

The Rapids Review

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CONNECTING WITH ART: FIRING THE IMAGINATION
WRITING CONTEST
FIRST PLACE WINNER

On the City Corner with Bus and Stoplights

James Autio

The street
shimmers and teems
with vibrancies: the color,
the noise of voice and traffic, the smell
of sweaty commuter and sewer emission.

Meanwhile,
the city corner with bus and stoplights
stands between me and my
moo goo gai pan.

I'm just another stroke
in the Impressionist's dream, flowing
in a coterie of primary colors;
a part of the parade.

But opposing the flow
of foot traffic, I bristle, knowing
that pleasantries are merely an act.

I'm hustling my ass
on a thirty minute lunch,
and the China Buffet is probably packed.



City Corner with Bus and Stoplights

Mark Horton



Stagione di Vita – Stages of Life

Laura Migliorino



Detail of "Stagione di Vita"

CONNECTING WITH ART: FIRING THE IMAGINATION
WRITING CONTEST

SECOND PLACE WINNER

Wild Life

Britt Aamodt

Out of the trees come the teeming undead
The sap kindlers, the leaf huggers, the line,
The kin, the folk whose bones run like vines bled
Winter dry and summer warm where they twine.

Out of the crusted river laughing bodies
Burble. Out of icy turf to be tossed
And superimposed on nature's plan, teased
Into human form—limbs as white as frost,

The heart a thumping beat of wings—the form
Of man and woman converge in wildness.
A week of falling leaves, autumn is torn
From the flesh and whisked round in barrenness,

And though it sounds a sad decline, the dearth
Again sprouts human and sapling from earth.

CONNECTING WITH ART: FIRING THE IMAGINATION
WRITING CONTEST
THIRD PLACE WINNER

The non-Driver

Vickie Nicole

The driver did not stop at a green light
To let a conformist in
Then the driver let an honest conman off
And kept a dishonest business man in

The driver offered a ride to a welfare mom
But that would take an act from congress
So the driver offered a ride to the congressman
On the condition he would share his seat

The driver asked a lawyer
“Do you want a ride or not?”
Before the lawyer could answer
The driver added, “A simple yes or no will do”

The driver took in a theist, an atheist
A leftist, and a rightist
And dropped them all off
In the middle - of merging traffic

Someone got on touting a Starbucks latté
Someone got on toting a brown paper bag
One trying desperately to stay awake
Another trying desperately to fall asleep

Then the driver yielded at a yellow light
To let a nonconformist pass
Who held up a sign that read
“Sometimes a simple red or green, just won’t do”

CONNECTING WITH ART: FIRING THE IMAGINATION
WRITING CONTEST
HONORABLE MENTION

The Stages of Life

Victoria Eze

I stand in awe and watch the beauty of nature.
I see in the eye of my being everything in life,
Has a pattern to follow.
This pattern I call the stages of life.
Be it man, tree, mountain, or valley
They are affected by the reason for their existence
Under the planet we call the earth.

When a man is born, he comes in as a baby
He cries first time and looks for what to suck.
He learns how to feel and how to be felt.
He crawls, steps, one by one, and learns to walk
He turns to his first step, being led by those he loves.
In old age, he returns to his baby stage once again.

Life itself is full of stages; we learn to live as we move in stage.
With the stage, we learn to appreciate,
Our tomorrow may not be the same as our yesterday.
Let’s take advantage of today and make the best of it.
For tomorrow may bring in a new day, we aren’t sure of what it holds.

The trees, the mountains, the valleys alike,
None of them remain the same.
They are affected by the change they see.
I watch the trees, grasses, and shrubs as covered by snow today.
It’s a different look on a face of spring or summer day.

Life on its own is full of stages, time to be born, and time to flourish,
Time to wither, and time to die,
Then time to pass, to the great beyond,
A stage that leaves many in doubt or appreciation,
Of a stage of an inevitable end.

CONNECTING WITH ART: FIRING THE IMAGINATION
WRITING CONTEST
HONORABLE MENTION

Threads

Adam Obremski

Threads of string forge these leaves, the weaver unknown.
They intertwine nature to give them nourishment.
They knit origins of dependence to extend their role.
They stitch time to constrict flow, allowing them more time to grow.
They tie fates and destinies, to master their control.
Threads of string forge these leaves, the weaver unknown.



Untitled

Jeanne McGee



Untitled
Joshua Fox

CONNECTING WITH ART: FIRING THE IMAGINATION
WRITING CONTEST
HONORABLE MENTION

Twelve Excerpts from *Stagione di Vita*

James Autio

1. “. . . while our thoughts, like scattered leaves, crumbled to dust at the slightest touch.”
2. The whispering wind carried chimes and crows yammering atop a neighbor’s fence, and the day was liquid, flowing so slowly from one scene to the next.
3. It danced in the shadows, but with a collective heave it left the nurturing womb. Later, it seemed to mutate by whims of fancy.
4. A fragment from the forgotten poem was found between the cushions of a settee in a parlor in St. Paul.
5. They were children on an ocean of spiritual reasoning, fingers clutching at the sides of the little boat as a fog approached.
6. “It’s like a sweet summer rain,” she confessed, “falling, collecting in the loading dock while the overhang blocks out just enough of the damp. (But with human organs.)”
7. It could have been someone’s attempt to unify quantum and celestial mechanics, though she certainly had reason to doubt.
8. Its shadow stretched out even further than the mind’s evermore. Meanwhile,
9. The ancient quilt of sky rolled back to reveal the guilt and imperfections of mankind.
10. They hugged near the misty lake and smiled slightly while waves of Vicodin lapped at the rocky shoreline.
11. He followed the rabbit tracks across the field that night, and was baptized by moonlight.
12. “Now I can smell the breeze,” he thought. “If only I could breathe dark water.”

RAPIDS REVIEW STAFF AWARD FOR
BEST OVERALL POETRY CONTRIBUTOR

Apartment on the Third Floor

Kristen Bleninger

It's been four months and she keeps coming—
with her own keys now.
She was great with her boy-short hair,
but she has let it grow to comfortable curls.
She often showers when he's not there,
always sing sing singing some
Celtic folk song or gut-wrenching, throbbing tune.
And when he comes with his backpack,
his laptop, his Monday through
Friday knots in his neck,
I picture her on the other side of that door,
smile smile smiling and calling him
Baby.

Evil Is

Richard Fears

Evil cannot be destroyed.
Not with violence.
Not with friendship.
It can be subdued.
Like an animal, its legs can be broken.
It can be hidden.
Like an object, it can be thrown in a closet.
It can be shoved in a dark corner,
where it is forgotten.

But evil is always there.
Watching. Waiting.
Viewing the world
from its corner
until people have no memory
of its existence.
Then it strikes.
Destroying the weak.
Corrupting the strong.

Power is used to “destroy” evil.
But power is only a euphemism for evil.
Evil encourages powerful ones.
When the evil is “defeated,”
it infects the one with power.
To use power against evil is to join it.
To fight fire with fire is to become it.

Why fight something you cannot destroy?
Don't.
Remove the power from evil
and it is reduced to nothing.
Remove the power from all
and there is no chance of evil.
Still, Evil Is.

26.2 Miles to Go

John Grimmer

Never judge a pumpkin by the length of her legs; she may just “Squash” your ego! The crowd is growing restless as the last few seconds tick off the starting clock. I am caught in the ebb and tide of an ocean of athletes, like a single drop of water in a million gallon wave pool. If the crowd squeezes any tighter on me, I will shoot out like a watermelon seed. We are surging fore and aft, hoping to gain enough momentum to force the straining ribbon at the starting line to snap. I am surrounded by people I have never seen before, yet I feel like we are old friends.

The temperature is a brisk 20F with a light north wind, typical of early morning in October. The sky glows pink as the sun rises over the Metrodome. Everyone is helping each other with last second clothing adjustments and race preparations. Through the crowd I can look down Fourth Street and see Hennepin Avenue, which is about three quarters of a mile away. Tall buildings line Fourth Street, shading it from the early morning sun. The pavement looks like a patchwork quilt where pot holes have been patched with new asphalt. Every street light blinks red, and all cross streets are blocked with road blocks to stop crossing traffic. There are policemen at every corner. The street is empty except for a few stray leaves and a stub from a past Vikings game caught in an updraft between the high-rise office buildings. A group of kids are laughing as they carelessly try to catch the floating ticket stub before it rides the miniature cyclone into the sky.

Spectators are crowding the sidewalks. There are thousands of people stretching all the way to Hennepin Avenue. Bundled up in layered clothing, they celebrate in spite of the frigid temperatures. Many of them are dressed in Viking purple, no doubt anticipating today’s football game. My mind wanders, and I close my eyes. I can imagine myself back at the old Metropolitan stadium, tailgating at a late fall Vikings game during the old “Purple People Eater” days. Just before the gun goes off, I see a huge flash of bright orange about twenty yards in front of me; it is caught in the undertow of runners as we surge forward. “Did you see that?” I asked the runner next to me. BANG! The starting guns report echoes off the tall buildings. “See what?” he asked. “No time to talk,” I said. I leaped toward the starting line and started my stopwatch. I was finally

moving as the 1999 Twin Cities Marathon officially started. The gun going off was the second most incredible part of the marathon.

Miles 1-8: I can’t even tell I have just run eight miles. I am running on pure adrenaline. The danger here is going out too fast. It is very hard, but I have to force myself to run at my planned pace, if not a little slower. It feels like I am crawling as hundreds of other runners pass me. As I run near the side of the street, I am receiving constant encouragement. Every person who can reach me wants a “high five” and those who can’t reach me shout and whistle. I remain focused on my strategy and I finally pass someone myself, at mile three. I was following this runner for about two miles, slowly gaining ground. During my pursuit I was rehearsing the greeting I would bestow upon her as I passed. I was slowly gaining on a five foot tall pumpkin with a green stocking cap, green nylons, and at least a sixty inch waste line. This explains the flash of bright orange I saw at the starting line. She had short, thin legs and wore a brand new pair of Saucony “Grid Swerve” running shoes. (Nice shoes, about \$95.00 a pair.) Her short legs were a blur as they tirelessly pounded the pavement. I made my move to pass as we headed down Hennepin Avenue. As I passed her, I chuckled and said, “So there really is a great pumpkin.” She was perhaps mid fifties, five feet tall, and beneath the costume she was no more than 110lbs. We smiled at each other. She smiled at me because of my pathetically prosaic greeting. I smiled at her because she was just a cute little old lady dressed in a pumpkin suit, no threat to me. I was certain I would not finish my first marathon dead last. Convinced of my superiority, I strutted past her with my tail feathers in full glory; I am such an athlete.

Miles 8-14: I can really tell I’m running now. My heart rate is up, and I am getting warm. It is still very exciting, and there is a lot of runner camaraderie going on. I can’t believe the tremendous number of spectators lining the course, over 250,000 estimated at the 1998 marathon. There are literally thousands of people at every turn cheering me on, which makes me feel like I am competing in the Olympics. I feel good as I pass the halfway point, mile 13.1, at 2:07. This is a little bit slower than my intended pace, so I decide to pick it up a little. I keep thinking, “A few seconds per mile during a marathon is the difference between finishing with the Kenyans and finishing with some guy named Ken.” I pass mile 14 and grab a drink of water. A quick glance over my shoulder to see who is running with me, and I am off again.

Miles 14-18: I am getting really hungry now, and at mile 18 the pain usually starts to set in on me. Volunteers are passing out bananas, oranges,

cookies, candy, etc. I know from experience to eat as much as I can; lord knows I'll need it. Talking amongst the runners has all but ceased as everyone really starts to get down to business. I am surrounded by all kinds of people. I look around and see moms, dads, teachers, doctors, students, unemployed workers, and even professional athletes. . . . What drives these high achievers to log training miles, despite the obstacles of daily life? Ultimately, it comes down to just deciding that you want to do it. The urge is there to not get up and get going, but there's just one reason to get up and get going, and that's if you don't, somebody's going to be beating your ass real soon. Spoken or unspoken, I believe this is an attitude that is shared by all of these ultra-busy athletes, along with a sense that the sport they love is worth the investment. So many times I want to turn that alarm off and roll over and go back to sleep, but I can't. I know that later in the day I will feel worse if I don't run.

Miles 18-20: I am starting to pass people sitting on the sidelines with cramps and injuries. It looks like a scene from "M.A.S.H." My knees are beginning to get very sore, and I am wondering if I will finish. Each step I take is making my knees more tender. I am not tired, but I stop and try to stretch out my legs and loosen my knees. I can feel the boost from the food I ate at mile 18. I am becoming less aware of the things happening around me as I obsess on the sharpening pain in my knees. I know I am slowing down as I approach mile twenty. My brain is saying stop and rest; it's becoming difficult to override this sensible solution to my imminent collision with, "The Wall." At mile twenty I am climbing the ramp to Summit Avenue. The scenery here is completely different from downtown Minneapolis. Summit Avenue is much wider than Fourth Street, and the tall skyscrapers have been replaced with elegant mansions, manicured lawns, and beautiful boulevards. It would be so nice to lay down on one of the plush green carpets surrounding me and take a much deserved rest. I glance back to see who is following me. I see bright orange, and I can't believe it. I'm being chased by a disgruntled employee from Home Depot. By now my knees are seemingly cushioned by shards of glass, and each step is excruciatingly painful. STOP! STOP! Wait a minute. That is not a Home Depot employee; it is the lady in the pumpkin suit, and she is gaining on me. I turn my head forward and look down Summit Avenue. "You only have a short 10k to go, run, run, ruuuunnn. . . ."

Miles 20-25: They say this is where the race begins, and I believe them, whoever they are. This is where you have to not only physically force yourself to meet the challenge, but mental toughness is absolutely imperative. No one is talking anymore. The world around me is silent except for the occasional grown

man or woman laying on the side of the course in the fetal position, praying for the merciful hand of death to graciously rescue them from their suffering. By the looks on the faces of 90 percent of the other runners, I'd say they were in considerable pain. These miles pass very slowly, one-by-one. Each leg movement is now a conscious effort, and I can only think that each step brings me closer to the finish line. Many people are now hitting the wall – which is when your body has depleted itself of all glycogen stores, and is beginning to burn muscle for fuel. It is possible to run through the wall, but from what I hear it is pure hell. I have nearly forgotten about my nemesis the pumpkin lady. I gingerly turn my stiffened body hoping to see her smashed in the street like a Jack-O-Lantern the morning after Halloween. She is not smashed; in fact, she is gaining on me, and her short thin legs have not slowed down. She has taken her green hat off and removed her orange gloves. She is all business, and she is pouring on the coals. I turn back and find myself babbling unintelligibly, certainly not speaking English, but the runners around me can understand me perfectly. "This isn't the brightest thing I've ever done, and I'll never do it again."

Mile 25-26: I know I'm going to make it now, which is worth a tiny little boost. At mile twenty-five, pumpkin lady and I are neck in neck. I look like Frankenstein, as I try to move my now unbending legs a little faster. I am exhausted, and my arms are flailing. My knees now feel like they are bone against bone. Pumpkin lady politely says, "Excuse me," as she gracefully and effortlessly sidesteps, to avoid my ungainly gait. She glides past me for the home stretch. I wonder if I am delirious, or if I am going to actually lose to a short legged fifty something lady in a pumpkin suit.

Mile 26-26.2: I am convinced that they made a measuring error and the last; "point-two" was really more like "two." It doesn't matter how long it took me to get here or if I am losing to a fifty year old lady in a pumpkin suit. I literally cannot run this last stretch, with the street lined by thousands and thousands of cheering people, without getting a little choked up. And crossing the finish line is the single most incredible feeling I've ever had in my life.

Webbings, So Fragile

James Autio

1. Pie from a cruel kitchen
finds me far afield,
 intoxicated.

The clover's woven
in a mass of intricacies
 while I hide
in the heather.

Out here, angels
fear to lay a foot
where fools were led then left
between the weft and warp
of greeny undergrowth.

The jealous sun jabs accusing fingers
here and there while fabrics, sheer
like air tossed by a summer sigh,
ripple across
 her rear.
2. Spiderwebs quiver
over cooling pies on the sill.

I cross your freshly turned field,
my own home, far from mind.

Slipping between white cotton
banners adorning your homecastle
grounds, I sneak through your
neatly trimmed hedge.

I gaze in your windows, taking
in the sweet scented air
with one finger deep in your pie.

I'm at your door, getting
dirt on your newly washed floor,
and I've pie on my fangs.

Ponder

Bill Haley

I ponder as I have before, each time we go to war.
Is it good and just our cause, worth the life of youth that's lost?
Though our land has been attacked, are we sure it was Iraq?
The world seems to disagree, what warrants my country?
Will war stop the production, the weapons of mass destruction?
Or rather will they proliferate, acquired by yet another State?
Then shall we rise again, to pay the cost our countryman?
So now I ponder as I have before, is it worth the price of war?

RAPIDS REVIEW STAFF AWARD FOR
BEST FICTION/NON-FICTION CONTRIBUTOR

Journey to the Slum

James Muguro

I was awakened by sounds of gunfire mixed with people's screams and dogs' barking, adding to the agonizing rhythm of an evil night I will never forget. I jumped out of bed to see my father peep through the window and say to the rest of us, "Oh God, we are under attack." My mother and sisters hastily tried to gather together everything they could manage while my father stood behind the door with a machete, raring to defend his household at all costs. My brother and I were assigned to stand guard at two windows and watch out for any attackers entering through the backyard.

In the midst of screams, we heard another loud shot followed by a few seconds of silence and then even more desperate cries. We knew people were dying. As I stood guard by the window, I saw a blurry figure jump over the fence, and as I shouted to warn my family, a fire had been started in our granary, and the smoke's heavy smell added to the prevailing chaos. There had been warning signs of tribal tensions in our rural community, which my young mind had innocently failed to comprehend. The majority tribe had been planning to cleanse the village of the minority tribe, who had long been seen as ambitious outsiders out to take over control of farming and business activities in the village.

Our house was only a few hundred yards from the edge of the forest, and so a stream of humanity came running by, constantly seeking refuge in the dense thicket. As the intensity of whistles mixed with cries of despair by people increased, my father realized it was a good time for us to join the fleeing families in order to try to save our lives. My mother and sisters left the luggage they were trying to put together, and father led us out in haste. He stood by the door to make sure nobody was left behind, with his machete still firmly held between his gigantic arms.

After maneuvering our way through the bush for about two miles, father said it was time to lie low, and as we did so, smells of burning houses formed a cloud around us. Mother thanked God on our behalf that we managed to get away with our souls. "Where is Simba?" I asked, but the response I got was my

father's blistery hand wrapped around my mouth to keep me quiet, or else we would be spotted by the marauding tribal gangs. My dog was lost, forever.

Nobody knew exactly where we were going; we were just running away from danger. Through the black night, we were joined by hordes of other desperate families as we struggled to find our way through the dense covering of thorns and twigs, our clothes wet with dew. Fear of the invading gang was far much greater than of the many cheetahs resident in the forest. It was very contrasting how a night so beautifully lit by the full moon could be so full of terror. Many people had been stabbed or shot as they fled, and some were too weak to walk. I saw my father try to pull out an arrow that had been lodged in my neighbor's thigh, and as it came out, a stream of blood followed. Some did not make it out of their homes and more died along the way. It was like being a character in a horror movie.

As daybreak approached, the dense forest gave way to scattered houses, and all of a sudden, a huge lorry with a bold red cross inscribed on its side stopped besides us. A massive evacuation was under way. With their eyes red and their cheeks wet with tears, the volunteers ushered us in. Every time tribal clashes erupted, the Catholic Church acted as a refuge. On our way to the Church grounds, other sobbing souls were ushered into the lorry. By the time we entered the compound, everyone looked downtrodden and gasping for breath. There were bodies strewn all over the village, and some families had even managed to bring their dead with them.

"Why is this happening?" I fearfully asked my mother. With her dry arms around my shoulder, she responded with a faster flow of tears. To hide the ugliness of a man crying, my father and his fellow tribesmen converged at the back of the debilitated building, and when I went to peep at them, my heart skipped a bit at a sight never before seen. Men were not supposed to cry. Many had been injured as they fought the attackers, but as the injured women and children were being tended to by the lucky ones, the injured men still stood strong with their weapons in hand, expecting the attackers to enter into the Church compound at any time. Fortunately, the compound proved to be a safe haven. They did not follow us that far.

"God is love," started the priest as he led the mourning exiles in a special service. I was too young to comprehend most things but my weary, young mind begged to disagree with the priest's statement, at least for once. I had always known that I belonged to a minority tribe, but it had never occurred to me that I would possibly wake up to such an ugly orgy of tribal cleansing. Huts had been

razed to the ground. We had heard desperate cows, sheep, and goats make noises of confusion. My quest for understanding the reality of the social ugliness around me was met with a mask of linguistic finery. As the sermon went on, the Kenya Red Cross staff was erecting tents within the Church grounds to act as temporary housing for us. As bowls of porridge were passed around by the World Vision staff, most adults declined but children emptied one after another.

We mourned for a whole week as people buried their dead in the Church cemetery. The atmosphere was thick with grief. Dirges were constantly sung, and tears were like a uniform is to an army. My father made arrangements for us to move to another part of the country in the hope of starting a new life. The coffee-growing region of the country seemed the best possible place to move to as we could easily find shelter in the ever-expanding slums surrounding them. "Life must continue and we will survive by toiling in the plush plantations nearby," said my father as we arrived in the slum. The shacks were literally built on top of each other, and the nearby river, with its water black from pollution by the industries upstream, provided water for all our needs. The narrow streets were busy with human traffic, and legal and illegal activities went on twenty-four hours a day. Small rooms acted as churches, others as brothels, while others were dens for cannabis dealers.

At first it was very hard for me to adjust to the new life, but after three weeks I was adjusting. One night, the light in our little hastily-assembled shack was burning very dim. The little blaze was brown and red. And I waked just in time to see a slithering figure slip its way under the makeshift bed below my young body. The chase had started somewhere in a hole at one corner of the shack, and when it all ended, I was curious to see how large the catch was this time around. By the time I added some oil to the dying lamp, the snake's jaw was already back in place, and our shack was one rat less. As had happened many times before, the soldier in me, hardened by hunger, went to search for my weapon of choice. After hitting it several times on the head, the snake's tail wiggled for a minute as I stood there gazing at its protruding belly with a mixture of jealousy and relief.

As I fought the battle with the intruding serpent, mother witnessed the ensuing mayhem in her half sleep. As she turned, I could hear the bamboo bed beneath her body squeak. As I held the serpent heavy with rat on a stick on my way out, I could hear the survivors of the snake's easy hunt make noises of confusion and as they did so, pieces of debris fell from the grass thatch above me, allowing the moon to peep into our shelter of agony a little bit more than

before. I thought to myself, "A lucky eagle will in the morning wake up to a free meal." For once, I wished I had been born an eagle.

Even at that time of night, the slum was always alive with all sorts of activities. I could see drunkards, prostitutes, and drug dealers going about their business. I went back to my bamboo bed to ponder on the following morning's trip to the coffee plantation to toil for a wage good enough to buy a loaf of bread to quell the pangs of hunger within my eleven-year-old skeleton. Hopefully, the plantation owner would bless me with a bowl of porridge to sustain my unfortunate life throughout the day. Only a few weeks ago, I was living in a beautiful countryside on the other part of our ethnically divided rural area surrounded by streams flowing with clean water and farms green with produce. What had life come to? At the edge of the coffee plantation was the owner's gigantic mansion with a large heated pool and manicured lawns. Every time I saw his children ride their bikes around their massive compound, I was red with envy. The barbecue smell emanating from their compound choked me to death, yet not killing me.

As rays of sunshine pierced through the thatch above my skeleton, my natural clock reminded me that it was time to go to work. Mother was too ill to work that day owing to the back-breaking labor of the previous day. In her morning prayer, I heard her ask God to touch the plantation owner so she would get paid the following day. It wasn't certain. "The boss," as everyone called the pot-bellied monster of a man, was in the process of completing refurbishment to his swimming pool, so as reputed, he would have an excuse to postpone his laborers' wages. On my way to the plantation that morning, I peeped through the master's backyard and the water in his swimming pool made my throat dry. Its appearance was nowhere close to the greasy one we fetched from the nearby river. With every passing day, memories of that dark night when my family's journey to the slum began, remain stronger than ever. It was an experience in life that shocked and surprised me, while at the same time preparing me well enough for the ups and downs that were later to become characteristic of my life.

Myself

Amy Stroman

I can feel it behind me. Gaining, as my feet pound the pavement in rapid succession. The sound of heavy breathing rips through the still night air like a knife through flesh. I run faster, fear dripping from every movement. Looking over my shoulder, I expect it to be there. The dark street is empty except for the shadows in which it hides, surrounding me, waiting for the kill. I stop running, even though I know my fear does not stop. Panting, I bend over, my hands resting on slippery, sweaty knees, trying to catch my breath. I turn to face my fear, but all I can see is my reflection.

Scraping the Bottom

Erin Monetti

Binding are my thoughts
Speechless is my mind
Motionless is my soul
Streaming are my tears
The wounds are fixed
Deep and gushing is their state
Exposed and uneasy they stare faceless
Beating into my eyes
The stain of red is embedded
Vowing never to leave
Familiarity is comforting
Until it becomes painful
These are my wounds

Fireball

James Autio

1. Moving through the thicket
in the midst of a crush
of between-class undergrads
when I see, searing
in the college hall,
the fireball
coming my way.

She grabs my coat,
pulls me from the flow
while my eyes, careful
to linger in hers, steal
little peripherals up and down.

And she's talking,
but my thoughts drift away.
My hands find her hips,
and we're sharing a kiss
under a night sky
as stars collide in a spray
of dazzling streams
which make their way down,
showering all around
and, my God, her lips
are like being home and warm.

2. The old film fades to commercial,
and I step into the kitchen
with an empty chip bag
when the sound of peeing upstairs
rains down on me.

I'm drawn out, escaping
as far as the porch, the night air
refreshingly crisp,
and I'm in no hurry
to finish my smoke
when my wife calls me back.

I'm tired.
I've been feeling ill.

I'm staring deep into the night
sky, just hoping a star streaks by.
I close my eyes and try to pull
a wish from the dark chill.

Denouement
Zachary Flategraff

after eighteen gloomy years
of loving
and hating concurrently
I have come to the
denouement
that I am to you
a meanderer
and to me
you are the queen
laying down
equivocal testimonies

seeing you
now, at this juncture
like a doll
fragmented by tears
and pain
I undergo a cautious
but beautiful vacillation

you hold my hand
with a sorry embrace
telling me about
fortitude
and what you would give me
if it was in the possession
of you

I tell you
I only want us
to breathe
to live

never will I
let you know
it was me
that hid that ten dollar bill
in your purse
for your stubborn
reaction
would not be
the first

we say
without speaking
that the dialect
of relationship
we suffer through
is the languor of our love
a detail
so blue

The Kitchen That I Grew Up With

Thavy Zumwalde

The smell of roasting peanuts, browning garlic, extracted hot coconut oil, simmering hot curry, and burning waffle batter on an iron rim are sensations that bring back the memory of the kitchen I knew while growing up. The last section of the wooden house was the kitchen where most of the real action occurred. There were many meals, many events, family gatherings, discussions, counseling, laughing, crying, celebrations, and therapeutics in that room.

The kitchen had a very simple layout. There was a short table, topped with white tiles. We called it the stove table. On top of the table were three stoves: one that used only propane gas, another stove which used charcoal, and a small electric stove. Each stove had its own purpose. The propane stove was mostly used for making soup. The charcoal stove was used for grilling, stir-fry, or cooking rice. The electric stove was used for anything that needed to be cooked quickly. There was a doublewide window located above the table. There were many pots and pans that hung on the wall by the table. Next to the table there was a brown cabinet that stored the dishes in the top half and spices in the bottom half.

Many meals were cooked and many people were entertained in that kitchen. Some meals took several hours to prepare. A majority of the ingredients were fresh and needed to be assembled or processed by hand. There were no food processors or electric grinders; instead we used mortar and pestle to prepare the required spices. Some times, we made flour using a rice grinder, which was made up of two big pieces of hard rock that sat on top of each other and crushed the rice as they turned. There was a lot of kneeling and crouching on the wooden floor, which transformed the floor into a dark mirror-like surface.

My grandma, my mother, and my aunts met for a family meal almost every weekend. They usually cooked, baked, or played cards while they discussed everything or nothing.

On one Saturday afternoon, a few weeks before my youngest aunt's wedding ceremony, my grandmother and her children decided to make Cambodian omelets as they checked the boxes and crossed off the lines on their wedding to do list. My grandma was like the head of a train; she always had the

last word on everything. Of course, in our culture, we were taught to always look up to our elders, and to obey and honor our parents.

I was always amazed at my grandmother and her knowledge of everything. She cooked well, she made great delicious deserts, and on top of everything she loved me the most or that was what I was made to believe.

Cambodian omelets are made of the rice flour mixed with coconut milk, eggs and a yellow powder that made out of root and called the turmeric, which transformed the dull, off-white color to a bright yellow batter. In the center of the omelet, there was chicken, which sometimes was mixed with shrimp or pork. The meat was combined with finely chopped white onion and shredded coconut meat. As my aunt tossed the chopped garlic into a hot frying pan, the hissing sound together with the garlic smell filled the room and probably carried many houses away. As grandma, who sat behind her, handed her a bowl of chopped separated meats to put into the frying pan next, she said, "Put the shrimp in last so it won't lose its flavor." Meanwhile, my other aunt used the electric stove to roast the peanuts for the sauce. The omelet sauce contained lemon juice, brown sugar, salt, garlic, and ground, roasted peanuts.

I was helping by cleaning the lettuce, cucumbers, bean spouts, and the many different kinds of mints. Grandma, who carried on other conversations with her kids, still had time to tell me, "Don't waste too much water, but make sure it is clean."

She paused for a while then continued to instruct me some more, "When you are done, arrange them just like you see in the restaurant. Food should not only taste good, but it should also look good."

As I watched my youngest aunt cut the cucumbers, she asked, "So how thick should I slice the cucumbers?" Before anyone could open their mouths, grandma had already responded, "Thin and slanted slices."

On the floor, a beautiful colored lotus mat laid waiting for everyone to sit down and enjoy the food. My aunt would place a tray with a mound of omelets in the center of the circle. Later, she handed the tray of vegetables, and lastly the individual, half-filled sauce bowls.

It took almost as long to eat as it took to make, but the eating part was much more enjoyable. The proper way to eat the omelet is to place a piece of omelet on top of the leaf lettuce then proceed with a slice of cucumber, mints, and lastly a few bean sprouts. Next, wrap the lettuce around the ingredients and

drown the whole thing in the sauce bowl. The lazy way, grandma said, is to place the whole omelet into a big bowl, throw in all the vegetables, and pour the sauce on top.

After the meal, all of the adults were still giving their two bits of advice to my youngest aunt on how to be a successful wife. There were a lot of omelets eaten that night and it came with a lot of dirty dishes. All the beautiful and ugly china were brought into use during the meal. At the end of the meal I offered to do the dishes. My grandmother grinned with pleasing eyes. While I rinsed off the soap, my bony elbow bumped into a couple of piles of soaped china. The crashing sound of the porcelain hitting the cement tub brought my grandmother to the kitchen in a hurry. Almost every plate was split into several pieces. My ears were burning and ready to receive an unkind word. There was a long pause where even a pin dropped would break the silence. A voice came from behind my back, which was soft and forgiving. "Thavy, it's okay; I needed to get new china anyway. Don't worry, but next time don't pile the china too high. Clean up and save what is left." I was so relieved, and all I could say was, "Okay grandma," and then thanked her for not punishing me.

In all the time that I grew up, come to think of it, I rarely got yelled at or talked down to. I was surrounded by positive comments and kind words. Many things were reasonably explained to me. There was always someone in the family coaching, counseling, and supporting, whether I needed it or not. They always told me that I could do many things even though I was a female. This was the kind of encouragement I received while growing up. I carry a positive outlook in life. My grandma used to say, "Life is what you make of it. You should be happy to wake up to experience another day, and live it to the fullest."

Since my grandma passed away many years ago, my mother has inherited her mother's place, giving us and her grandchildren advice all the time. I also could see myself in this path, the path that I would act just like these women before me, toward my own children and grandchildren.

Even though life in the United States is busy, very stressful, and full of nonstop activities, my family and I still continue to see each other almost every weekend. We meet at my mother's house to continue our family ritual.

Tiger's Trophy

Richard Fears

Tiger hunting, hunting
See him prowl through the forest
Deer grazing, grazing
See it eat in the forest
Tiger pounces
If he hits, poor deer, no life
If deer escapes, poor tiger, no food

Knight stalking, stalking
See him clank through the caves
Dragon sleeping, sleeping
See it dream in the caves
Knight pounces
If he wins, poor dragon, no life
If dragon escapes, poor knight, no trophy

A Letter from the Front – World War One: Upon a Reef of Contention

Bill Haley

My Dearest Mary

To write this letter was but a bitter pill of distasteful dread of which I must swallow, for as you read its somber emotion I know the heartache it shall bring forth.

Oh Mary, the situation on the front has grown far worse since I've last written. Winter has now brought damp, cold winds to compile the misery of man. Like the sirens they sing in the night calling, calling my name to come onto the romans land where flesh is torn in a rain of iron and lead. I have grown to fear, not death, but life, for life has become war whose sound and smell have permeated my soul like an unseen wound, never to heal.

The sorrow that surrounds me overwhelms the strongest of men who yesterday were but children, only to come of age by the fires of hell unleashed by those who do not hear its mighty roar, or taste its bitter ranking. I fear not my death, for I am tired, tired from sleepless nights of fruitless slumber on the damp, cold earth that saps my lust to see tomorrow's sun. A sun that only illuminates a landscape smashed beyond recognition, treeless, lifeless, and perforated with craters as to resemble the face of the moon. I fear not my death, for I hear the constant cries of both friend and foe. Like children they cry with a common plea for their Mothers, Mothers to come to their side, and ease the coming of death. Cries that become a single prayer, rising to the Heavens. Yet, I wonder, does God hear them?

Sweet Mary, I fear not death, for thy body and spirit now lay broken and destroyed. I worry you shall not recognize what I've become, for I have killed, I have

maimed, only to have my own spirit suffer the same. My flesh heaves, rejecting all nourishment. I'm now pale and gaunt, and turn from my reflection with shameful self pity. Will my parents now even recognize me as their own son or you Mary, as your own husband? Mary, will you call on God, for he is not here? Ask that not only he grant us peace and deliverance from battle, but that we may forgive the enemy whom has trespassed against our beloved country, for he too must suffer as I, to be torn from his loved ones, and thrown into the bowls of hell.

I fear not death, for I know it is near, comforting, calling me to its eternal rest. No Mary, I have already lost the war whether I return home or not, for I shall not overcome my wounds of flesh and spirit. I only ask when you receive this letter that if you would light a candle for me, and place it on my writing desk. While it flickers and burns its lonely sheen that you think of me, as I was before the call to arms when our young hearts were as one, beating in harmonious song. Let it burn until the last gasp of light has given way to darkness, for deep was the love on which my soul had sailed, but the weight of war has run it aground upon a reef of contention between two nations. Now, I cast this war into the abyss, hoping to free my soul from the reef, yet to no avail. Forever now my spirit remains as the haunting wreckage of all souls lost to war, the eternal scourge of man.

With deepest love,

Your indebted husband

The Shadow's Jest

Jennifer Dalsen

There were shadows cascading across the worn woodwork, a soft candlelight emitting warm rays against this stormy night.

And yet—one shadow moved.

Perhaps it was simply the gentle rapping of rain against the windowsill which disturbed the norm of the world tonight. It must have been, lest some poor soul's eyes weren't deceived and the shadow now moving up the woodwork, was indeed, real. The flickering of the candlelight bade comfort to all those in doubt of this mysterious dweller, for not one creature or unearthly being appeared to be stirring on this night of nights. Such things simply did not happen . . . or did they?

Another blink of the eye, and all previous doubts were suddenly shattered for something was indeed not right, someone was indeed near, and somewhere, somehow, the shadow was now moving its way up the woodwork.

Twisting, crawling, slithering, prowling and taking shape into what it truly had become, what it truly was, and what it would always be—a monster.

The world would surely end, all because of this—thing.

Pale yellow orbs began to glow with life in the dark corner of the room. A small 'rap-tap-tap' followed close behind, the shadow's form revealing a long-legged, grotesque creature. Enormous jaws and claws as sharp as nails were thought to be seen by the mind's eye as this shadow continued to move, becoming closer to the light and, drawing in with it, fear.

Another moment passed, and suddenly the creature, who for far too long had haunted the room, crawled out from the darkness as though it was the most mighty thing on earth, curiously seeking a new place to roam.

Yes, there it stood: a monster, a seeker . . . a spider.

Green Fuzzy Couch

Adam Obremski

Bottom of friend barrel,
spat on by owner,
and ignored by scruffy cat.

Another replaced the green fuzzy couch.
Black leather skin (a lot nobler)
and worth one grand.

Dumped to curb,
awed by neighbor,
scooped into antique truck.

Appraised couch,
found value,
worth three grand.

Unexpected Procedure

Erin Monetti

Partially complete crossword puzzles were scattered across the dining room table. A pack of Bensen and Hedges was tightly clenched in Marlyn's bony hand. Her comfortable attire consisting of a gray sweat suit and bright pink slippers was in stark contrast to her usual constricting uniform, which she sports during her working hours. The poorly lit room smelled of freshly brewed coffee and cigarette smoke. "The morning looked much like this," she recalled as she stared intently at the unfinished puzzles in front of her.

The surroundings were similar just fourteen months earlier. The white porcelain was warm as she put the coffee mug up to her lips. The scalding brown liquid made its way down her throat. One hand contained a half-drunk cup of coffee, while the other was occupied with a recently lit cigarette. She thumbed through her miniature black planner. "Today is September 11; my vacation begins on September 15." Rising from her seat at the table in the middle of a fancy hotel room, she took one last drag of her cigarette. She glanced at her reflection in the oversized mirror located on the wall. Pleased with the image produced, she nodded in approval and made her way out of the hotel.

Marlyn boarded the airplane with dignity. Her fiery red hair contrasted against her navy blue, double breasted suit. She took her place at the front of the airplane where she would be serving first class. "It was a beautiful early morning in the Big Apple," she recalled "The clouds were barely visible." The sun beat down, creating streaks across the isles as it entered through the small windows that lined the America West plane.

Flying this particular trip was very familiar to her considering her thirty-seven years of experience. Marlyn readied her oversized, chrome cube with the supplies needed to fulfill the overwhelming, and never ceasing, requests of her passengers. As she stocked her cart, her mind wandered into visions of her much needed vacation: crossword puzzles, romantic novels, and cigarettes. Her thoughts were distracted by a pungent smell that permeated the plane. The woman's name was Penny. Marlyn always knew Penny was close by; the perfume she wore infested the noses of whoever was within fifty feet of her. Penny skirted along the aisles checking for miscellaneous trash that may have been left behind from an earlier flight.

Marlyn continued to stock her cart, finishing just before the passengers flooded the plane with their overstuffed suitcases and boisterous voices. Marlyn pasted a toothless grin upon her face as she welcomed her guests. Her small stature and permanent smile is often misleading to her passengers. Within her petite frame and beyond her frozen smile is a very confident and strong individual, who unapprised to her passengers, is concerned only with their safety and well-being. "Many believe I am only there to serve them cold beverages and provide them with those tiny, under stuffed pillows," Marlyn snarled.

The passengers searched for their seats as if they were seeking a buried treasure. Marlyn peered out into the sea of faces. The large Airbus was carrying only half its capacity. One hour and ten minutes passed with no sign of disaster. "I remember handing out beverages when the pilot asked me to come into the flight deck."

Marlyn dropped everything and made her way into the pilot's territory. She knew the pilot very well and had been on many flights with him before; never had she seen his eyes look the way they did at that moment. They looked like two glazed-over rocks inside his head. "A plane has hit one of the twin towers; they think it was an accident." Voices spilled out of the radio as Marlyn tried to concentrate on the pilot's directions. All that she heard was a mixture of "bring," "FAA", and "please." She left the flight deck in a bit of confusion. Marlyn quickly gathered her thoughts and summoned the FAA controllers up to the front. Upon her entrance, the pilot continued to serve her bad news. "It wasn't an accident; another plane hit the second twin tower," she remembers the pilot saying. Her eyes reverted from his stare. She knew the procedure and was ready to follow through with any request given to her. She proceeded to inform her fellow flight attendants, Penny and Lynn. Their eyes widened in unison, as they stood there like two cement statues unable to move. "I recall telling them we needed to secure the cabin and prepare for our initial decent." Just as Marlyn was giving her instructions, the pilot came over the speakers. "Ladies and Gentleman, air traffic has just advised that we are making an unscheduled landing in Kansas City. We will give you further information when we get on the ground." The cabin fell silent. The once lively and talkative passengers were now stiff like mannequins in their seats.

Marlyn was like a drill sergeant giving the passengers orders. They obliged like small children fearing punishment from their parent. Marlyn marched down the aisles carefully checking the belts strapped across the passengers. She made her way to the front of the plane and into the flight deck.

“The cabin is secure, we are ready to land.” The radio hummed with blurred words. She left the flight deck with a cool confidence lining her exterior.

As the plane glided along the runway, the passengers exhaled creating a stereo-like sound throughout the cabin. The silence continued as the plane came to a halt. Marlyn’s footsteps could be heard throughout the plane as she made her last jaunt to the front where she met the pilot. His eyes had disposed of their overwhelming concern and had taken on a much more relaxed appearance. The pilot extended his hand; as they shook, his hand swallowed hers. His sweaty palm soaked her transparent skin. “Our silence spoke so many words,” she remembers, “for him and I had just been through an experience that had no basis for dialogue.”

Marlyn returned home several days later. She was bombarded with an overwhelming amount of messages that filled her machine. Half listening to the words spoken throughout the tiny box on the kitchen counter, she recounted on recent events. Her flashback was cut short by a voice that screeched through the message machine. “Marlyn, are you okay, and more importantly are you sure this job is right for you?” Marlyn paused and pulled out a white carcinogen from her purse. She lit the cigarette and stared blankly at the machine. She kept replaying the message countless times, as if it would change, but it didn’t and neither did her answer. “Of course this job is right for me,” she replied out loud “I love what I do and a few crazy people are not going to ever change that.”

I Am That Woman

Kristen Bleninger

He hits me
like a thousand jagged stars popping behind my eyes,
like the noon whistle in my ears,
like every synapse firing.

The floor and I are long-time friends.
The floor supports me in my paralysis—
all still except the heat oozing in my face,
except this raging thought:
I can never be right like this.

Now I am that woman who knows
that it’s safer to brawl on the front lawn
before neighbors who peek through
burnt-orange curtains or dusty mini-blinds.
Now I am that woman who calls
the police at three AM—they will come
even if I hang up too soon.
Now I am that woman who goes
to the shelter—just like on the news.

Am I messy? Ripped baby doll dress?
Do my popsicle-faced children stand behind me
like ducklings behind a hen?
Am I neat? Unexpected class?
Did I pull up in a suburban or a mini-van?
Are you surprised at the gold chain around my neck?
The diamonds in my ears?

The Tyger

William Blake (1757 – 1827)

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Draygon

Richard Fears

Draygon, Draygon burning night,
In the cities oh so bright,
What foe could stand and defy,
That which your mouth doth scream and cry?

While in your caves or in your skies,
Those all around you tell no lies,
For in your sight, evil is wrong,
And those who speak truth sing the song.

Of Draygons past and their deeds,
Of Draygons present and their needs,
Of Draygons future and their plight,
Of Draygons all and their fight,

But now the sweet song does dwindle,
For other forms do mingle
Into the minds of children.
Evil and vile they are.

These shows can now entertain
The children when both work again.
But is it safe? Does it not harm?
Now the Draygons feel the alarm.

Draygon, Draygon burning night,
In the cities oh so bright,
Now I know what shall defy,
It is a clown and his cream pie.

A Change of Mind

Bill Haley

I always figured God made Saturdays for us to catch up on all the things we didn't have time to do on weekdays, leaving Sunday for him. One Saturday while thinking about what to accomplish I noticed a funny feeling of something on my neck, thinking it was a spider I quickly brushed my hand past, but it was just hair. That meant first task was to get a haircut. I guess I'm a little old fashioned because I go to a barbershop. I like barbershops. You don't have to go into much detail about how you want your hair to look. You just sit down and he cuts what looks best on you. Hell, when you're half-bald anyway his expertise is well appreciated. Now Fuzz the barber is quite an interesting fellow, and always has a great story to tell.

It was a rather warm winter day, and being a motorcycle rider I mentioned that I couldn't wait for spring to ride my bike. That did it, I was about to here a story because in his youth Fuzz was a biker. I don't mean the kind of bikers you see today, you know the ones, they drive on weekends wearing flawless leather jackets on 30,000-dollar Harleys that are all spit and polished. I'm talking about the ones that scared little old ladies, or if you saw them walking by you didn't dare make eye contact, or get too close; also, the motorcycles they rode always looked sort of dirty, worn and tattered. Older now, Fuzz claimed those bad boy days were far behind, yet he sure enjoys reminiscing about the good old days. He asked me, "what kind of bike do you ride?" Why I have a Kawasaki I said. Fuzz continued, "well let me tell you what I think of those Jap bikes." To my astonishment he said, "I say them Japs make the best motorcycles in the world." I thought to myself, how could a real biker like Fuzz think so highly of Japanese motorcycles. It just didn't figure. So, I asked why? Well I was glad I wasn't in any hurry to go anywhere because when Fuzz tells a story they tend to be, shall I say kind of long.

In 1961 Fuzz was at the peak of youth, and did a lot more with it then I ever dreamed. Fuzz and a few friends Dan, Vern and Lou rode in what you could call a gang, and this gang of four decided it was time for a road trip. Being the fourth of July weekend they decided to go all the way to Canada. Jim, a younger fellow who liked to hang around the older guys wondered if he could ride along. Now Fuzz and his buddies drove American and British motorcycles, and didn't care much for the idea because Jim drove a Honda.

Honda was the first Japanese motorcycle to be sold in the United States, and most people weren't familiar with them yet, and frankly these guys were bikers, and you just ride a Japanese bike when you're a real biker. Jim pleaded with Fuzz so he too could go along. Fuzz asked the other guys if it would be all right, and reluctantly they agreed to let Jim tag along. Fuzz, Dan and Vern drove Harleys, and Lou a Triumph, and those were big bikes. The Honda was just a small 305cc motorcycle. They told Jim straight away "you better keep up because we're going fast, and you're going to have to stay far enough behind, so we don't have to be seen with someone riding with a Jap bike." Jim had another problem, a brown bomber jacket. Real bikers wore black leather jackets like Marlin Brando wore in the Wild Ones, and of course this just further separated Jim from the rest of the guys.

The Harleys all had one thing in common, they went through oil like a sieve. I'm talking a quart every four or five hundred miles, so they always had to carry extra oil with them. After carefully packing for their trip they all left for Canada, nowhere in particular . . . just Canada. Riding north on highway 65 Jim looked awful funny. All bent over trying to streamline himself against the wind. Jim practically had to hold the throttle wide open to keep up with the big boys, yet he had to stay far enough behind as not to anger the others. Confidently Jim rode on. The Harleys didn't have very large gas tanks, and had to stop often to refuel. Each time they did they made sure to check their oil, but Jim on his Honda seldom bothered too. The others laughed saying, "Damn Jim, your going burn that thing up if you don't check your oil." Jim said, "why should I, I just changed It a month ago." "Good luck," said Fuzz.

A while later misfortune came Jim's way in the form of an arrant can of oil that fell off Vern's Harley. At seventy miles per hour it exploded upon hitting the pavement; consequently, Jim was now covered with oil, his glasses, jacket and pant legs were soaked, but Jim didn't complain no sir, and with his ever-present sense of humility he carried on. That wasn't the worst of Jim's luck, or the others, for a short while later cold, forbidding rain set in. After a good soaking they decided to call it quits for the day; besides, it was getting late.

Soon a road sign appeared, State Park 3 miles ahead, so with great relief the intrepid gang pulled in for the night. Evidently though, real bikers don't bother to pack a tent, but as luck would have it while driving through the park campground they noticed a vacant one. Tired and wet they started a fire in a vain attempt to dry themselves. Unsuccessful they gave up, and retreated to the tent. It wasn't long before the owners of this tent returned. Half asleep, Fuzz heard the

cowering soft voice of a teenager say, "could we please have our tent back?" Though bad ass bikers they still had soft hearts, and wouldn't do anyone harm, leaving the tent they apologized for their inconvenience, but the teens were scared to death, and quickly packed up speeding off into the night.

Now hovered over a dim lit fire they contemplated their situation. It was half past four AM. Wet and tired they called it quits. The fearless gang had enough, and headed back to the Twin Cities. It was Sunday, and Minnesota had a strange law. It was illegal to sell clothing, so how could the boys get dry clothes? Cold and beat they pulled into a gas station, and the leather-clad bikers begged to buy five sweatshirts. The attendant felt sorry for the poor wet souls, and sold them each a sweatshirt, so the boys feeling anew headed south.

Fuzz had a girlfriend who lived in Mora, so they decided to pull in and take a break. Still damp and dirty they sat on the floor as not to muddy the furniture. Silence filled the room as the tired boys were at a loss for words. Fuzz, striking up conversation said, "Well how much oil did you go through Dan?" "A quart" Dan said. "How about you Vern?" "Two quarts including the one that got Jim," replied Vern. "And how about you their Lou?" "Well let me think, oh maybe one, no a half." "Ok Jim how much did you go through?" Jim quickly replied, "Why none, I haven't added a drop." "You got to be kidding," said Vern. "No, like I said I just changed it a month ago; although, I did check it a while back and it did go down a little, well maybe a fraction of an inch or so. I don't know I really don't need to change it for another month," said Jim. In that moment Fuzz realized, that if he drove his bike with the throttle nearly wide open the damn thing would have blown up, besides that Honda didn't even use any oil. That left only one explanation. Harleys and Triumphs are not made as good as that Honda, and that's why Fuzz had said earlier that he thought the Japs built the best motorcycles in the world.

Suddenly the small chime on the door rang signaling Fuzzes next customer. Fuzz thanks for the haircut and story. . . guess I'll see you in a few weeks I said. After paying and tipping him I left the barbershop with that same feeling you get after seeing a good movie. Then I thought to myself, Isn't it amazing what interesting people we run into in life, and just maybe life does sort of imitates the movies, or is it the other way around.

God

Adam Obremski

God, you are as made up as the Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. But unlike the omni-potent old man who delivers presents through the chimney, nor the omni-potent lagomorph that poops decorative eggs on the lawn, nor some omni-potent tooth gathering cult, you promise a slice of paradise upon the reaper's collection.

God, a slice of paradise is like the crowded amusement park empire. When you arrive, you'll wish you went to the tacky white-trash magnet across the street instead. They say that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, but the greener grass is like the expensive candy bar from Fanny Farmer. It may taste better than the mass produced candy bar, but you consequently spend the weekend on the john.

God, since I was young, they claimed that you have a big booming voice, the lord of the land, that I should follow your every command. The world was always alone... Why else is there war in different parts of the globe?

God, I don't believe you exist.
Go ahead, strike me down!
Give me divine punishment!
Prove your existence with your judgment bolts!
Nothing happened...gosh darn it...

Somewhere in the Middle

Kristen Bleninger

During rush hour the hippies
stand on the freeway overpasses
holding their anti-war signs
as they wave at the cars crawling
under their uptown streets.
Uptown—where the residents sit in
dingy corners of run-down coffee shops
spewing their hard-nosed, soft opinions.
They're all so open-minded, and they've got
the eclectic, mismatched clothes,
the body piercings,
and the tattoos to prove it.

Now I'm not saying I'm
anti-anti-war or anti-war.
I just wonder about people who
take a stance so far from the middle,
people who have all the answers
as they protest a system that lets them protest.
I wonder why they feel the need
to slow me down at five o'clock.

At 10:00 pm I turn on AM radio—
not because I like what they say,
but because the political pontificators put
me to sleep most nights.
I picture the man behind the microphone
with the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled to his elbows,
as he fishes fistfuls of newspaper articles
from his briefcase.
“We must obliterate the enemy!”
“We don't need France!”
He yells his pro-war cry to the regular folks
who are driving in cars or snug in their homes.

Now I'm not saying I'm
anti-pro-war or pro-war.
I just wonder about people who
take a stance so far from the middle,
people who have all the answers
as they protest a world that protests them.
I wonder why they feel the need
to keep awake at ten o'clock.

Paradise

Amber Jaccard

The crystal stars shimmer against the thick, velvet sky
The moon's reflection is blurred as wild horses dash through and trample the
mirrored stream
The trees with their flowing strands seem to tell a story in whispers
The winds, they set off a chill that has seeped down to my bones
The ground below serves as my fragrant pillow while the prickly strands of grass
poke at my neck
This is paradise, Mother Nature's Heaven . . . everlasting calmness, stillness.

Hey Crow

James Autio

I'm a stringer
between leafless trees
in a Minneapolis
ice grey morning.
They struggle, yet
hold their own
between imposing
and ancient factories.

Rounding
from 8th and down
some alley, I notice
abrasive brick sliding slow
beneath my touch,
so far removed
from the feel of skin.

If I could write to you,
I'd wax poetic
on streamers of industrial white
reaching for the skies,
and the lone crow
in our loading dock
eyeing me with
only mild interest.

Dad

Anonymous

Depressing gray socks cover the pungent smell of his worn-out feet. His jeans are worn at the knees from years of working on cars and the pockets worn from having them full of tools. His shirt smelling a hint of oil-scented cologne from his hobby of working on cars covers his semi-built body frame with a pleasant plumpness to it. The face is so sad and drawn down. Even from the distance at the end of the grimly white plaster-walled hallway, I can see the emptiness in his narrowly rounded eyes.

He gives me a hug and whispers gruffly soft, "I'm so sorry, I'll be alright." He doesn't want me to see him like this; I don't either.

I can no longer be strong: weakness falls upon me and tears fall like a treacherous rain inside, but only seep a little onto my trembling face. I have to be strong - on the outside.

I can feel his gruff unshaven whiskers, like a brillo pad, as he kisses me on the cheek. His sketchily trimmed mustache of fox red with a hint of gray showing through, tickles my face. He's not allowed to use a razor or a scissors, so this is going to be his look for a while. His widow-peeked, brown hair is hand combed through and messed up. The lighting gives a sickly white tint to his face. The hospital bracelet gives the final touch as it clings lifelessly to his wrist.

My dad was taken to the hospital two days ago from where he works. He had what they labeled a "nervous breakdown" at work and hauled him away in the ambulance. My whole family knew that my dad had a problem: he was always looking out for police cars and helicopters, afraid that they were "out to get him." It started back with his childhood, but for the past 12 years, has gotten progressively worse. We always tried to distract him and get him to think about something else; it worked at first, but after a while he was in his own world. It was as if he didn't have any consciousness about anything that was actually real around him - like his family.

We are only visitors to this unseen, forgotten floor. The woman pacing the hallway like the mother of Frankenstein and the old man who relives the war with every closing of his eyes, will probably live here permanently on the sixth floor.

My dad's eyes are empty, empty of a purpose, of a soul. So much distance between us now, I look back to remember and remind.

I remember once when I was watching Nick at Nite and the front door creaked open. I ran to the door, for I knew who it was.

"Hi Bug," dad would exclaim with a huge smile when I would run into his arms, clinging on as a daddy's girl would. He'd hold on just as tight and say, "How's my girl?" I'd tell him all the "exciting" details of my day and then we would relax together. We'd sit on the couch for a while as we watched Hitchcock's shadow introducing a new tale. That was a small portion of our father-daughter bonding time.

Sent up to bed unwillingly, my parents would tuck me in as snug as a bug in a rug. Refusing to go to sleep after an hour of lying there, I would start to cry. The overtired cries traveled just loud enough to be heard by my parents.

Dad would come up the stairs and ask, "What's the matter?"

"I don't want to go to bed," I'd stutter out.

"Come here," he'd say as he picked me out of my bed. He would rock back and forth and walk slowly around the room. He'd sing and hum in a low-toned voice, while holding little me in his big arms.

He would do this whenever I had nights like that, he would rock, sing, and hold me until I fell asleep. I don't remember what he'd sing, maybe he made it up, but I didn't care anyways - I just loved being held by him.

That memory of our closeness seems so long ago, now that I feel so distant. He's back from the hospital now, but nothing feels the same. It shouldn't really because nothing's been the same since I was almost six. We never have our father-daughter times or our little talks about whatever came to mind. Whenever he gets home from work, he sits down and watches T.V. or goes straight down to his workshop and works on odds-and-ends until dinners' ready. He's not the only one to blame; I'm gone a lot with my friends and boyfriend, but I miss him - a lot. He's trying really hard now to get better. He's seeing a psychiatrist and taking medication. My dad has a condition that is a possible chemical imbalance in the brain that causes him to feel paranoid; doctors call it fear. What a perfect name, fear, for it affects everybody who loves him. I'm afraid I'll never have my dad back.

The View
Amber Jaccard

The car rumbles on toward the dusk sky
From the front seat, baby blue, yellow and pink dance in my eyes
The grass is the greenest of green
And the road is the dustiest yet seen
The auburn sun is denying half of its glory
While the clouds blanket it,
Soaking up its story
The scent of pine borrows my nose
While the barren trees keep a still pose
The view releases me to a deep sleep
Coasting along to new scenes that bring on a humbled weep.



Jordan Leopold
John Kocon



Temperance River

Kristen Bleninger

Temperance River and Lake Superior

Kristen Bleninger

Lady Temperance goes to her lover,
leaping effortlessly over thunderous
waterfalls and jutting rocks.

Lover Superior tries to overwhelm her
with his moody rolls relentlessly
slapping the shore.

This is the natural order of
lovers with separate agendas—
She, moving out.
He, crashing in.

So too is it natural—
that small place where they meet
in a euphoric jumble of foam
twinkling in the sun.

Fifty-Dollar Bill

Adam Obremski

In one of the numerous gas stations in the city late at night, Billy entered the store after he filled the gas tank in his truck. A bell rang as he entered the store. He glanced at the nearby candy rack as a debate occurred in his mind: should he buy the king-sized Snickers bar? Normally, he would take one without much thought, but an epiphany in the disguise of a heart attack had struck him the previous week.

He fought with his inner demons. It was as though two little winged imps donned in armor traveled through a dimensional rip to eliminate each other for the best lackey status of their demon lord. They annihilated each other. . . Billy turned away to approach the counter. The floor felt a little slippery as he acknowledged the “wet floor” cones placed all over the store and the rising fresh lemon scent. Billy hummed to the generic Muzak tune played throughout the store while waiting for the clerk.

Meanwhile, a woman in her early 20’s sat in the back room putting the final touches on the assigned English Literature paper on her laptop. For an hour, she tried to stretch out the paper to meet the length requirements. The assignment involved giving her view on an aspect of Cat’s Cradle. She spent the first half of the night thinking of a topic – she eventually chose to write about Frank Hoenikker. The fairies of drowsiness overwhelmed her as she was watching the words on the screen blur.

She took a glance at the security monitor that hummed like a monk in solitude to her right. The woman sighted a chubby, middle-aged man drumming his hands on the counter. He kept himself occupied by staring at the various tobacco products behind the counter. . . either out of boredom or to avert his eyes away from the jar of cheap leftover Christmas candy mocking him.

The woman slowly tiptoed out of the back room to prevent the damp floor from grabbing her with its slippery mitts. She made her way behind the counter.

“Yeah, I got gas in the first pump,” Billy said to the blonde woman in glasses.

“M’kay,” she replied, ringing up his total on the cash register, “That’ll be \$14.23”

Billy took out a crisp, wrinkle-free fifty-dollar bill from his pocket and neatly placed it on the counter as though it screamed trinity. The clerk looked at the bill and said, “Ah, excuse me sir?”

“Yeah?”

“You can’t pay with a fifty-dollar bill.”

“Huh?” said Billy, whacked with the confusion rod, “Why can’t I pay with a fifty-dollar bill?”

“It’s store policy. No clerk is allowed to accept a fifty-dollar bill ever,” explained the clerk. “Do you have any smaller bills?”

“Listen. . .” Billy squinted to read the woman’s nametag. “Miranda. The smallest bill I have on me is a fifty.”

“You can pay with a check, credit, or debit card, you know,” Miranda replied.

“I don’t have a check, credit, or debit card on me. All I have is Mr. Grant here. I don’t understand why you can’t accept the money,” stated Billy calmly.

“I’m sorry, sir, but you can’t pay with the fifty-dollar bill.”

Billy grabbed the object with two fingers on each side of the bill. He held it in Miranda’s face.

“Look to the upper left hand corner of the bill. It says, ‘THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE’. I don’t know about you, but according to the ‘NOTE’, I can legally pay for my gas with this ‘LEGAL TENDER’.”

“Sir, you can’t pay with the fifty-dollar bill.”

Billy sighed. “Why can’t I pay with the fifty-dollar bill?”

“It’s store policy. No clerk is allowed to accept a fifty-dollar bill ever,” Miranda repeated.

“Why are you following store policy?”

“Because I’ll get fired if I don’t follow store policy. The sign is clearly posted on the counter, sir.”

Billy looked down on the counter to read the sign posted. It stated the following: NO CLERK IS ALLOWED TO ACCEPT BILLS BIGGER THAN FOURTY FOR PURCHASES LESS THAN THIRTY DOLLARS. He thumped

his head on the counter. He swore to himself the woman put a twenty-ton weight of annoyance there.

Miranda looked down and asked, "Are you okay, sir?"

He removed his head from the counter and blurted, "I can't believe you're wasting my time over something so trivial!"

"It's store policy. No clerk is allowed to accept a fifty-dollar bill ever," Miranda said for the third time tonight.

Billy turned around and pushed the giant cooler of a Coke over. Sleet of ice shavings and 20 oz. Coke bottles fell out of it.

"Damn it! I have a family who refuses to believe I exist! I have a loan shark to pay off! ARGH! I have better things to do than argue with some dumbass clerk!"

"You know, sir, you could buy other things up to thirty dollars,"

He ran up to Miranda and grabbed her by the collar of her shirt. His eyes twitched at her as he said, "I don't want to buy other things! I just want to pay for my damn gas!"

Despite Billy's arms clutching her, Miranda's expression appeared unchanged. She kindly replied, "You can't pay with a fifty-dollar bill."

Billy took a deep breath to quiet his inner-berserker as he released the Miranda from his grasp.

"Fine, then. I'll just take off without paying. You can call the police; I doubt they'll arrest when I explain how stubborn you were about a lousy fifty-dollar bill."

Billy folded the bill and slid it back into his pocket. He began walking out of the store. Miranda gasped at the thought of Billy leaving the store. If she allowed Billy to leave the store, she would have to call the police. Miranda recalled a similar incident occurring last month – it took the police until morning to complete the investigation. She tried to follow store policy, but sleep was a bigger priority. She refused to continue to dispute over something trivial herself, especially when she still had a store to close.

"WAIT!" Miranda exclaimed to Billy, "All right, I'll let you pay with the fifty-dollar bill!"

Billy stopped in his tracks (he was halfway out the door). He grinned at his little victory while executing a zero radius turn.

The Long Road Home

Joshua Fox

War isn't hell, living with the memories of war, that is hell."

– Richard Wagner

Georgia, I never got over how cold it got in the winter. It was late October, and with the wind and rain it felt as if needles pierced my face. Standing outside the bus station in Columbus smoking a cigarette, I wondered how this happened. As the cigarette burned down, I turned and walked back into the Greyhound station, a dirty, dim lit room with two old vending machines in the corner and six plastic blue chairs in the middle. An old man stood behind the counter at the far end of room, staring at me for a moment and then he said, "You AWOL boy? I'm not letting you on that bus with those fatigues on." Taking a deep breath, I tossed my duffel bag on to a chair, took off my jacket, tossed it on top of my bag, and walked up to the man. I paused before speaking and took another deep breath. The man looked up at me. His eyes squinted through his thick glasses, and the last of the hair on his head was wiry and stood almost straight up; he was a pathetic sight. "No, I'm not AWOL, and I will get on that bus wearing whatever I want." I bought a ticket to Anoka and turned to go sit down; as I did this he saw the patches on my left shoulder, "You a ranger huh?" I turned, looked at him, nodded, and sat down to wait for my bus.

I stood outside smoking one cigarette after another while waiting for the bus to arrive. A rusted out bus pulled up, half of the windshield had a crack in it, and the sign that said Greyhound was almost unreadable through the dirt caked onto the stainless steel exterior. It smelled like a sulfur mine. The door opened; I turned to toss my cigarette into a puddle when the driver shouted down to me, "G.I. Joe, all bags go underneath the bus." In front of me sat a fat black woman, barely squeezed behind the wheel. A cold rain began to fall; all I wanted was to go to sleep.

The Blackhawk hovered somewhere over Pakistan. Inside I looked around at my brothers, their faces painted; fear was now absent from our faces. This had happened so many times before that we were invincible. Again and again I checked over my weapon, pulling out and pushing in the magazine. I made sure there was a round in the chamber. I switched the rifle to safe and set it in my lap. The color had faded and it was a dark grey, no longer a deep black. The years shown in scratches, revealing the bright silver metal underneath.

Waking as the bus bounced over the curb, I looked out at the parking lot in Birmingham, Alabama. “Everybody off the bus!” the driver shouted as she waddled down the stairs.

Birmingham was a dirty city, and it seemed I was in the worst part of it. Garbage lay strewn across the street, homeless people walked constantly in to the station, just as often police were kicking them out. A man came up to me as I smoked in the first hours of that day, his face smeared with dirt; a scraggly beard grew wildly from his face. He asked me for a square. I gave it to him and lit it, and without saying a word he turned and walked away; he was barefoot and his feet were covered with cuts and scars.

I went to a pay phone and called my parents’ house—it rang and rang, and when the answering machine came on, I didn’t know what to say. I hung up the phone and sat back down. I felt defeat; I was being crushed between the past and future. I sat and fell into a daydream, thinking of my friends whom never again would I see.

The ropes went over the side; the dust billowed up as we fast roped down. As we hit the ground we formed a tight circle, huddled back to back. I felt the warmth of the guys to my sides as our shoulders pushed together waiting for the chopper to vacate the area before moving out. In the distance we could see mountains, the Himalayan foothills. I switched my weapon to semi-automatic before slowly standing to begin our patrol.

My head snapped up as I heard the intercom call for a bus to Louisville to begin loading. It was now going on five-fifteen in the morning; I grabbed my bag and walked out to board the bus. Spending my time on the bus, staring out the window, I watched the scenery as the sun came up across northern Alabama before finally dozing off.

Back in Pakistan, the cold wind that blew sand across the desert land stung like bees as it hit our hands and necks. We were walking a trail, and our ambush position was just ahead. I was at point; I knew we were close, but the sand made it hard to see into the distance. After a G.P.S. reading I moved forward, just another mile to go.

The bus came to abrupt halt as it slid into its space in Louisville, Ky. I looked up to see the man across staring at me with a fear in his eyes as if he had seen hell, and knew the pain of it. His eyes were wide. The white shined bright against his dark skin. I looked at him for a moment before sitting up. I couldn’t look back over at him; I stared at the floor as I stood and began to walk off the

bus, brushing my shoulders against the seats as I moved awkwardly down the row feeling his eyes burning into my neck like the fire of thousand suns.

Stepping off the bus, I grabbed my bag, lit a cigarette, and walked towards the bus station. I stopped by the door as I tried to regain my composure. “You were talking in your sleep there.” It was the man from the bus, “I heard ya, you were talking about death on that bus.” I looked down to his hands as I took the cigarette from my mouth; they shook slightly, the same way one might shake after being in a car accident. I tossed my cigarette to the ground as I said, “I sometimes do,” turned, and walked into the bus station.

The sun shone down bright through the cloudless sky. It had rained earlier that morning. Now steam rose from the streets as I sucked down cigarette after cigarette, trying to calm myself.

Finally the bus came. The repetition of loading was eerie, as if I had been doing it my entire life. Again I tossed my bag underneath, and again I smoked cigarettes until last call. When it came, I got in and sat down in the first seat. I hoped sitting in the front might keep me awake. I had slept most of the trip, but somehow I just felt more tired, more worn down, than I had ever felt in my life. Even before the bus left the station, my eyes burned with the intensity of hell; they grew heavy, and I knew fighting sleep was hopeless. I drifted between conscious and sleep as the bus slipped out of the city and onto the highway. The gentle rocking forced sleep upon me.

I unhooked my backpack as I switched my weapon to automatic; I wiped down my dust-smeared goggles. The sand was everywhere; it had gotten under my clothes and caused me to itch like I had a bad rash. I looked across the trail; through the dust I saw muzzle flashes, one, two, ten, then twenty, “They’re behind you too...”

The Chicago bus station was huge compared to the ones I had seen earlier; big televisions were hanging on the wall, there were restaurants inside the terminal, and it was packed with people hurriedly shuffling through the station. I was hungry and quickly found food. I liked the busyness of the station, I didn’t feel so alone with people all around me talking, eating, or watching television. Checking my last ticket, I now had a straight shot to Minneapolis. I went to phone, and as I dialed in the numbers from the calling card, my hands began to shake, my stomach churned. It rang and rang, each time seemed louder, the answering machine started, and I hung up.

It was now quite late, and I couldn't help but think about my parents, what they would think about me. I had no idea what I was going to do with my life; I always thought I would be in the Army until I retired. The bus pulled up, I quickly put out my cigarette, and I got on.

Finally I found a seat in the back, sat down, and pulled out a picture of my Ranger team; the picture was taken on a UN base in Kosovo after we had got back from our first combat patrol. I looked at the picture for what seemed like years, studying every face intently. Thinking of the past, I grew tired and my eyelids became lead as I fell into sleep.

I turned to see muzzle flashes from behind me; I fired through magazine after magazine of ammunition. Over the intercom I heard "whiskey six, we are under intense fire, three is down, six is down, two is down, five is down, seven is down, eight is down." The intercom was silent; I continued to fire my weapon as I crawled back under a ledge. Silence came; I stayed quiet as I looked around for motion. They were gone; looking down I saw blood on my pants. Christ, I had been hit too. I tried not to panic as I attempted to get hold of my base. Forever I got nothing, and then finally a reply—fire support was on the way. I hadn't even gotten a bandage on my leg, I hadn't been able to concentrate, my hands were colored in crimson as they pushed against my leg. The pain began to pour in; I was getting very dizzy as I heard the helicopter landing in the distance. I thought that this was a horrible place to die, in the middle of nothing. I didn't even know who shot me; I passed out as I heard a medic begin talking to me.

The bright lights of downtown Minneapolis awoke me. The station was small, and dirt clung to every surface. It looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in years. Across the station was a phone, so I went to it and picked up the receiver. I reached for change in my pocket, but I didn't want to call. I couldn't call.

The bus began to board; I finished my cigarette and got on, happy to be out of the cold. I settled myself into a seat in the front, the itchy fabric rubbed on the back of my head. The light streamed by as the bus made its way down the highway. I was anxious; I didn't know what to feel. I had made it, I was almost home, but now I was alone. It felt like I was the only one left on earth.

The bus stopped at a strip mall on the eastern side of Anoka. It had started to drizzle as I got off the bus and grabbed my olive green duffle bag. The driver looked down at me, "Are you home now soldier?" I looked back at the face of an old man, the wrinkles shown on his face even in the dark of the morning. Looking at me intently, he studied me, "I had to go home after my war

too. It didn't seem like my war was over either." He then closed the door and slowly pulled out of the lot. As I lit a cigarette, I thought of the words he said.

Home was four miles away; I wanted it to be farther. Even with all the time I had on the trip, it felt as if I still needed time to think. When I reached my house I was quiet, I sat on the front step and took my boots off. Slowly and quietly, as I had so many times before, I made my way to my room. The warmth was welcoming; it felt good on my damp skin. I undressed and crawled between the soft sheets of my bed. My mind ran until it could run no more, and I fell asleep, the only place I would ever see my brothers again.

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