice in perfume. Your
Transient aroma knives my nostrils
With reverie. Vigilantly, I wade

On the shoreline with cigarette carcasses.
The sand mosaics the memory
Of your footprint in the wind. "I know,"
You say, with a pathway of gaze.
You postpone my emotions with your shoe-tone.
A promise of coffee, negated through the hand
Of the grandfather. I watch
For nostalgic stars to wish upon.

The sunrise thickens with dust as the water
Sinks within fish scales. I weigh the shape
Of circumspection with my unironed
Fingertip. I bathe in antique water
Submerging the virginal pores. Dried iris
Petals mask my eye of souvenir
From your hotel. I wade to elude
The template of yesterday.

Eclipse

Ben Blevins

Last day of summer
Warm sun watches
Cool water guides. Glides
Down the path,
Third time today.
Adrift on a make-shift
Sea, with an unseen side
Suddenly a struggle begot
Of an enjoyable ride. all
Illusions of safety fade fast
Washed away by waves.
Currents pull me, under
My helmet I struggle to see.
The jacket pulls up, but
The water pulls onward
Feet find terra firma
Traction is denied, I slip.
Ropes are thrown, to me
It's hopeless. Confusion
Assaults me. Darkness, Fear
finds a foothold, Why can't I.
Striving to stand, I fail
To see the break in current.
Just in time I lunge. Safety
Restored, now fear falters
Slipping from me. The sun
Has been shining, the darkness
Wasn't as real as I
imagined it to be.



Breeding Plumage Billy Jean McQuithy



The Farm Help Joanna Wittke

To Move To Texas

Jim Kowalski

Unfamiliar books I carry weigh me
and straps on bags snap often
like the breaking fever of July.
Unfamiliar noise becomes lost in Summer's haze.
Melting canvas oils of red and orange,

don't last in this Texas heat.
I count hills of biting ants
the severity of pain
killing salamanders scratching walls.
Breaking glass with cold tongues

to carry seeds in wet pockets,
sprout language and breathe
and cool down fevered necks. Dad
opens business to the delight of none.
Mom plants but snaps her neck on sand.

I carry her to the foreign bed.
She dreams in tongues till dawn
and wakes to brown and grey and heat.
Texas swallows her saliva like shots of tequila.
My words will not jump

to misspelled commas and periods.
Buried senoritas dance
like dizzy concubines, alcohol
saturating for moments the books I carry,
the letters disappearing from the page.

Brooklyn Skyline Sidewalk Sunset

Dan Dienelt

Deaf on the arrival
Dead ears survival embraced
again. The Prism
prison encased Gotham City.
Nestled in tenement building Sky
exited the citizens' daily dances.
Heard the familiar animated
screams.2 battered pink
purple bruised plumped roses.
Bashed
along Dean St. Cold leftover
down the block from Cobble Hill
Funeral home next to bulldogs fire station.
The flowers left
chest high to die.
On the white weathered crusted sidewalk
to say goodbye,
amore.

Severance

M. Fernanda Acosta

I want to tell you about a place
where mango aroma is in the air,
coming from the jungle and the rain.

I want to tell you about the songs:
bouquets of multiple tongues
where English and Hindi roam.

I want to tell you about the spices:
the cumin and ginger fragrances
that women's hands make them rise.

I also want to tell you about the great journey, away
from the mango cradle

I want to tell you about the long traveling
letters that never made it on time.

I want to tell you about the diverse diasporas, including
ours, scattered everywhere.

I want to tell you about the changes on my saree,
changes I never happened to see.

I want to tell you about the telegu words
that escape from me.

I want to tell you I now sustain a double foreignness,
whether here or there.

I want to tell you that my own people do not know if I am or I am not,
and sadly sometimes, neither do I.

Ode to water

Sarah Jane Gaines

For Pablo Neruda

At the tap of the bath,
in the hem of a rain cloud,
the eye-crease of a woman—
 you are waiting
 for whoever will welcome you.

With refreshing drops you long to pour yourself
into the porcelain basin, onto the woman's fleshy cheek,
over crops of golden corn and deserts as dry as elbow skin.

You dream of washing over the land like a river
to bring drink to all thirsty and cleansing to all unclean.
You gather behind the silver faucets
in the homes of the lovers of water,
form puddles under the tear ducts
of unlucky widows and emotional mothers,
and put all your weight on the giving stitch of the cloud seam—
 not only to cover those who know of your revival
 but also in hope of their cups overflowing
 and spilling into thirsty mouths



Fresh Fish Billy Jean McQuithy

Outback, in the Glow

Rachael A. Wiegmann

I was dreaming a glance in you. Sand
Granules petaled upon my iris. Natively,
I missed you, outback in my glow.
The Alice tried to telegraph you centuries
Ago, but the contact was loud in desolation.
The wind stole my stiletto-print, but she
Still has the eye's fire. The rays blaze

Framed Ayers Rock. Monolithically,
I thought of the fire in your shoe.
Do you always flee from water? Uluru
Hugged me with her orange forest.
The lantern of a tourist kept my
Eye a desert. Your nomadic gaze
Must be drowning in a blaze by now.

That clock handed me the dreaming.
Boomerang moons were thrown
To the zenith. "Highly transient," the elder
Woman whispered my eye, haloing
Me in a eucalyptus singe. Crimson
Stains on my stiletto, and the desert
Telling me not to hold my breath in his dijeridoo.

I Watch Glaciers Thaw

Rachael A. Wiegmann

I sat in a fountain, counting slivers
Of mock-water. My eyes performed
Icelandic dances at the Smoky Bay.
I remembered how your hands
Weighed your thoughts. Fish scales
Are mirrored on city streets; I will
Not scry into the miniature glaciers

For your visit. In my hiatus of ice,
Lava molds a desert in the plates.
I eat seafood to water my intellect.
Our fishing poles always tailed
The other. I went to chase you,
Sunning a dress in the icefields,
But magma molted your footprint.

Esoterically, I was a Viking with you.
On an island of unmended ice & whistling
Volcanoes, water stains my eyelash.
Eye retraces territorial fishing rods.
My lighter is iced against grey skies;
I only weep for the fleet of fire.
I watch glaciers thaw; envisioning your gaze.

Treasures on the Maumee

Adrienne Housman

Do you remember...
The last time we went on a treasure hunt?
 Treasure for our coffee table,
 Treasure for our blood,
 Treasure for our soul.

It was when the Cottonwood and its foliage still hid our secret on the Maumee.

While the colors on the trees created a diversion and protected what we love,
The colors under our feet crackled a warning to scatter what we love.

The Honeylocust and its “prickeries” told you we should take another path,
The Poison Ivy knows us well and it let us move through unharmed.

And there was our secret island,
The red, orange, and brown guards on the banks successfully completed
their job of hiding:

 The 500 million year old fossil we found,

 The clams,

 The heron’s prints,

 And what the river chose to leave on our banks.

The tired sun put stars on our river to see us back home, long before night
had come.

Our sentries offered their roots as a helping hand to the world above,
And I offer you my hand as a root in this world.
But now the rivers water has rewarded and washed the sentries hands of
their job,
The water is up; the leaves, the heron, the island is gone.

You didn’t hear the scream that came from the bottom of my soul,
It happened all the way down the bank; it happened when we looked out
over the water.

The scream you didn’t hear was inspired by our life and let loose by the
sight of our secret.

 My heart sounded excitement and fear,

 Despair and hope,

 Beauty and disgust,

 Loathing and Love,

 Love.

Because we both cling to the same roots along this river, my child,
I know one day you will hear my scream through your heart.

From the window, I can see that the bare Cottonwood cannot hide our
secret,
The water rises to take its place for the winter and promises to leave new
finds in the Spring.
For now the cold will keep trespassers away.

The Precipitation of Friendship

Jeffrey W. Watson

As I approached the center of the storm my body began to feel numb.

An immense swarm of fluffy snowflakes engulfed my being like light invading a valley on a warm summer's day.

Only there was no light at all and no warmth,

just an invasion of snow,

in fact it seemed as if all shreds of light had been sucked from every corner of my vision's reach.

As the cold temperature consumed the last of my physical energy, I was thrown into deep thought,

focused on remembering times past.

I collapsed in the fury of the storm and began to feel even colder,

however, now my thoughts and feelings were completely submerged in a past tragedy.

Two old friends, who I can not call friends anymore, caught the attention of my focus.

Friendships ever so close, dissolved over time.

I began questioning the events, why had situations happened as they did?

The tragedy of ending friendships can be more painful then the worst of physical agony.

The more I stressed my mind to conceive of a resolution,

the more comprehensible the answer I had wished to deny became.

It seems this energy I had spent trying to invent a positive answer somehow understood the passion of my good intention and made clear in my mind the truth of the matter.

Situations could not have been played any differently,

and time spent dwelling on past events is time wasted in the present.

As I acknowledged and accepted this explanation the cold I felt overcome
my body began to fade.

The storm that had seemed so violent started to settle,
a feeling of absolute harmony came over me and a smile crept-about my face.

In the distance, I could see my two old friends waving at each other,
then their gaze met me.

They stood in silence for the distance was too great for words,
there seemed to be an understanding in our presence.

As I continued forward I felt no fear or angry anticipation for any storm
to come

just a pleasant awareness for a typical solution.

Duppy's Story Written on Papyrus

Jason Douglas

Like monkeys dragging their knuckles,
gargoyles perch the roof of the sanctuary.
A path of conglomerate serpentines through the cemetery
ending its journey at the entrance of the Babylonian-like structure.

Inside a harem, seeks a save haven from the thunderbird.
Palmistry tells them a story of a vampire named Atlatl
arising from an ancient sarcophagus resting upon shale.
As if scarificating one's testicle without anesthetic,
reedy shrills fill the air, coonhounds howling.
Vampires prefer a bloody Mary before a Margarita.

Carriion aftermath, a bowl of spilt macaroni.
Atlatl struts off in a mackinaw
like a chameleon, blending in with society
Leaving the condition critical.



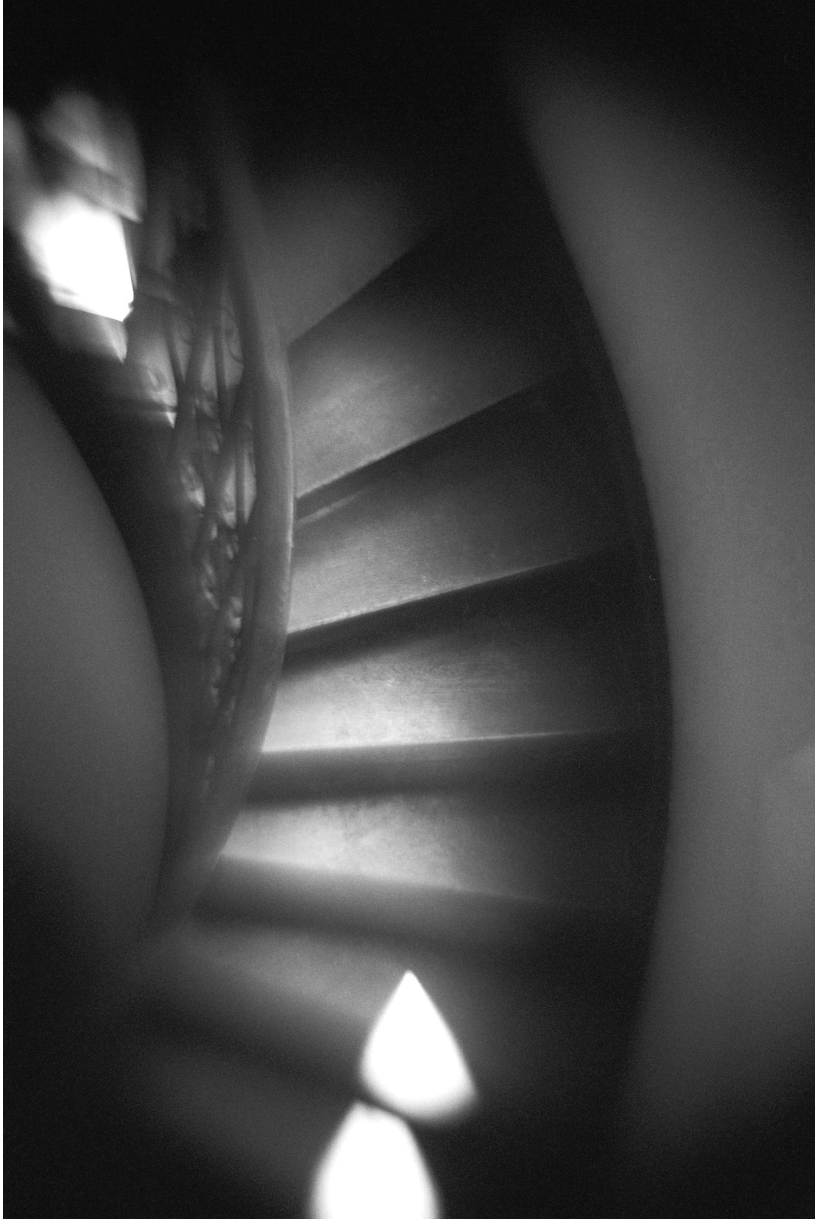
Daniel Dienelt

Marriage of Life and Death

Sarah Jane Gaines

she was twenty
and wore her hair in long curls
down the middle of her back
like the coiled ribbons
on a christmas gift.
skin like an early orange,
like a tamarind, the rind
of a sweet grapefruit
she wore a sunset blue dress
with orange rays shooting
out from underneath each arm.
holding a bouquet of gerber daisies—
dyed with sunlight and ripples
of a smooth blue lake—
she walked lightly down the aisle
toward her groom

who grinned with a raunchy wickedness
like a grinch or a witch's cracked
teeth. he had chosen an all black
tuxedo with a thick cloak
and his two flowers—died red with blood—
were stuck on the top
of black sticks
with a bit of embalming fluid.
his hair—greased like the barrel of a gun—
left black streaks on the back of his neck
as he slicked it
squinting at the parade of color
coming toward him.



Daniel Dienelt

Crumpled Stilts

Michael Sherfield

Quietly we lay, legs intertwined,
not readily apparent which is whose
and where either begins or ends,
except, of course, for the delicate curves
of toes flexed against a much less delicate calf.

And the day floats across our window,
undulating beneath the cloud shadows,
ululating with bird songs.
We sanctify it, silently soaking the ease
of early summer,
far away from the hard faces,
suspicious and defensive in their responses
to simple questions.

We retreat and mesh our lives, our desires,
we fall together without fear,
without regard to the resemblance of a pair of
crumpled stilts.

Open To His Dew

Laurie Marqueling

I'm starting to grow out
of you,
my favorite pair of old jeans
worn so right
holes appear in all the wrong places.

And I could kiss him,
the Rock of Gibraltar,
my eyes moist clamps,
so tight.
My lips open to
his dew.

With all the passion
of so deeply wishing
for something better.
Something not this amazing Canadian
summer, but long winter,
pure white snow.

And I write metaphors
while blaring Led Zeppelin for inspiration,
like you, white trash intellectual.
One minute cussing like a broken toe,
the next picking constellations out of Ontario
night skies a half a pack of cigarettes
north of Toronto.

Poems for X

Nicholas Young

Three for Love

I. One Night

Chalk white moon plays
sunshine through my wall.
I plug the hole in your heart
and drown in tears.
Translucent transmissions of
vapid love lost in smoke.

Ravel then unravel this strand
of time; shared infinity,
random not wrong.

II. Smoke

Black sky, white moon, red
rose;
a falling star lights the
pane of night.
Shared conviction a
shattered image of mind.
Awake – the glass bed
lies in ruin.
Left with delusion of illusion.

III. Memory

Flashlight shadows on
a bedroom wall.

Two for Failure

IV. Argyle Park

My lover lies,
dancing in shades of guilt.
Twinge of breath and
strain to feel the moment
pass.
All apologies for
divine purpose,
unfettered by love.
Meaning breaks;
I walk away.

V. Memory Pt. 2

Scent of memory blinds;
everything changes.
Impression negates time,
creates what was anew.
To feel is to live; longing is
lust.
Space allows two pieces of
self. We fade and mean
nothing.

One for Hope Eternal

VI. True

Somewhere, a reason
for voice.
Speak softly, life waits,
truth within.

Terror in terminology

Anonymous

a broken child lost in the folds of recently acquired apathy--
ivory lakes collected and distributed evenly producing a shallow reservoir
on rusted joints--
agoraphobic tendencies brought on by the continual surge of anti-social
broderick--
eyes enflamed--
flowing golden streams--
lava flows cascading down the arms of a heart-shaped embrace--
broken by luscious lips bleeding out misguidance to peers and loved ones--
razor-sharp spoken terminology creeping through raised hair on stony
flesh--
two eyes a stormy sky--
heat lightning perturbed--
placid water shallow and rock bottomed--
lining below the eyes--
concern for the possibility of sudden death--
car crash--
skulls collide with broken glass--
headfirst into asphalt and tar--
grinding gravel into fear-filled eyes--
obsessive compulsive nature spreading through spidery veins--
taunting twitching fingertips to casually kill all who care--
paranoid megalomaniacal ideas quickly descending into dangerous depths--
seek and find the truth behind closed eyes--
“the truth [is] something less fantastic but equally strange.”



Androgynous Technology Joanna Wittke

matt, august 2003

Sarah Jane Gaines

“Everything the dead predicted has
turned out completely different.”

– Wislawa Szymborska

I.

The first thing you ever said to me
in Fort Wayne was the time.
You saw the empty watchband on my arm
and thought it was odd
to have a place for the 5:53
that wasn't there.
You gave me a yellow watch
with blue hands.

II.

Two weeks later it was Columbus, Ohio
and too loud to talk in the concrete basement.
You penciled on a ripped paper flier:

“We must be friends for life.”

III.

Akron and Bloomington followed in August,
a year before you died.
We drove for two days
and drove amazed that there were two of us
in this crazed nation
who understood each other.

IV.

Chicago was the last kiss.
It was the sleeping on the floor,
touching in anonymous cities.
We ate at the all-night diner
and slept under the tennis table
on a dark hardwood floor.

V.

After that there were no cities.
Those few Midwest months were like ghosts—
were you ever really there and where
did you drift away to?
I knew you would stop calling.
I think I knew
the first time you said
five-thirty

VI.

I heard in Peoria you suffocated in the car
with your sister and Molly there—
watching you choke for air,
watching you struggle for words,
watching your hands turn blue.
Call it collapsed luck.
Call it cardiac arrest.
Call it bad lung.
You left this life almost immediately
like me in a Midwest city.



Silent Film Joanna Wittke

Where Was God

Elaine M Haag

i remember a summer storm and calm
Running on a hot summer day,
the cool grass on my bare feet
The solid branches of an Oak tree, stay
rest in my arms- I love you

Jesus loves me this I know
For the Bible tells me so

i remember i wanted to go away,
pretending a world with puppies and kittens
A land without lions hunting their, prey
for they who Come Unto Thee
i remember His hands, as i began to sway

Little ones to him belong
They are weak but He is strong

i remember the silence of deep woods
smelling the living earth, the dirt, and decay;
all of this my childhood playground
Where was God! - we sometimes say,
"I Am."

Highest Tree

Elaine M Haag

As a child I climbed
the highest tree
allowing him to hold me
with mighty arms
that never penetrated skin

his sweet breath
tousling my hair
sheltering me
amongst his own

I'd sit high above the forest floor
listening to the secrets
of this ancient
and discover the love in me
there upon the highest tree
the one I climbed when I was young

Headlines

Elaine M Haag

19 Kids Died in Families Where State Had Identified Problems

Kids subjected to death camp-like abuse, charges say

Cops: Mom Brutally Beat Young Brothers

Charge ma in hammer slay of girl

Father faces charges of child abuse

A trial date has been set for a former LDS missionary accused of fondling two girls

ex-priest guilty of raping boy in 1980s

For the Record

Trial date set for man accused of fondling girls

Man Charged With Sex Offense

The headline tells
the latest
tragedy
for the day-
those were Our stories
being told
to inform the masses,
shedding light
on their dark secrets

My childhood,
top billing for the day?
Tell the truth,
be brave.
My head turned downward
afraid my lips
will spill
that which they do not want to hear-
Let them do their goodly deeds.
Sit at the plate
of charity
and let them
pat each other on
the back.
Who is holding the Story now?
Their hands
are clean-
Do Not Make Them Feel.

Anne

Hilary Counts

Plundered womb, barren fertile sphere
encompassed in flesh,
raped by Western philosophy
You gave birth to me

Expelled in concrete sequential ideas
unsurgical in nature
Did you find the male child
you coveted, in my crippled uterus
A dream grounded by the chains
holding your feet to
the soil he walks on
Bindings cannot still your thoughts
Expanding toward the stratus formations

Male child, born of my womb
as unready as yours once was

Feet smaller than mine
fill the deep trenches
marked in the crisp January ground
I was not able to tread
You breathed the spring
winds that melted the ice
covered fingers that gripped my frontal lobe

Male child uplifting
womb repairs
he is of two women born

Her Puddles

Ebene Burney

Sweet baby girl...
Big brown eyes,
Sweet baby girl don't cry.
I didn't mean to give up
I tried. Now it's too late
It's too late now

The Cemeterian

Troy Bigelow

I saw last week, driving through the cool air and the cotton candy sky
of a spring sunrise, the clouds wispy, pink and sweet like spun sugar.
I drove past a cemetery. The cold stone markers were still draped
beneath the bruised half of the dawn sky which held fast to the night.

Shadows and deaths waited beneath the trees. Tombstones spoke silently
of past lives and deaths. The sight of the cemetery attacked my eyes
much more magnetically than the sunrise. The cemetery gave me pause.
It gave me an epiphany – and the motivation for experiment.

Today, I try to prove my theory: beauty of the moment versus death's future.
It is dawn, warm and dark, sitting on the grave marker of one Eunice Bock,
beloved mother and wife, 1849-1893. I know I won't disturb her as much as she
disturbs me. She is as peaceful as the breeze passing through the arms of
these shadows

and trees beneath which I sit and search. The sun is rising toward the horizon
but has not yet crested it. The sky in the east is dreaming pink again. I'm
wrapped
in the night half of the earth, watching cars past the cemetery in their
morning commute
with the day and the living. This sunrise is as spectacular as the one last
week, the sunrise

which has inspired my theory. The beauty of the sky beyond the road is
light, alive.

Cars pass north and south; the faces turn away from the lovely sunrise and look
at the cemetery. I'm dressed all in black, sitting motionless in the held breath
of the shadows. Every driver dismisses the beauty of the sunrise to look at
the cemetery.

Every, single driver. Can you believe it?
One drinks his coffee. One yells at her kids to sit down. One just stares,
hypnotized
by the only clairvoyant fact which lies in her future in my future
in yours.

Every driver: woman, man, father, mother, grandmother or brother looks
in my direction,

away from the light and into the darkness. My experiment is a success.
The facts: we turn away from the rose of a new spring dawn, turn away
from the pink lip of a new day, to look at the one, true future for us all.
We look at the markers, the marble with names. We remind ourselves

that we will be lying beneath this cemetery, or beneath one like it.
We won't see these fantastic sunrises any more.
I see our lives in the faces that look toward death. When the beauty
of today is just on the other side of the road, I see faces half-dead.

Self-reflection mirror

Anonymous

Self-reflection mirror sees blurry eyes
Red wine stained lips and skin too white
She's a fighter they said
I'm too weak, I'd think instead

Fist to self-reflection mirror

Broken glass sees bleeding knuckles
Trembling lips and skin too white
She's dying they said
I'm trying, I'd think instead

Hands outstretched to broken glass

Broken glass sees a thousand tiny reflections
Lips set in a frown and a blood stained dress
She's losing the fight they said
I'm not giving up, I'd think instead

Hands pick up broken glass, piece by piece

Self-reflection mirror sees a dark void
Nothingness, a blackout midnight nightmare
She went driving they said
I'm picking up the pieces, I'd think instead

Hands on steering wheel, feet to gas

Self-reflection mirror sees sunlight and a girl
Lips curved into a smile and a new white dress
She isn't back yet they said
I'm almost done here, I'd think instead

Hands toss broken glass into water

Self-reflection mirror sees watery distortion of a girl
Silent laughing lips revealing sparkling white teeth
She won't return now they said
Things are just getting better, I'd think instead

Hands back onto steering wheel

Rearview mirror sees a satisfied smile
Lips in chagrin of the happiness within
She's back again they said
Not for long, I'd think instead.



Roboticatastrophe
Joanna Wittke

The One Note Blues

Adie Baach

City kids grow up and only look down.
And they end up singin' the one note blues
Cuz it's the only color they ever knew
The power of steel cold and blue
Clenched in their hands, it triggers their hearts
It's the only power they think is true.
They are their own universe. It has shrunk to their size.
Forget the heavens, they never saw them
For the skyscrapers and streetlights.
No sky, no stars, no planets wheeling.
They sing a small song, never having heard surf or spring.
They have no sense of space, or the vastness of time.
No sense of the calendar of birds, the resurrection of bulbs,
They only know dirt, not loam
Alive and busy, warm and fragrant,
Home to tiny lives with greater rhythms.
Inwit, to use Hopkins' word, has become claustrophobic,
A law unto itself, myopic and supreme.
All matter and energy reside in them alone.
Illusion, manipulated reality is all they see.
Anything bigger than they are exists only in show rooms, or on the screen.
Concrete and metal are permanent and solid as things can get.
But they do not bloom, they only rust and crack.
Such a sorry view of life, diminished to death.
Supermarket aisles are full of miracles they do not discover. Lettuces were
never sprouts.
The oranges have seeds that summon no remembrance of blossoms.
Little wonder they spit them out! wherever! no matter! as carelessly as they
spill their own seeds.
The connection between impulse and consequence, between the seed and
the sprout,
And the force that spins the spheres and the seasons – Lost!
And with it meaning and reverence – Lost!
And with it responsibility and relationship – Gone!
So things are triggered not evoked, and there is murder not marvel.
And they end up singin' the one note blues.
Cuz the biggest blue they ever knew
Is the empty song inside them.

The True Idol

Joseph M. Dyer

I can't help but think
what Kurt would do
when he turned on
American Idol.

It would make him sad
and want to kill himself.

Because the world was
oh so fake.

When the music lights,
the star is shone;
and he has been inside
for six days
not moving or caring
wanting them to get out.

Not be tempted by the sound
of the crowd.
The money zapped on wires
to the your main line.

It is the direct deposit
of your dreams; the money is lifeless.

The wine, cigarettes; takes from you.
A bumpy couch of smashed
VCR boxes
and fidgety nerves that can't sit.

Don't want to do anything,
just draw in a notebook, wonder;
dream of sleep.

Like April in the spring
curled on a basement floor.

Peaceful in the end,
the true idol.

The City of...

Anita Glenn

I'm not fat or dumb or laced with cadmium.
I don't go to church or eat out much.
I don't work in a factory.

I don't eat the fish from the rivers or lakes.
I don't drink the water from my tap.
I don't unwind daily at my local bar.

I'm not raising kids any more.
I never learned to just pass the tests.
I never looked forward to fitting in
while dying in the city spewing three rivers
of hypocritical, apathetic, and self-righteous sins.



Misfit Gaze Kelly Lynch

I never really knew you

Sarah Jane Gaines

for Johnny Cash

There is, all around us,
this country
of original fire.

This ring of fire—

a burning circle
of pills and needles
that you stepped into,
letting it burn your feet—
the skin bubbling up like pan grease,
curling over your toe bones like potato skins—

until your wife pulled you out,
until your doctor pumped it out,
until your Savior scooped you out.

But for a while you always put your feet back in.

There is music all around us,
but it was your smoke-voice
that saved our grandparents
and our parents,
even us,
from the cities of the Midwest.
It was you who pulled us into the south—
with one turn of a slotted circle,
with one needle picking out
the sound of your callous-handed strum.

There are idols all around us
but your honesty—
of small round obsessions,
of your faith in God,
of His great saving power—
drew us
more than any other movie star
or musician.

Your name was the first on our list
of anticipated concerts
(below you: Townes Van Zandt,
U2, and your wife—June Carter Cash).

But when you died
(four months after your wife)
our lists and hopes were gone
along with your widower-misery,
and I sat in bed
weeping
while the radio
said your now grave name.

*First three lines borrowed from Mary Oliver.

fiction



Daniel Dienelt

Limited Wish

by Thom Dawson

What a god awful, sticky mess. Harlan liked to call it a fumble-fizzer or “F.F.,” an abbreviation the other guys at the distribution center liked to twist around into something more obscene. The soda can had slipped right out of his grasp, flew in a lofty arc, and hit the floor with a dull ker-chunk sound. He threw his hands in the air, and a curse was on his lips as the can danced around on the waxed floor like a drunken ice skater. He bit his tongue and looked shamefully both ways down the middle school hallway to see if there were any of the little squirts running around. He muttered a few indiscretions under his breath anyway. The can of Honeymist soda rocked forward and back until it came to a rest by his foot and a thin ribbon of the syrupy liquid sprayed out all over his pants legs and the inside of the vending machine. He stopped a moment, mesmerized by the anti-freeze colored geyser, and remembered the day his son Tommy, just a toddler, had narrowly escaped a diaper change and ran through the house naked, peeing all the way. Tommy... Harlan had to push back a swell of emotion. It was almost like he was right there, but then no, perhaps not.

The irony of the gushing can was not lost on him. His wife would often chide him about spending so much time at work, telling him as he walked in the door, “Honey missed tryouts,” or “Honey missed the fifth grade play.” Carole was never careful about when she said it, and one time Tommy heard her and chimed in, “Honeymist, Honeymist, a limited wish in every can!” just like the commercial jingle. Harlan was thankful that Tommy had been too young to recognize the venom in his mother’s retorts. The memory stung that much more because it had been a little over a year since Tommy had died from a rapidly progressing brain tumor, and now Harlan found his work days growing even longer and more drawn out since his son’s death. These days, however, Carole never seemed to mind his work schedule, and when the two spoke to each other it was in non-committal factoids and soundbites, no longer any hidden agendas behind “How was your day?” Now their conversation was just noise to fill the dead air. In a melancholy huff, Harlan wrapped the can in a layer of protective plastic – the outer wrapping from the cases of soda – and placed it out of the way on his hand truck.

He reached into his pants pocket – this time out of habit, but usually to grab the vending keys – and felt the smooth sculpted edges of the pocket watch that was forever with him. The timepiece was silver coated, and already a bit worn in the high spots where the deeper and duller coppery color shone through. It had a picture of a train on it, one of the old civil war era models.

Tommy had given it to him for Father's Day a couple years back. "This train can take us wherever we want," Tommy had said, "no matter how late you happen to be." Carole had made a sarcastic remark about that too, when the two were alone.

"Don't you worry son, we'll take that trip next..." but Harlan never finished the sentence as he turned around and saw no sign of the ghost that haunted him.

A limited wish in every can. The words hung in his mind as he put the watch back in his pocket. He grabbed a can of the Honeymist, held it out before him soft and sure like an infant, and closed his eyes. It was okay, he told himself, no one was watching. "I wish ... I wish..." He could not get the words to vocalize, even though he felt them inside. I wish to God you were here. Then he slid the can into the vertical hopper in the machine. It was a silly commercial anyway.

There was a quick tug at his pants leg, twice. "Mister, hey mister!" and the tugging continued in synchronicity with the high-pitched beckoning.

"What?" Harlan was pulled away from his introspection and noticed one of the middle schoolers trying to get his attention. "What can I do for ya?" The boy was still tugging on his pants, and Harlan gently tried to shoo the kid out of his personal space.

"Something's wrong. I made a wish and opened this can I bought, but," he stood there in pretend defiance, holding the can aloft like a trophy, "there's nothing inside. Mommy said I need to ask for my money back."

"I'm ... sorry," Harlan's first words stuck in his throat like a barb and came out in a faltering, incredulous tone, "but you know that's all just a commercial, don't you? You don't actually get a wish. That's why they call it 'limited.' It absolves the company of any legal responsibilities..."

The boy continued to be rooted to his spot, but his eyes began to glaze over. It was Harlan's utterance of the word 'absolve' that pushed the boy over the edge into only-adults-talking-now land. "Look kid, you can wish to your heart's content, but I can tell you, there ain't no wish in that can coming true."

The boy's eyes began to swell, and Harlan knew he was on the verge of a major water works problem. "Wait, wait..." he said shaking his finger at the boy encouragingly, "so, what you wish for, anyway?"

"For the kids to stop calling me 'Germy'."

Harlan had to think about that for a moment. The boy didn't appear to be

dirty, and he wore what he considered to be fashionable clothes, at least, as fashionable as a middle schooler's wardrobe could be, anyway. Jeremy was the incarnation of "spiffiness" in his brown corduroys, white BDC and plaid sweater vest. "Okay, so tell me, why they call you that?"

"Nobody likes me. They mess up my name, Jeremy."

Tommy had always been such a cheerful and friendly boy, never short of friends, so Harlan was unaccustomed to hearing stories about harassment from other students at school. He tried his hardest to muster that fatherly image that had lain dormant for the past year. "Oh come now, I find it hard to believe that no one would like you." For a moment he considered giving Jeremy an atta-boy nudge on his arm, and then thought better of it.

Jeremy wrinkled up his face and said, "They say mommy dresses me sissified."

And for a brief instant, Harlan could see their point, in a way. He had always hated the vroopah sound corduroys made when he walked in them. It was one of those things he would have teased someone about if he was in school. Then a thought occurred to him. "What's your daddy say about that?"

"Don't know who he is. It's only mommy and me."

The odd symmetry of the moment struck Harlan dumb and he felt a kindred connection suddenly with Jeremy. "Well, here." He smiled broadly, as if the edges of his cheeks needed to be tied together, and he handed Jeremy another can of soda. "Try this one, but tell you what? This time you try to wish a different wish, hokay?"

It can take us wherever we want, Tommy's voice rattled around in Harlan's mind, but he shook it off.

"How do I know this one will work?" Jeremy perked up briefly, but then the energy subsided. "I thought you said it didn't matter how hard I ..."

"Never you mind what I said. Us old folks don't always say the right thing. I'm telling you now, if your wish doesn't happen, bring it back to me, and we'll try something else."

That seemed to do the trick as Jeremy rushed back down the hallway where the kids were starting to gather, a new can of Honeymist securely in hand.

Harlan cheered up a bit, but shrugged his shoulders. It was a silly commercial anyway.

In the Snows of Conception

Troy Bigelow

Excited and aroused, you watched the dance of the thick flakes all day from your office window and, as the snow dived and gusted, kissed and orbited your window you thought of Carrie, or course. Always thinking about your wife. Knowing that she was watching the snowstorm, too, waiting for you. You realize that snow just might be the key to life.

You have tried everything from fertility pills to extreme and cramping tantric positions. But Carrie is still not pregnant. She is slowly losing hope in her life-giving feminine gift. You can give her everything but that which she most wants in the world.

The snow is slowing, stopping. You tell your boss you have to go home early because of the weather – because your wife is at home, alone and it is critical that you be there with her, now. He knows your strategy; he smiles and says, Good luck.

All of the snow is on the ground and you drive through an empty sky. The last overcast of the passing storm is giving birth to a brilliant blue. The sun is ready to be born but Carrie's womb remains as bare as the trees standing leafless and cold in the sudden February sun.

You open the front door of your country home, a warm and secluded square of wood which sits shin-bone deep in the fresh snowfall. Carrie is watching the diamond-like glitter and glint of the strong sun on the deep snow through the large picture window. She is wearing your Valentine's Day gift, a strikingly red and wispy teddy made all the more striking in front of that large window of whiteness.

Red. Gorgeous.

Last month Carrie took you to a new-age faith and fertility guru. Hey, you told her you would try everything, right? The guru claims that there is a proportional correlation between ovulation and accumulation.

It has snowed six inches.

Your wife turns to you from the window as you approach. She is smiling as she begins to undress you. This will be an adventure of sensations.

Your fingers fly and she is soon as naked as you are. Her eyes are the most

precious gray of winter storm clouds bathed in sunlight. She smiles and squeezes you gently down there.

But you were ready the moment you saw the first flake fall.

You lift her in your arms and cradle Carrie out the back door into the crisp winter daylight. The snow bites your bare toes and ankles. You both shiver in the wind.

“Now,” she says.

You lay her down in the snow. She screeches and wriggles, laughingly making inadvertent snow angels. She is so pale, almost as white as your bright new lovers’ bed – and unarguably as pure.

Your heart could beat winter into spring.

You could cry because of failure and hope.

As you lay down with her – on her, and in her – you feel the shocking contrast of the cold around you and the heat between you.

As you rock and love and melt through the white to the green, you think of the birth of spring, the hope of spring, the life of spring.

Christmas Spirits

Benjamin Smith

I wipe my sweat covered palms across my cold, khaki pants, which are now covered half way up the leg with fresh fluffy snow. I breathe deep and ring the doorbell. I can’t remember the last time it snowed on Christmas Eve. The world seems serene as I patiently wait. Multicolored lights that adorn the neighborhood homes glow softly through the heavily falling snow. The sounds of holiday music are faintly audible as I anxiously wait on the front porch. I have no idea what to expect from these people. I don’t do the best in social situations. On top of that, there is always added pressure when you’re meeting your girlfriend’s family for the first time.

Kate and I have been dating for a few months now. I’m really starting to like her. I love all of her little quirks. I love the fact that she never steps on

a sewer grate for fear of falling in. Or the way she scratches the back of her throat by puckering her lips, sticking her finger in her ear, sucking in as hard as she can until it seems as though she's going to swallow her face. I love the fact that she can go out with my friends and me and knock back a couple of beers. She's so beautiful and smart. If her family is anything like her, I have nothing to worry about. But for some reason I'm still nervous. Hopefully there will be alcohol inside... and lots of it.

I ring the bell again and pace across the front porch. The crisp air is beginning to numb my fingers and toes. I carefully peek in the window hoping to go undetected. The house seems empty. That can't be right. I just talked to Kate thirty minutes ago. She said everyone had finished dinner and was still sitting around the table. Maybe I should just go inside.

I enter the house as if it were a covert operation. It feels a little strange to just walk into the home of someone you don't really know. "Hello?" I nervously utter. Still, there is no response. The vacant dinner table is straight ahead. It is covered by the remnants of Christmas dinner past. Empty bottles of wine and beer cans are strewn across the white linen tablecloth. Dirty plates, silverware, and half eaten Chicken Kiev adorn the table along with an advent wreath and candles, still burning. I continue my investigation and venture toward the living room. A small, pale figure lies motionless on the sofa. It must be Timmy, Kate's youngest brother. He is covered in cold sweat and looks completely miserable. His eyes are closed, head is tilted back, and mouth is slightly ajar to allow air to bypass his clogged nasal passage and reach his phlegm-filled lungs. I poke him with an extended finger to see if he is still alive. No response. Again, I poke. Still there is no response. I give one final prod. This one is a little deeper and a little more brazen. His small eyes slowly open.

"Hey what's up?" the little guy utters, as if it were his final gasping breathe. "I'm sick as hell and nobody's home. They all went next door."

"Are you alright?" I asked feeling puzzled, curious, and sympathetic all at once.

"Yup. I'm good," he whispers back and slowly drifts back into his feverish slumber.

At this point I don't know what to do. This sick child probably should not be left alone, but, at the same time, I need to find Kate. I guess there's nothing I can do for him. Might as well abandon him like the rest of his family try to find everyone else.

I walk up to the door of yet another unfamiliar home. I can't help but

wonder if I should have just stayed at home with my own family. At least there it's safe and comfortable. I could just get in my truck and leave. No one would even know I was here in the first place. Well, Timmy would, but the kid is so delirious right now he probably won't remember anyway. This thought leads to the expected pang of conscience. I couldn't stand up Kate, not on Christmas, not ever.

The loud music and drunken conversations can be heard from the front stoop as I knock on the door. I know that no one will hear me. Suddenly the door opens. A tall, lanky character with curly brown hair stands peering in the doorway. His nostrils flare as he sniffs the winter air and looks around. "God! It smells like up dog!" the curly haired man exclaims and then glares at me, waiting for some sort of reaction.

I nod my head and sarcastically reply, "What's up, Dawg?" All I could smell was stale Miller High Life permeating from his being.

"Hey Joey! He's the only one who caught on all night," he slurred, then turned and stumbled away.

I step inside and scan the room. The room is lively and everyone within is filled with the Christmas spirit, well, just spirits in general. My eyes meet with Kate's and her face lights up. She runs over, wraps her arms around me, and gives me a quick kiss.

"Oh good, you found us," she says and smiles.

I feel her long brown hair gently tickle my cheek as I deeply breathe in its scent. At that moment, I remember why I am here in the first place. Kate is the sweetest and most fun girl I've ever been with. I hate all of this commotion and uncertainty, but I guess that's why I'm with her in the first place. She makes everything fun and exciting.

"I'm so glad you're here. I can't wait for everyone to meet you," Kate says. She's beaming. I smile back and clench tightly to her free hand.

Just then, her mother swaggers into the room. It's very apparent that she is three sheets to the winds. Her oversized goblet is filled to the brim as she sloshes it back and forth. Copious amounts of red wine a splash down upon the white shag carpet as she exclaims, "Hey everybody, Josh is here!" Then, as quickly as she entered, she loses interest and moseys away.

"Sorry, my mother is a little drunk," Kate giggles. Obviously she's indulged in a little frothy beverage herself. "I have to go check on Timmy. Here you go. Take my beer. I'll be right back."

Kate leaves and here I am stuck to introduce myself her nine drunken brothers and sisters. I take chug of the warm Stroh's Kate has so graciously handed me and make my way over to the couch. Everyone is so engaged in conversation that they do not even notice me weaving my way through the bustling room. I sit alone in the corner, taking in all the laughs and casual swears lingering throughout the room. I finish my warm ale and decide I need another. But before I get the chance, Kate's oldest sister, Jennifer, storms in the room. She's in a panic and a little on the hysterical side.

"Where's mom? Her shoes are here but she is gone." Everyone acts as though she is invisible. She screams again and still no one looks. I know just how she feels. I've gone this whole time completely unnoticed.

Looking for my out, I jump up, "I'll go see if she went back to your house." I make a dash straight for the door. Here I am back on the porch again. My mind is trying to process what is going on. As I'm laughing to myself I notice footprints in the snow. They are bare footprints. I have a sneaking suspicion that they were made by Kate's mother.

I make my way back to the house. A trail of melting snow spreads across the hardwood floor that leads to the bathroom. The door is open and there's Kate's mother, hunched over in a gridlock with the porcelain God. She's somehow trying to dry heave out whatever is left of the two bottles of merlot she drank. Kate, having taken her sick brother to his bed, heard the commotion and came downstairs to check things out. She pulls me close to her and sighs. Her mother's head was now resting inside the bowl of the toilet. Our heads turn toward each other and we erupt with laughter.

Kate looks up at me and lovingly says, "Thanks so much for coming tonight. It means a lot to me. I'm sorry about everything. You're probably ready to head for the door."

"Well the thought did cross my mind," I chuckled back. "I'm glad I'm here with you. Craziness and all." Deep down we both know that this is the first of many interesting Christmases to come.

"Merry F-ing Christmas," her mother exclaimed, vomit still glistening on her chin.

Merry F-ing Christmas.

Ashes to Ashes

Kelly Lynch

I am no better than the nightly news reports.

Instead of telling you about fluffy puppies saving little babies, or roses blooming miraculously in a desert, or how the world really isn't going to end, I am simply going to tell you that some people have died. You won't be up in arms about it.

In fact, if this were a story in a newspaper, you'd probably glance to see if you could gather a few cursory details, seeking out buzz words like "beheaded" or "fiery death" that strike your fancy, not because you're someone who cares about the victims in question, but only how they were dispatched. I'm one of those people, but I like to inform myself about the former lives of the deceased and formulate some sort of picture in my mind of what they meant to the world. Hopefully these people meant something to someone else; someone other than a nosey, indifferent reader of the newspaper who only wishes to drudge up gory details from the newsprint.

The people I want to tell you about are dead. And they meant something to the world, they really did. Granted, it was a very small world to begin with, especially since the part of the world they inhabited was much smaller than any one of you should be use to. Now they no longer inhabit their small spaces, and I wonder if such corners of the tiny earth are smaller or bigger for their loss. It's smaller because the population is lessened, but bigger, because the current population has more space, overall. I guess I didn't need to spell that out for you. You got it, already, didn't you? I'm sorry. I hope in your effort to be intrigued, you aren't scanning for those buzzwords. Well, wait, if you are, you'll find one. It's a whole phrase actually: Fiery death.

Yes, these human beings, these lives were, pardon the pun, extinguished by the flame. And no, it was no incident involving a towering inferno where all these people died together.

You know, “towering inferno” isn’t exactly the big cult movie reference I wanted it to be. Now, the reference conjures up images of two towers and fire and glass and paper and people who aren’t here anymore. They died, more or less, together. A luxury if you had somehow known more than several of them.

Nevertheless, the people I know died all at once, under vastly different and horrifying circumstances that all involved sparks and fire and burning and, for the sake of their last moments, I hope it was the smoke that choked the life from their lungs before the fire cooked their skin to the point where a whispered breath could have peeled away their flesh with ease.

Nathan died quick, or so it seems you would if the shock of having oxygen ripped from your chest by a hungry flame was strong enough. Hopefully, the explosion rattled his body hard enough so that it absorbed the shock only long enough to be shattered and die.

Jack and Kayden were on their way back from a particularly wonderful date. They were probably getting hot and bothered thinking of making mad, violent, and of course, compassionate love to one another. What a buzz kill, getting run off the road by a truck. It’s a shame, because there were big plans for them.

Actually, James died in the accident too. He was the pickup truck driver who smashed into the semi truck, which hit Jack and Kayden. James was going to die no matter what. Stupid fucker didn’t stop to think how easy it was to turn a suicide into a triple homicide. The semi driver died, too, but I didn’t know him. Look up his name for me. It’s in the paper. You already know he died a fiery death, so just glance around for his name.

Robert was about to be shot dead, but it was fire that claimed his life. I guess a bullet carries with it a fair amount of flame and spark, but it was nothing like the slow simmering barbecue that ate him.

Henry was scalded to death by steam, which was actually caused by fire. We’ll let this one slide, since Henry’s life was almost over anyway.

A few other people died, too. Poets, dreamers, songwriters, angels, artists, cops. They never really got around to getting names, except for one detective, Aaron Parker, a police detective. He was going to save a woman's life. I'll never know if the woman was suppose to be saved, though. I do know that he never caught the guy who planned to kill her.

You see, these people burned up in my house. It was a mass murder, a big, stinky fiery death. I watched them, floating up to heaven in ashes and smoke. They burned alive, some right in the middle of a sentence. I can't remember a lot about them, except that they are gone.

I should have seen fit to remove them from their tiny spaces. . .I could have given them oxygen, maybe even enough to help evade the flames and retain themselves in existence, let alone my memory. I'd say I was responsible for their death, but I was just as responsible for their being alive at all. I was their caretaker.

I should have taken them out of the notebooks they resided in. I should have put them on a computer, saved them to a disc, locked it away and put everything in a big, dumb safe. Alas, they are gone. My closest friends are gone. The lives I lead with them are gone. Suffice to say, much of my life burned up in my house, taking my dreams, and these characters with them. Then again, these characters leading these lives that were never, ever real. And now they'll never have a shot at anything more than a dusty notebook in a dusty box because I never found the time to bring them out. This is their obituary, really. So much potential, left to rot and rust and burn. And I believe I am at fault. I have lost them and therefore lost much of everything. The futures I had in mind for them I can no longer recall. I guess it is all for the better, as I cannot raise the dead.

The Last Ten Minutes

Gaither Stephens

Walter Schmidt eyed the carrot stick in his hand suspiciously. Sure, it would be fun to crunch it between his teeth but only for the first minute or two. After that it would become a chore, crunching and chewing for what seemed like an eternity with no hope of ever swallowing all the little pieces. Why does it take so long to chew a damn carrot stick? The phone rang.

Hello?

Walter Schmidt?

Yes.

You have ten minutes to live.

The line went dead. Walter Schmidt sat dumbly holding the receiver up to his ear. Unrelated concurrent thoughts began racing through his mind. Is this some kind of a joke? Who would play a joke on me? What if it isn't a joke? I should spit the rest of this carrot out if I'm going to die. I don't even like carrots. I have ten minutes to live?!? Who would want to kill me? Even if someone did want to kill me, have I done anything worth being killed for? All the channels of his mind shifted and focused on one question, have I done anything worth living for?

For the first time in his existence Walter Schmidt elevated his mind above the mundane and thought with more awareness and clarity than ever before and asked himself a new question, if I only have ten, no nine, minutes left to live, what would I do with that precious little time? His mind came crashing back to the mundane. I could kiss that cute bank clerk that I stare at every week yet never have the nerve to ask out. I could go eat one of those jelly donuts that I've been eyeing all day, but won't eat because of my diet. I could go fire my lazy intern or even kick my boss in the ass and quit just for spite. He thought about all these things that he had wanted to do but hadn't and realized that even now, facing either a poor sick joke or his last few minutes of life, he would still do none of them.

It was then that Walter realized how much of his life was spent dwelling on the trivial, why he was overweight, why he had a job he hated, why his tension headaches woke him at night. For a moment he tried to convince himself that if he were to live things would be different, but this was nonsense. He knew he wouldn't change a goddamned thing. One lesson Walter had learned with great alacrity was to thine own self be true...even

if it was a sad and extremely disappointing truth.

So Walter stood up, walked over to the stack of CDs next to his desk and pulled one out. He pressed it into the CD tray and hit play. Walter Schmidt shut his door, threw the rest of his carrot stick into the trash, sat down and closed his eyes. A few minutes later, Walter Schmidt of 315 Wildwood Lane was dead. He died with the soft resonance of a piano filling his ears. He gave up the foolish dreams and false hopes that had accumulated through his 32 years, and instead chose to spend his last few minutes listening to Moonlight Sonata by Beethoven...and they were the most meaningful minutes of his life.

The Good Life

Nicholas Young

“You ready?

Yeah, I’m cool.

“That’s my boy. Let’s go.”

The fuck did I get here?. Black Navigator, black tint on the windows, so dark I can see my reflection. Me starin’ back at me, saying there’s still time to get out.

Fuck it. Let’s ride

Shit was never like this, I swear to god. Usually we handle our business right then and there. We took care of it, got it out our system, then we was cool. The vibe settled down and took back control of the spot. Everybody calmed down, no big deal - dude ran his mouth and got beat, just that simple. Bouncers relax, the girls stop actin’ like they really care what’s goin’ on. They could give a fuck, ya know? They in it for the green, pure and simple, and any bitch that try to tell ya different’s just runnin’ her mouth. Lyin’ to a woman is like breathin’ to a man.

Where we at?

“Almost there. You ready to do this?”

Yeah, ‘bout.

It takes twelve minutes to roll from the crib to the corner of MLK and Vine. I've gone over it so many times, the route in my head, I know it by heart. I could probably drive it blindfolded, I ain't gonna lie.

They don't tell you when you join that the shit's gonna be like this. They don't tell you every time the shit goes down you gotta roll out and handle it. They don't let you know that you can't ignore a motherfucker when he runs his mouth. Even if you ain't in the mood, you still gotta handle your business. Whose business? Everybody's business. Fools rattle off at the lip when they get drunk; who the fuck wanna hold everything a dude say against him when he been drinkin'?

"Five blocks, nigga, you ready?"

Yeah, I'm ready. I'm ready to kill a motherfucker so dead he ain't never gonna come back and bother me anymore. Fuck this motherfucker, fuck him.

You wanna fuck with my shit? Hmmm? You wanna fuck with my click?

No fuckin' way, I ain't about to live with that shit.

Only I could. I could let it slide off my back. I don't fuckin' care...

That's the problem. I don't care enough to go through with this. I didn't care enough to set it off in the first place. The others, yeah, they had a problem with it. And since they was twisted about it, I had too as well.

I remember when I was ten or eleven, seein' these cats for the first time. I thought they were the coolest motherfuckers I'd ever seen. Kickin' it on the corner, shootin' the shit all the damn day. Not doin' much of anything, really, but always had cash to spend on whatever they wanted. New kicks? Got 'em. Latest album drop? Damn straight they bought it the day it came out. It didn't matter they dropped out of school to do what it was that they did. Who needs an education to make it in the world? Leroy was making a G, G and a half of easy money, every week. Take a shipment upstairs, cut it into hundred dollar baggies, throw 'em in the back of the Cherokee, and run 'em out to the suburbs. Drop the package off to some white dude in a station wagon, come home with an easy twenty-five large. Nothin' to it.

That was the shit. It didn't get no better than that. Why work at Burger King for five twenty-five an hour when you can do minimum labor for maximum paper? Ain't nobody I knew wanted to wind up smelling like grease in five years.

That was the in. I remember it like I'm always there, over and over.

It was cool, man, sportin' the red and black. Rep ya set, ya know? Claim it like you proud of it; and if you ain't proud of it, get your goddamn mind right. This where you from, this where you born, this where you gon' die. Unless you get enough together to get out of the projects.

Because that was the ultimate goal, man, to get the fuck out. The hood was fine for right now, but nobody wanted to be an old-timer on the corner talkin' 'bout the good ol' days, sippin' on a paper bag of Colt .45. Everybody wanted the American dream – a porch swing, a sunset, a woman next to you, maybe a couple a kids gettin' under your feet. A scene where you didn't have to close your eyes to picture happiness cuz it was all around you.

In the meantime, shit, you damn well better rep to the fullest. Nigga give you beef, ride on a motherfucka.

But that shit didn't concern me. I never had to go toe to toe, never in five years. That's probably a record 'round here. But, then again, I never went lookin' for a reputation. I never started static. If some dude tried to get hard I just gave him the look. The look that says you don't wanna fuck with me. It was always enough.

"Here we go, here we go, here we go..."

Now we got the windows down and mommas is gettin' they kids off the street. We comin' and not a goddamn thing they can do about it.

He sees us screamin' up the block. Black hat cocked to the left, Chuck Woodson jersey claiming the home team.

Jesus.

He's got a little girl in his arms. Even from here I can see the pink barrette in her hair, holdin' her pigtail off the side of her head. Big eyes, round, maybe a little Asian in her. Wonder what her momma looks like, if the guy loves her momma. Wonder if they're happy together.

I wonder if she'll even remember him in ten years.

"Get some now muthafucker!"

And the shotgun's buckin' in my hand. I'm leanin' out the window, feeling the vibrations race up my arms, jerkin' my elbow every time I pull the trigger. Ked's dumpin' with the bootleg Uzi we bought last night, sprayin' it fuckin' everywhere. I don't even know where the bullets are going.

The guy's turned around, scrambling for the house, shielding the girl from the gunfire. Runnin' back up the walk, trying to get to the porch. I feel

my hands rock, see his ankles disintegrate in blood. I can hear her cryin', screamin', as he collapses in front of the steps. He's got her in his right arm, draggin' himself up by his left elbow, diggin' it into the concrete, drivin' himself forward just a little bit further.

Tank's got the Navigator stopped and Kedric's out running, three, four, five steps and he's up over the dead guy. "Talk shit now, bitch."

Pop Pop - Ked's jumpin' back into the ride. "Move nigga, haul yo' ass." Tank guns the engine and we leap away from the curb. I look back and see them motionless, the world passing them by.

"Ain't it cool?"

Yeah.

People say that when you save a life you responsible for him for the rest of his days. The fuck's the opposite? Nobody knows. Nobody can tell me. You take a life, what happens? What happens to him? His soul? It hover around you, haunt you, make you come awake in the middle of night, sweatin' so goddamn much you can't see straight? I don't know. Nobody fuckin' knows.

Kedric's ecstatic. And I'm so happy I could cry.

