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ET CETERA



THE MARSHALL UNIVERSITY LITERARY MAGAZINE

SPRING 1996

Marshall University
Student Anthology

Et Cetera

Spring 1996
Marshall University
Huntington, West Virginia

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Printed in the United States of
America

Awards

First Place Prose : Warren Reuschel - On The Stoop

Second Place Prose : Ryan Orwig - The Crossing

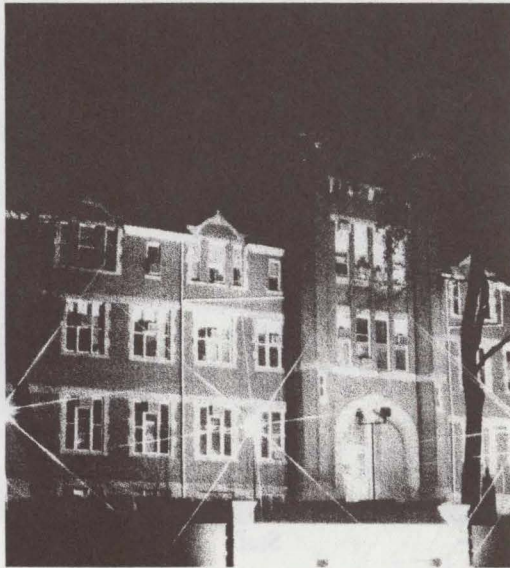
Third Place Prose : Angela Lilly - Cleaning Up

First Place Poetry : Ben Kline - The Priest's Operation

Second Place Poetry : Laura Tussey - Lilies

Third Place Poetry : Michelle Hodges - Playground Serenades

Honorable Mention : Shawn C. Ayers - Mr. Appalachia



Old Main At Night - Nadir Mirza

etc.

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First Place Fiction

On the Stoop

by Warren Reuschel

I never really thought that the rock was a potato, but I told Hannah about biting it anyway. We were sitting on her back stoop when the streetlight buzzed and clicked pink all of a sudden, and she asked me if I sometimes laugh about stuff that happened when I was little. I told her about the trilobite fossil I'd found in a shale barren, and it really did look like a potato. So much like a potato - - and I told her how I pretended that Incas had grown it and baked it for their chief, who said it was too hard, and he climbed the highest mountain in Peru and had thrown it as hard as he could. I bit the corner of it, not really believing it was a potato; I just felt like biting it.

Sometimes when I drive at night, by myself, I squint at the wind that comes through the windows, and dogs chase the car. I wonder about them biting the tires -- the dogs' big white teeth and pink and black spotted lips flapping against the rubber like loose chunks of pavement. I think about things like that and wonder what it feels like, and for a second I think that I might like to try. I wouldn't really bite a tire, but a potato is harmless enough, or a rock. Stuff feels different in your teeth and lips than in your hands, I guess.

etc

Hannah thought that it was funny that I bit a rock when I knew that it was a rock, and she laughed. She has these big eyes that crinkle up at the edges when she smiles, and they're good to look at. The wind wasn't blowing any that I could tell, and her hair was stuck to her forehead like wet newspaper -- soggy newspaper plastered above her eyes. her eyes are black, or brown - shadows -- like the unknown places under things, like when the sun stares down at the shale barrens, thirsty and mad, and dark spots form under the overhangs, fuzzy at the edges with moss, too. So dark, sort of calling to me. That's what I mean about her eyes.

Sometimes I just come out and say whatever I thought of, all of a sudden, and I think that Hannah likes that. Or she pretends to. It's hard to tell, those times when I think I recognize whatever is in her eyes, and I smile at her as wide as I can, but lots of times everything is overcast, all of a sudden. She doesn't look away or anything like that, but her eyes look different. When I look at the shale overhangs in the rain they're still dark underneath, but ominous, and I want to run home to be dry in a cotton blanket.

* * *

I told her about finding the finger, too.

There's the old guy that lives next door, out through those blackberry vines and multi-floral rose. You can see the top of his roof from here in the winter, when the canes are leafless and dry so that the briars are brittle and break off in your skin, and he has a metal stovepipe that runs up beside it. The pipe smokes out brown from the coal he burns, and the smoke goes up and then over, to the left and right, until it looks like a moldy cloud stretching to

etc_____

each side of the chimney.

He's got a bunch of cars and parts in his yard, where the powerline runs through and the trees are gone: Volkswagens, old International trucks, bare Detroit diesels, and tractors.

That's his job, fixing cars and trucks. Not like at Mr. Goodwrench, he buys them as junk and sells them as "good work car," "nice farm truck," or "dependable machinery." Every morning he gets up and drinks his coffee and rolls a cigarette, then heads out to the shop, which I suppose means his whole yard.

His name is Charlie.

He was working on a dump truck that one day. It was a really big one, with a broken grill like an old woman's mouth, and he had the bed raised. Chunks of old railroad ties were stacked under the hinge, and I remember smelling the coal miner's breath small of the tar. They soak those ties in the worst chemicals they can find, so that bugs won't eat them, I guess.

The timbers were too cracked and dried to hold any weight. That's for sure because he was cutting a bad spot out of the frame with his torches and he must have burnt a hose. It was like one big machine, the way the bed cracked through the wood slowly, then bright hydraulic fluid spurted and the bed crashed down and Charlie crawled out slowly. He stood there staring and sick, and the blood spurted, as far as the hydraulic fluid, like conservation of energy.

He taped the hole at this knuckle with duct tape, a big wad of it that circled his wrist and crossed between his thumb and middle finger, and left in his wife's Volkswagen to go to the doctor's.

Ginger is Charlie's German shepherd, and she's got a bad

etc.

leg. Charlie says she got bit by a copperhead on the hip, and he could be right -- the way she goes after snakes like they were rabbits and she were a beagle. But she walked right over there and sniffed the blood that was sprayed out on the grass, and she started licking it with her long pink tongue.

I didn't like watching that -- it was wrong, her licking up her master's blood and all. I pulled her away gently, by the scruff of the neck -- she probably didn't know whose blood it was -- and I locked her in the cab of the truck. She put her paws up on the window and left footprints; one of them was bloody and the other one was bright hydraulic fluid and orange dirt. I remember that.

The acetylene and oxygen were still hissing out of the torch nozzle, although the flame was out, so I crawled under the truck and turned them off, and got my knees bloody on the ground. Charlie's finger was laying there curled, as if an invisible person with one visible finger was lying there on the wet ground making a fist, or maybe holding something else invisible. I picked the finger up and straightened it out, and the open end of the finger gurgled, like a wet brittle crawldad going back into its hole.

* * *

Hannah asked me did I bite the finger to see what it felt like in my teeth. I laughed and told her No, that wasn't the point of the story, but she knew that.

That night the moon was one of those blue speckled cups, like a robin eggshell up there in a sky full of bats and mosquitoes. Hannah kept smacking her arms and scratching at her legs. Both arms and legs were bare, and she pulled her knees up to her soft

etc.

chest and hugged them tight with her arms, holding her wrists and rocking back and forth on the cement stoop. Part of the picture that I remember is the color of the skin on her legs, the color of butter melting under the streetlight. I don't know why I remember her legs as a big part of the picture, it's not like I was staring at them or anything.

She'd sigh occasionally, and I wondered why, but didn't ask. What would I say, "Why'd you sigh?" It sounds silly and it's a question that I wouldn't want anyone to ask me. But I wondered what she was thinking about, with me sitting there looking at her eyes, and legs, and the soft white between her chin and the third button of her shirt.

* * *

I told her about the time I drowned. I wondered at the time if she believed me, that I'd really drowned, and I almost decided not to tell her. But I didn't have anything else to say.

I was trout fishing in Glade Creek, probably a mile from where it runs into the New River, and bank is cut out of hard slate and above that is some crumbly sandstone.

There is a goat that lives down there -- nobody's goat I guess -- and he's black and white and has a broken horn. Usually he eats my lunch when I'm on the opposite bank of a deep hold, like he knows I don't want to splash across the cold water and scare the fish from biting. When I'm on the same side of the creek as my lunch, he won't come within rock-throwing distance. Not that I'd throw rocks at him, but I know that some people do. He gets along all right though; he's fat.

etc.

I like fly fishing, or at least I like to look at the flies, with their bright, fuzzy bodies and curving, barbed hook-stingers, like bees from a dream. But the brush is too thick there to use a fly-rod, so I use salmon eggs and a stick with some string. They're pink -- some are orange or yellow or green -- but I use the pink ones, and hide tiny golden hooks inside, and flip them out so that they land just above a frothy hold and float down. The idea is to float it right into the fish's mouth. They don't usually take off right away after biting it like a bass or a pike would, so you have to watch and make sure they don't swallow it; I jerk as soon as I see it going into their mouth because sometimes I can't even feel it.

The water splashes up on the slate shelves when it's high, and that's a good time to catch fish. I caught fourteen trout one morning, and two of them were tiny brown native trout. You really know what you're doing when you can catch native trout.

Anyways, I was standing right on the slate shelf and that goat was eating my lunch on the other bank, and I wave my arms and yelled and fell straight in. Glade Creek is cold -- any trout stream's cold -- and it's fast. I tried to swim but the current pushed me underneath the shelf and I drowned. It probably took only a few minutes, because I was so scared and cold, but I seemed like a long time. I looked up -- I guess that's the only natural direction to look when you're under water and want out -- and the whole sky was gray and green.

I woke up with water in my nose, way up in the back where it burns. A fat man with a big mustache was wiping his mouth and looking at me like I'd rose from the dead. I suppose I did, in a way. He asked me was I all right, and I coughed and nodded, and

etc_____

he shook his head. He looked like a walrus.

He asked if I knew how long I'd been under, and I told him that I hadn't looked at my watch. I didn't think of it at the time, but they always say, "Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer." I think he was mad, he just said something about me owing my life and stomped away.

People are weird like that. I didn't know how long I'd been under water, and I didn't care. He left a nice pocket-sized tine of flies on the ground beside me, though. I kept them.

It's hard to remember what it was like being dead, if I were dead, but it must have been cold. I remember screaming and yelling, and only water went through my voice box. Probably scared the hell out of a fish or two. When you breathe in water it is nothing like breathing in air: it moves slower and feels colder. I shivered for a long time that day.

* * *

Hannah was still looking at the moon when I finished telling her the story, and I quit talking and everything was quiet for a long time. Then she looked at me and asked, Was that all?

I nodded and she smiled again, one of those real ones like when you suddenly see something that you like. She was looking at me, though. I didn't say anything because I couldn't think of anything to say. She just kept looking at me with those eyes, all of the inviting darkness pulling at something in my chest.

In the moonlight in the shale barrens, the dark places under the rocks are black, deep patches that fade to purple at the edges, where the moss curls wetly and send up stiff saprophytes. Those

etc _____

moonlight shadows are bigger than the shadows caused by the dry sun, and they are softer. Every time I'm in the barrens at night I feel like crawling up close on my hands and knees and having a look insides. Don't know what I'd expect to find, really.

I didn't have anything to say, no more stories to tell, and I didn't like just sitting there saying nothing. I looked at Hannah for a minute or two, and Hannah sighed and I looked back down.

Hannah's face was right in front of mine, and I could see straight into her eyes. I might have gasped; her eyes were so close and pulling so hard that I don't know what I'd have done next. Probably something silly like clearing my throat or sniffing. My chest felt strangely tight, like the inside of a rock, or a potato. I felt her fingers, alive and very gently curved, reaching for my arms. Then I felt her lips. I mean she kissed me with her lips, and I couldn't breath. And it was like drowning, I remember thinking, but a little bit different.

~*~

etc_____

Second Place

The Crossing

by Ryan Orwig

We pushed off into the dark waters of the Blue Hole. As my inner-tube drifted away from the river bank, I looked back to see if Zack was with me and saw not his face but the shape of his face hidden in a hood of darkness. Down river, beyond the bend at the end of the Blue Hole, the rapids roared and churned like some fabled storybook creature, daring us to float too close. But we were not going that far. We were crossing.

"You were too afraid to do this alone," Zack told me as the moon brought his face back from shadow. His small body shivered in the contrasting heat of the summer night and the coolness of the mountain water. "Tellin me that witches woulda got me if I stayed at home was an out-and-out lie. You're just afraid."

"Shut up," I told him. "We got to stay quiet."

"Why? There's nobody to hear us. . ."

"No *body*, maybe, but definitely some *thing*. If you're not quiet, you'll wake up the ole Blue Devil himself, and if you thought all that stuff about witches was bad, just listen to this." I had never heard much about the 'Devil except the name, but Zack needed a good story to keep his imagination occupied while we crossed, so I cooked one up.

etc_____

“Long ago, when Granny was still a little girl, the train tracks ran a lot closer to the river than they do today. The trains carried people from here to town and back all the time. So the tracks were more crowded then, more than coal from the mines, you see. Sometimes, they had accidents. Not like car crashes where people lose control and wipe out. Nope, train accident happen when someone messes up real bad and two trains ram into each other. Full speed. And the biggest train wreck ever seen in these parts happened right up on that bank,” I said, pointing to the opening we had come from, now a blotted shadow.

“Was there an explosion?”

“Sure. A big one. It killed a lot of people and destroyed the railroad tracks. Twisted them like pretzels.”

“The Blue Devil did it?”

“Oh, no, no. The explosion was so big that it blew one of the engines all the way to the river. It landed in the middle of the Blue Hole and sunk, never to be seen again.”

“Must’ve been a big explosion . . .”

“It was! But the engineer . . .”

“Who’s that?”

“The guy who drives the train. He was still alive when the engine hit the water.”

“How?”

“He just was,” I told him, tired of his questions. “And when the engine sank to the bottom of the Blue Hole, he was trapped. Forever. And the Blue Devil is his ghost.”

“Can people go down and touch it? The train engine?”

“Not even the older boys. That’s how deep the Hole is, out here in the middle. Might as well be bottomless. So now the Blue

etc _____

Devil haunts this place looking for little kids like you to keep him company down below, so I'd keep quiet if I were you."

"You sure are talkin a lot."

I let in that I was serious, and he was quiet again. We drifted through the crystal-black waters as the ripples from our tubes danced with the moonlight. The approaching bank of the river towered above us like a great walled shadow-fortress whose true identity was given away only by the few up-turned rhododendron fronds that caught and absorbed the moon's pale illumination. We drifted into the forbidding shroud of the fortress and onto the sandy bank; both of our thoughts were of witches and dying. Below, the moon continued to dance with the water, no leaping in white bursts like herds of albino deer racing over white-washed rocks on into oblivion.

We slipped our giant tubes into the low, open spaces beneath the canopy of rhododendron. Our water-slicked bodies, sleek and tanned, trembled in the slow summer breeze. The moon was still with us, peeking through the foliage and speckling us with silver camouflage as we walked the old trail to Uncle Dice's. The path opened into a wide field, its boundaries kept secret by the night. At the far corner was our Uncle's house, where he lay dying. It was his last night alive, and I had come to see him.

"What about Jam?" asked Zack. We were far enough from the river for him to speak, I suppose.

"Aunt Jam? I know. She'll be there."

"You scared of her?"

For a minute, I was quiet. "Yeah. Yeah I am."

Zack swallowed with a gulp. And who wouldn't be afraid of a real-life witch? We'd both seen her, plenty of times, She was

etc.

old, with millions of hard, brown, callused wrinkles covering her wicked face. Each one was so deeply grooved it cast its own shadow. She was stiff and rigid and her bones pointed like rotted wood on a scarecrow.

“Is she a real witch?”

“Pretty sure.”

“She the reason Dice is dyin tonight?”

“Don’t know,” I told him. “Ma said tonight was his last one, and that we couldn’t come see him. I figure it’s because of Aunt Jam.” We rarely saw her while visiting our camp across the river. She never came around. To avoid bewitchment and hexes, we thought it was best to keep a safe distance from Jam. Always hateful-looking when we’d yell witch-chants at her from the woods, she’d just turn and go into the house. During the day, she didn’t know happiness and was always quiet, bent over and worn out. It’s because she stays up all night witching. And now she was with my old, dying Uncle. And I had to see what happened when people die.

The old house, set low to the ground, was sinking into the earth, the spine of the roof sagging in the middle. Veins of splintering green paint coursed throughout the house’s walls like the scales of a great fallen lizard. Without a sound, we reached the outside of Dice’s room. Chips of yellowing white paint fell like dead leaves from the window sill as, with Zack behind me, we looked through the window for our first glance of a dying man. My glance became a stare. No color lit Dice’s face; the hint of playfulness was gone from his eyes. I was wrong to want to see him, wrong to see him dying. As I tried to look away, an uneasiness swelling in my gut, Aunt Jam entered the room. I

etc.

ducked down, breathing heavily and shaking a bit. Zack was beside me, huddled into a ball. His face, again veiled in the night, was this time betrayed to me by the electric blue light of the pulsating bug-zapper from around the corner. Tears crept into his eyes.

"I didn't want to see that, see him like that. He was always fun, playing jokes."

"I know," I whispered.

"Good," he whispered with a touch of justification. "He's almost dead . . . why'd you want to see him that way? Don't make me see any more."

"Of course not."

He pulled back against the weathered paint, tightly hugging his tiny legs. I then found myself standing, again facing Dice's room. Jam moved to him in silence, sat on a stool beside him. In her hand was a glass jar filled with seething witch's brew. She drew it to her shriveled lips, sipped easily, tenderly, then sighed an old, tired sigh. I'd never heard of a spell that started with that. Her free hand, chiseled from vein and bone and covered in splotches of light and dark, lowered slowly, unsure of its destination, to gently touch Dice's face. In the moment of their absolute intimacy, she looked at Dice with her tired old eyes and abandoned the stiff, rigid posture I had always known.

She whispered a secret to my Uncles, creasing her grooved leather face with a subtle smile of sadness. Instead of turning away, I watches as she bent down and, with her desert-dry lips, kissed Dice good-bye. It was not a hot and deep kiss of passion seen in the movies, nor was it my parent's kiss of passing habit. She kissed him firmly, knowingly, and though it was only for a

etc_____

quick moment, it was a kiss that told the tale of their long lives, accepting the good and the bad and everything else. It must have been a kiss of love, a kiss of love's end. And as I watched the ritual, I stole from my uncle the private secrets of that love; I soiled it, spoiled it, ruined Aunt Jam's kiss. So, like the thief I had become, I turned and tried to steal away into the night.

I sulked away, turning my back to the lighted house, turning my mind from how I had somehow wronged my uncles. But my retreat into the darkness was too hasty, and I left Zack behind.

"Wait!" He tripped and fell against an old fire drum; the crash of rusted metal echoes in rhythmic throbs across the open field splitting the silence of solemn night. I stood frozen as I heard the grating of a window opening behind me. My heart stopped cold when I heard what followed:

"Boys? Jake, Zack What are you doing out there?" It was Jam, and the summer air grew noticeably warmer. I collected Zack, a fumbling mess in the face of our witch, and walked back to the window to face her.

To our surprise, she invited us in to pay our respects to Dice. Though Zack resisted, pushing his bare chest to my back, I accepted the invitation. It was all right. We walked into his room; the smell of old people -- rub-on ointments, Mylanta, coffee grounds, aspirin, hot mist from vaporizers, peppermint, a hint of mildew -- oozed from every corner of the room. In the stuffy air, she ushered the two of us toward Dice.

I stood over him.

"He's dead," Jam told me.

"I know," I said, stumbling for words. "I've . . . never seen someone dead. Not for real."

etc.

"That's too bad," she said, sadness in her wavering old voice. "Too bad that you had to see him like this. I've seen more than my fair share of dead friends in my life."

Behind us, Zack was scoping the room out, looking for broomsticks or caldrons, no doubt. "I'm not going to see any more," he said. "Not tonight."

"Fair enough, dearie," she told him, turning to face him slowly, steadily.

"You're not a witch, are you? Not really?"

"I don't think so, Zack. I don't think so."

I couldn't believe he said that to her. "We're sorry, Aunt Jam. About everything. But we'd better go now."

"If you think you've seen what you came for, that's all you can do, I suppose. And don't worry, I won't tell your momma you boys were here."

"Thanks."

"How w going to get past that old Blue Devil this time? Won't he get us?" asked Zack as we walked to the door.

"That old Blue Devil got you scared, Zack?" asked Jam.

"What've you got to be scared of him for?"

"Jake said . . ."

I nudged him with my elbow. No need to let him bore Aunt Jam with my story, I figured.

"That old Blue Devil is a good old spirit, boys. He's the guardian angel of that whole swimming hole." She eased her wiry frame down to rest on the fractured wooden step of the front porch, a smile lighting her pruned face. "He was probably with you two the whole time you crossed. He's a good spirit, I'd say."

"So if he's a spirit, was he alive once?"

etc_____

"I reckon so." The light from the house at her back illuminated her delicate frame, the rays of light caressing her narrow bones like a summer mist. She was a perfect old lady. And I couldn't even see the wrinkles any more. Not really.

"What happens to Uncle Dice now?" Zack asked.

"He goes on, to a better life. He'll be an angel in God's Silver City in the sky. He won't feel pain and he won't know sadness. He'll certainly watch over you two, guard you."

I never held much to God and heaven and angels with harps and all that junk, but coming from Jam, I didn't even question it. I hope she was right.

We sat on that rickety old porch -- me, my little brother, and Aunt Jam -- and enjoyed the country silence of the summer night and, through the restlessness of crickets and the distant churning of rapids, we enjoyed each other's company. It was good to be there with Jam, talking about heaven and ghosts and Dice. We spent much of the night on that old porch, facing the blackness of the field ahead and the vast shining blueness of the cosmos beyond, talking and listening and wondering. And as long as we sat there, we didn't once talk about witches.



etc_____

Third Place

Cleaning Up

by Angela Lilly

Get off me, Serena thought, as Jacob pushed his pathetic organ into her. She moaned, writhed, did all the things her mother had taught her of so long ago -- well, not so long ago, thirteen years. On the eve of Serena's wedding, her mom had told her three main points about marital sex:

1.) "Always make a lot of noise, sweetie. That way he'll think you enjoy it."

2.) "If you know he is going to want sex, take some Pepto Bismol beforehand so that the rocking won't make you sick."

3.) "If he's small, feel lucky."

Jacob climaxed and Serena screamed and thrashed, crying out "Oh Jacob, I love you!" He wiped his smelly sweat off of her forehead, where it had dripped, much like their kitchen faucet had ever since Jacob had tried to fix it.

"Honey, that was the best yet," he said with such vulnerable emotion that an onlooker probably would not guess it was the punch line to every performance. Serena smiled and kissed his moist cheek before getting up to go into their bathroom. She sat on the toilet -- it was one of those cushioned types that whistled when you sat down -- and peed. Then she grunted and pushed,

etc_____

trying to force his smelly semen from her bored body. Wiping with the "cottony-softness" to her right, she grimaced in stinging pain. God, how I loath this messy marital duty, she thought, as she flushed the shiny toilet.

She walked back into their sand colored bedroom ("... harder to see dirt if everything is dirt colored," her mother often said) and saw that Jacob had fallen asleep. Ignoring his sleeping form, she released the sheet holders on all four corners of the bed in order to change the now soiled sheets.

"Jacob? Get up. I need to change these," she said as she tugged on the sheet around his head. Moaning, he pulled himself into a sitting position and leaned against the headboard.

"Why don't you wait a while and lie with me?" he asked, eyeing her less than ample bosom.

"You don't actually expect me to lie in that mess, do you?" she said and looked at him as if looking at a brainless rag doll who had suddenly begun the habit of trying to speak.

"Of course not Serena. What the hell could I've been thinking?" He said this while getting his short, staunch form up off the bed and walking into the bathroom. He slammed the door and Serena pulled the sheet off the bed with one hard tug. As she wadded up the soiled bundle and stuffed it into the hamper by the bathroom door, she felt a sense of relief.

* * *

Serena brought the knife down hard upon the rooty carrot, slicing it first horizontally then into paper thin half-moons. Little, orange UFOs, she thought. How I would love to go to Mars and

etc.

sweep up the red planet's dust. No more people. Just me and a broom. She continued fantasizing about the planet nearest her own as she spread peanut butter onto crisp, green stalks of celery. What did Jacob call celery? Oh, that's right. Dirty water. And mushrooms were classified as rubber dirt. God, how she hated his ingenious analogies. Serena felt that Jacob always compared things she loved to dirt because he liked to mock her cleanliness. As she carefully placed mushroom slices on top of the creamy, chicken casserole, she remembered their last discussion on dirt.

* * *

"Just leave it alone, Serena!" Jacob said, as she bent over to place a coaster under his sweating glass of iced tea.

"And let it form rings on the table? I don't think so." She picked up a coaster.

"Serena, don't push it."

"Jacob, I will not let your laziness destroy our home." She placed the glass on the coaster and took her ever-present cloth out of her pocket to wipe away the wet ring left on the table.

"Serena, you're impossible." Jacob stood up and grabbed his tea. "We're not living. Do you understand that? This . . ." he raised his hands -- palms up glass tipping precariously -- ". . . is like living in a damn hospital!"

"Serena ignored his speech and kept her eyes glued to the sloshing glass.

"You're going to spill that."

He stared at her as if seeing a ghost, and with one arm still raised above his balding head, he poured his tea all over their

etc_____

white couch.

"Oops," he said softly, looking like a rebellious child. Serena stared at the spreading stain for only a second before flinging her cloth down on the liquid and rushing into the hallway. She grabbed her Woolite upholstery cleaner and got to work on the couch.

* * *

Thanks to her quick reflexes, you could not even see where the tea had once been. Jacob would someday realize how lucky he was to have her clean up his immature messes. Serena thought this as she removed the burned casserole.

"Shit!" she said upon seeing her unfortunate creation. She heard the garage door creaking open and hastily began pulling the odorous, blackened topping off of the casserole. Jacob entered the kitchen right as the lid to the trash can closed with a metallic clang. Placing his leather briefcase on the bar and tossing his worn corduroy jacket onto a stool, he went and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator. Flipping the tab, he viewed his obviously frustrated wife over the top of his can.

"You OK, hon?" he asked after taking a hardy swallow of the amber liquid.

"Yes. Just tired. How was work?"

"Fine. Fine. Bill said I may still have a shot at that promotion."

"Even after you lost that last case?"

"Yep."

Serena reached above the bar for plates and glasses. Then she walked over to their small, glass table and set it.

"Is dinner ready? I thought I smelled something burning

etc _____

when I came in.” Jacob crushed his can with his palm before placing it in the trash.

“It’ll be on in a minute. Go change and I’ll fix it up.”

“OK.”

They ate dinner in a silence that was only broken by the unpleasant howling of a neighbor’s beagle.

* * *

“Mother is coming for the weekend,” Serena yelled to Jacob through the bathroom door.

“Great.”

Serena sat on the toilet and sighed as Jacob’s sarcastic response hit her ears. He loathed her mother and never had hid the fact of it either.

“Jacob, please be nice to her this time. She only says things because she cares.”

“That’s a load of carp, Serena! Your mother has never liked me and every time she visits she nags me. Sometimes its like I was born with two mothers.”

Serena shook her head, causing her red curls to sway. She wiped, flushed, and then began to undress her tall, lanky form. Bending over, she turned on the bathtub faucet and adjusted the temperature slightly too hot. Then she poured a generous amount of lavender bubble bath into the faucet’s stream.

“Are you going to be in there much longer?” Jacob asked.

“Jacob, you’re not deaf. You hear my bath water running. Of course I am. Go downstairs if you need the bathroom.”

He sighed loudly, and then she heard his retreating footsteps going down the stairs. She turned to face the iridescent bubble-filled bathtub and sighed in anticipation. Turning off the water,

etc_____

she slipped her too tired, freckled body into the streaming liquid.

“Ahhh . . .” her breath expelled as the warmth surrounded her. Time to relax, she thought. Hopefully Jacob will fall into the toilet and accidentally flush himself to Hell. As she soaked her tense muscles, she thought about her husband. She was not sure exactly when his messiness had begun, but she did know it not only started after they were married, but had also become increasingly worse over the years. In the past few months their fights had become more venomous and more frequent. Jacob knew how Serena liked her house kept clean, knew how much she disliked messes, and yet he kept creating new ways to make them.

Just last week, he had come in the house from mowing and raking the lawn with grass clumps sticking to his worn out sneakers. She had watched in horror as he had walked, looking at her in what seemed like triumph, all over the just mopped, white and teal checkered, kitchen linoleum.

“Jacob! Take off those shoes!” Serena said while hurrying to get the broom and dustpan. “Good God! You know better than to track shit in here!”

He looked at her and smiled, showing his smoke-stained, uneven teeth.

“Shut up, Serena.”

She had looked up from her squatted position, dustpan flat to the floor and hand-held broom in mid-sweep.

“What?”

“I said shut up. I live here and I’ll do as I damn well please.”

Serena had turned her back on him and swept up his mess.

“Well, I’d appreciate it if you’d do what you want outside.”

Serena had heard him walk out of the kitchen and into the white

etc.

carpeted living room, grimacing at the thought of the mess he would leave in there.

Now, lying in the tub, the bubbles slowly dissolving into the water, she thought about how much she was growing to despise his repeated household rule disobedience. She truly felt that her marriage was a mistake from the beginning that was just now showing its festering head.

She reached down with her long fingers to release the drain stopper. Standing up, she surveyed her body in the adjacent vanity mirror and frowned -- as she always did -- at what she saw. There standing wet and naked, was what she normally referred to as her "little orphan Annie" looks. Not a compliment in her book. Especially since her breasts never had come out of their pre-pubescent state (she wore a 32-AA bra). Her skinny legs seemed all bones and skin -- no form or shape to be seen. But she was well groomed and always "squeaky" clean.

She dried off and took her routine teaspoon of Pepto Bismol before stalking out into the bedroom. Jacob was sitting up in the bed reading the local newspaper. She slipped under the crisp, cotton sheets and turned her boney back toward him.

"Good night," she said. He leaned over and kissed her shoulder.

"Night, hon."

* * *

On Friday evening, the doorbell rang signaling Serena's mother, Joan, had arrived. Jacob, after saluting Joan with his middle finger (through the windowless door), opened the door to greet her.

"Hello, Joan."

etc.

“Why Jacob! How are you? Are you trying to grow a beard?”

Jacob raised a hand to his chin and shook his head.

“No, I shaved this morning.”

“Oh? Must be that five o’clock shadow Serena complains of.” Joan smiled and brushed past him into the small, brown foyer. “My luggage is in the car, Jacob.”

Serena stood behind Jacob to give her mother a welcoming embrace. “Hi, mom. How was the trip down?”

“Bumpy as usual. You really should write to your mayor about those roads. I probably gave myself a case of whiplash.”

Serena smiled -- lips drawn tightly over her teeth -- and took a suitcase from Jacob as he entered the door.

“I’ll put this in the guest room, mom. Why don’t you get freshened up for dinner?”

“Yes, right. Don’t want to eat the nasty bacteria I picked up at those rest areas. Jacob, have you washed your hands?”

“Not yet, Joan.” Jacob shot an annoyed glance in Serena’s direction that was met with an icy stare from Serena.

Serena turned and went up the spiral staircase that led to the bedrooms. She placed her mother’s suitcase on the recliner by the bed. She heard her mother coming up the stairs, and sat on the blue and cream patterned quilt to wait for her.

“So how are things, Serena?”

“OK I guess.”

“I noticed the house was all clean and fresh smelling. For me?”

“No. I keep it clean. All the time.”

etc.

“Good girl.” Joan sat down on the bed beside her daughter and began taking bobby pins out of her once natural, now dyed, red hair, letting the full length of it fall down on her frail shoulders. “Are you still having problems with Jacob?”

“Yes,” Serena answered.

“Oh?”

“He won’t listen to me, mom. He says it’s his house too.”

“But doesn’t he want a clean house?”

“I don’t think so. A couple of weeks ago he said he felt like he was living in a hospital.”

“That’s quite a compliment,” Joan said.

“Yeah, but not in his eyes.”

“Of course.”

They spoke for a few more minutes about hometown gossip before heading downstairs, closeness confirmed, for dinner.

* * *

They were all sitting around the kitchen table, sipping hazelnut flavored coffee, when Jacob decided to go work on their boat’s engine. He got up to change into his grease monkey clothes and knocked over his coffee. The warm, black river streamed in all directions, both on the table and the floor. Serena gasped and jumped up out of her chair to grab a washcloth.

“Goddamnit Jacob! Be careful!”

“I’m sorry.”

Serena continued sopping up the newest mess as she yelled at him.

“No you’re not! You’re always making messes just so I’ll

etc _____

have to clean them up!"

"That's enough Serena! It was an accident!" Jacob said.

Getting up off her knees, Serena threw Jacob a glance meant to melt steel and marched to the sink to rinse out her cloth.

"No it wasn't. I'm so sick of you not appreciating me. Sick! Sick! Sick!" Serena said through clenched teeth, her back to Jacob. He stood silently behind her. She turned.

"Get outside to your damn boat!"

"Serena! I said I was sorry!"

"Sorry? Sorry! Good Lord, Jacob! Do you really think I'm so stupid? Do you? Well I'm not! I can't live with this shit anymore! I want a divorce!" She stood there, chest expanding as she practically panted in her anger. Jacob and Joan stared in disbelief and shock.

"What did you say?" Jacob asked -- face white.

"I want a divorce. Go live with your father's pigs. That's where you should've stayed thirteen years ago."

A silence fell on the room so thick with tension that Serena felt she might suffocate. She had said it. She had said what she had been needing to. As she thought this, Jacob sank onto a stool and stared wide-eyed at the wall behind her head.

"I think I'll start cleaning up this mess," Joan said, picking up the dirty- coffee filled plates on the table.



etc_____

Waiting

by Donna Balsler

I glanced at my watch, then nervously tucked the edges of my brown curly hair behind my ears but the curls fluttered out around my face only three seconds later. Would he actually show up? I ran my middle finger around the rim of my stubby water glass, watching the sweat dribble down the side and absorb into the white cotton tablecloth underneath. I looked up when I heard the entrance door swing open, tinkling the bells hanging above it, but it was only an elderly couple wearing hideously out of style pastel yellow, blue, and orange cotton shirts with flared pants. They clung to each other like giddy newlyweds to the disgust of the patrons sitting nearest the wait station. I watched as they bounced along behind their waitress who abandoned them in a dim corner. Whether she was giving them privacy or hiding them from the other eaters, I didn't know.

Why couldn't my parents have been like that, I wondered. Sure, I guess it would have been embarrassing to take them anywhere, especially when they would have insisted on hugging and kissing me at every major function and event in front of all the cute boys in high school. I snorted when I imagined the couple

etc_____

that just came in being my parents and slobbering all over each other in congratulations when I won first place at the state science fair. But I guess that would have been better than having one parent missing everything I ever did throughout middle and high school. I still fantasized occasionally I had a secret time machine I could use to go back and change all the horrible things that happened in my life from being picked on by the uppity clique in my sixth grade class to having food poisoning from beef bar-b-que in a can. Sometimes I even imagined that I could go back and stop Mom and Dad from divorcing.

I blew out my breath, flapped my flimsy fine bangs then fluffed them gently with my hand, afraid that I had screwed up my appearance. Maybe I could at least change the future and help make up for the past. That is, if he ever gets here, I thought, glaring at my watch. Five thirty-seven. Instead of looking up, I studied my arm for a while, watching the golden sweep hand as it click-click-clicked its way up to twelve then down and up again. For some reason it reminded me of a slow treading waterwheel, scooping up time and throwing it away somewhere else. When I got bored with that, I started playing with the fastener, pulling the band out of the third notch, pushing it back, pulling it out, pushing it in.

I twisted my head around when I heard the door again, but this time it was a younger couple with a girl about eight or so who was screaming for strawberry pie smothered in whipped cream. The girl's bellows echoed off the ceiling and walls to bounce into my eardrums like sharp, hot knitting needles. I shook my head, both to make my ears quit ringing and to express disgust. Why couldn't parents make their kids mind anymore? Everywhere I go

etc _____

I see brats. Sheesh, all my mom had to do was give me a dirty sideways look and I was ready to cower. Of course, I was always wimpy anyway, but still. I certainly am not going to have kids anytime this century if they're going to bring home friends like that.

I checked my watch again. Five forty-two. He's almost fifteen minutes late. I hope he's not having trouble finding the place. No, it wouldn't be he can't find it - Tommy's Italian Restaurant is better advertised than breakfast cereals on Saturday mornings. I couldn't imagine him having a problem finding this place with billboards and signs over the entire city. I mean, they only make the best pasta in the state. Nah, check that, I thought, the best pasta in the whole continent. In spite of my nervousness, my stomach grumbled, longing to work on some fresh fluffy breadsticks with a hint of garlic and hot gooey strands of feticini blanketing tender strips of sliced grilled chicken breast and covered with spicy alfredo sauce and parmesan cheese. Oh, man, and don't forget the chilled romanoff salad, my stomach reminded me, with its oozing thousand island dressing layered over crisp lettuce leaves, firm tomato slices, and crunchy bits of golden carrots and juicy cucumber chunks. Then I would finish off with a giant slab of homemade cherry cheesecake made with at least three packs of cream cheese, and not the no-fat kind either.

As if she had telepathically heard my stomach and came to rescue it, Shelly, my waitress, popped up behind me, nearly causing me to flip my silverware onto the floor since I had become oblivious to everything except the wafting scent of tomato sauces and garlic.

"Are you ready to order yet, ma'am?"

etc

My stomach begged my mouth for a "yes," but I decided that I should at least wait until six o'clock before I ordered; I didn't want him to think I was too impatient or that I never ate or something.

"Uh, no, I think I'll just wait a little longer for my friend, thanks."

Shelly nodded politely, but I could tell she thought I was waiting for a date, and from the look on her face, she wanted to tell me, "Look, honey. You've been stood up so you might as well order and enjoy yourself without a man." But I smiled anyway; if only she knew who I was truly waiting for and why, she would have thought I was nuts and called the local funny farm to pick me up. Who knows, maybe she would be right.

As she walked to the next table, I started to wonder why I was there. What did I have to say to the man after eight years that wouldn't be full of profanity and hate? The last time I talked to him before yesterday was when I was twelve years old; he'd disappeared shortly after his mother's funeral. I hadn't thought much of his leaving then because that had been typical behavior of his since I was three; there was never a time in my life when he'd had played a big role. I remembered the two years before I turned fourteen, waiting for him to pop up again as he had always done, but he never did. No phone calls to ask how we were doing without him, no birthday, Christmas, or Easter cards in the mail, no presents for any of the holidays. By the time I had turned fifteen, I had given up waiting for Dad to come home again.

So why did I suggest meeting him here? Why did I suggest meeting him at all? What kept me from being so bitter that I was able to tell him over the phone that I loved him yesterday? My

etc.

brother, Ricky, refused to speak to Dad when he tried calling him, and Rick hung up on me when I tried convincing him to come with me today. But I couldn't blame him - since he'd been five years older than me during the active years of Dad's running in and out of our lives, he'd seen far more of the worse side of Dad than I had. Like the time when Rick had his front teeth knocked out at Little League practice. Dad didn't even notice the gap in his teeth, though Ricky pointed it out, until they got home and Mom asked what happened. Ricky was still bitter over having caps instead of his real teeth. The worst part of the story was that those teeth had only grown in a few months before that, or so Mom told me since I was too young to remember the incident for myself.

But that still didn't explain why I had come. After all, my time with Dad wasn't all peachy-keen either and I'd been on the receiving end of much of the crappy stuff he'd done too. The fifth grade carnival was a good example that came to my mind. I had sat outside for four hours straight, the entire time of the carnival, waiting to see Dad's red Lincoln churn up the dust on the little dirt road in front of our trailer. Two hours after the carnival ended, he wandered home. Dad apologized when I complained, saying he thought I wouldn't want to go since I had developed a sore throat earlier, but he forgot it was only because I'd been to the dentist having my teeth coated with some kind of plastic film crap to prevent cavities and I accidentally swallowed some. Years later I found out that he'd spent the entire afternoon at one of the local bars instead of home with us.

Maybe that was why I was here, I thought. Maybe he finally kicked his drinking and knew what a screw-up he mutated into and wanted to start over. I shook my head and curled my lips

etc _____

slightly, enough that I felt one side of my face twist and pucker slightly. I remembered the dozens of times I heard him come home from Florida telling us how he'd joined AA and was going to stop drinking. But before he always left again, he'd meander in smelling like the old Dad which I didn't know was alcohol until I was almost sixteen. He always promised us he'd quit, but he never tried, so why should I presume he'd be sober this time either?

I flicked my middle finger against my glass, listening to the faint ching-ching-ching sound echoing through the water before I took a sip of the lukewarm liquid moving around semi-melted ice cubes. Dad wasn't all bad, I admitted, and even Mom had said Dad always had a good heart and would give you anything you ever wanted so long as he had the money to buy it. It was just that long before Mom and him married, he decided that alcohol was all-important and let it dictate what he should do in life. At least that's what I had always been told when I asked why Dad kept leaving us. Maybe that's why I didn't blame him now, but it didn't stop the hurting I still felt even after all these years.

But all my times with Dad weren't bad, I reminded myself before I became too depressed. I forced myself to smile when I remember the Easter before I turned ten. Dad drove fourteen hours from Florida to our place, and it was almost ten-thirty by the time he showed up, way past my bedtime, but he couldn't wait to show me my Easter present. Outside on the dewy homemade concrete sidewalk was my first real bike instead of the hand-me-down I had borrowed from Ricky for the last three or four years. It was a Windmaster done in pastel blue and pink with a pink and white basket and purply-pink flowers all over the frame. If I hadn't already been in my pajamas, I would have climbed on and took it

etc.

for a spin around the yard. That bike is still out in the storage building somewhere, rusted to death probably, but still there I think.

My smile faded as I thought about the other holidays he hadn't bothered to stay for, let alone give me anything. Why hadn't he been there for my thirteenth, sixteenth, eighteenth, twentieth, or twenty-first birthdays? What about my high school graduation? What about when I was inducted into the National Honor Society? Why should I expect him to stick around for my twenty-third birthday next month?

I tinkered with my silverware and I couldn't help wondering how different all of our lives would have been had Dad only remained sober. I started to chew on my thumbnail as I pondered all of the comforts we missed out on. I could have had all the toys I'd ever dreamed off. He'd have been there to take me to cheerleader practice, or play practice, or whatever kind of practice I wanted to go to. I vaguely remembered a time when I was four when Dad spent about six or eight months with us while he was working at the local aluminum plant, making probably fifteen dollars an hour. That Christmas was littered with toys, from Barbie dolls to Dr. Seuss books and even a Fonzie pinball machine for both Ricky and me. That's what made it all so sad, I thought. Seeing what could have been.

It seemed like Dad always enjoyed spoiling me whenever he was around long enough to do it. I snorted loudly at one memory, causing the couple in front of me to turn and glare before they resumed poking at their lasagna. Dad had taken me to the store with him and let me choose a lot of the stuff Ricky and I would have wanted to have around the house to snack on if Mom could

etc _____

have afforded it. Not only did I get to pick my favorite cereals like Kaboom and Fruttie Pebbles, but Dad let me take a couple of every type of candy bar they had displayed around the cash registers; I had everything from pixie sticks to Watchamacallits and then some. To top the night off, Dad let me keep the change he got back which if I remembered right was nearly five dollars - that was a fortune to a seven year old, or at least for this seven year old. Maybe it was better he didn't stick around if he was going to treat me that well all the time. I would have ended up like those bratty girls in my middle school classes who had all the newest clothes featured in Teen magazine along with the extra puffy hair.

I turned halfheartedly when I heard the door jangle again, but this time it was him. My heart squeezed and I could feel my stomach pushing against my diaphragm, making it hard to breath without getting dizzy. He looked tired and had a tinge of gray around the temples, but it was still Dad, even with the same suit I remembered seeing him wear at grandma's funeral. His clothes made me wonder how bad his drinking had become that it wouldn't even let him buy a new suit. He was searching around uneasily, craning his neck to peek around the now crowded tables for me. I felt the urge to bolt across the room and hide in the bathroom until he'd left, but I couldn't do that to him. Besides, I had waited this long so I had to see what would happen.

Finally, he spied me and seemed to pale slightly though his mouth burst with a smile. He quickly strode over to my table, dodging the bustling waitresses, kids trying to escape from their parents' discipline, and stuffed patrons struggling to warble out of their seats. I swallowed hard but my mouth barely had any saliva and I felt like I had swallowed a piece of stale bread that was

etc.

sandwiching my windpipe. Before two seconds passed, or so it felt, Dad was standing next to me.

"Hi Tessie," he said, clearing his throat.

"Hi Dad."

I wasn't sure what to do next. Dad was shifting his weight, and kept crossing and uncrossing his arms. What should I do? Give him a hug? A kiss? Shake his hand? Get up? Stay seated? Ask him to sit? He was starting to attract attention so I finally whispered for him to take a seat. He thumped down across from me hard enough to jostle the water out of the glasses and onto the table. I blotted mine up with a spare napkin while he muttered an apology.

"How you doing?" I asked.

He nodded halfheartedly. Then he fiddled with his place mat, acting like he was trying to line up its bottom edges with the red border running across the tablecloth.

"You want to go ahead and order? I'm kind of hungry myself." I asked, attempting to get a conversation started. At least some food would give us an excuse to not talk for a few minutes. I squirmed slightly in my seat, feeling the board underneath the cushioned chair. Dad pulled on his collar, something I thought people only did in the movies.

"I suppose. What are you going to have?" he asked.

"I was thinking about having, um, the grilled chicken and fetticine with a side salad."

"That sounds pretty fattening."

My head swung up from picking at the corner of my menu, surprised by his comment. Since when did he start caring about how much fat was in anything? This was the same man who used

etc.

to cook rare sirloin steaks in a pan smothered with an entire stick of butter.

“Well, yea, I guess it is a little. But I don’t usually eat like this. Except for the chicken. I eat a lot of chicken.” God, listen to me, I thought. I’m babbling about chicken. Sheesh. And why am I letting him make me feel guilty about what I eat, me miss “let’s-have-plain-yogurt-and-call it breakfast-woman”?

“I . . . didn’t think you worried about fat.”

“I didn’t used to.”

“What changed your mind?” Now I was optimistic though I tried to keep that bubble from floating up too high - you never knew how hard it would crash when it popped. Maybe Dad changed some after all, enough for him to want his family back in his life or at least what was left of it.

“The surgery.”

“And what surgery is this?” I asked warily. Maybe now I’d find out the reason he’d called me. He was probably dying of something and his conscience hurt like it had hurt those other times when he felt guilty about his neglecting Ricky, Mom, and me, when he tried to make up for it by showering us with material things. Like the time he bought a Barbie Dream House for me, but only after I was ready to outgrow the dolls. I couldn’t feel very sympathetic at the moment, no matter what was wrong with him. Where had he been all those times I had been sick or hurt, like the time I slipped on the ice in front of home, cracked the side of my head, and needed three stitches?

“I had triple bypass surgery back in January.”

“That was eight months ago! Why the hell didn’t you call us? What happened?” I felt guilty for my thoughts a moment ago,

etc.

but I hated him for dropping this story on me. Well, I thought, now I know why he called. He probably came closer to dying in the operating room than all his years of drunk driving accidents that Mom told me about when I was old enough to understand what drunk was. Probably he'd be back to his usual habits after the shock of surgery wore off.

Dad quivered with embarrassment at my outburst, nervously cracking his knuckles as his head darted from the mural on the other side of the room to the light swinging gently over the table and back again. "I had. . . two heart attacks and I was in the . . . ICU for almost a month and a half. I was. . . afraid to call. I don't know how it happened." he answered, looking at me with a shrug.

"It was the cigarettes and beer you've inhaled all these years that did it Dad, and don't act like you haven't a clue!" I couldn't control myself even though Dad looked like he was trying hard to keep from crying. And I had to admit, I'd never heard him acknowledge being scared before. I was screwing this all up, but I couldn't help being hateful. I remembered all the times I had brought home pamphlets for Dad that told how to quit smoking or how to get help if you were an alcoholic. Other kids got to bring home report cards and pretty pictures to show Daddy - I brought home books to help Dad's addictions. That is, whenever he was home that I could show him.

I curled my hands over my lips and felt my throat tighten. I wanted to cry and he already was sniffing. "Why didn't you call and talk to us?" I started again, whispering this time.

Dad snuffled and I thought I saw some tears trickling over the edges of his eyes. "I really wasn't sure. . . that you guys were still in the same place. You could have. . . moved or something.

etc.

Besides, how. . . how did I know that you. . . still. . . wanted. . . to see me.” He pulled out an old gray handkerchief that I presumed used to be white and blew noisily, drawing the disgusted attention of the family catty-cornered from us. Though I felt sorry for him, I still couldn’t help smiling as he wadded the soggy thing back into his back pocket. Sometimes it was nice when things never changed.

I reached across the table and grasped his callused hand and squeezed. I gave him a lopsided smile, or at least that’s how it felt. I saw from the corner of my eye that the waitress started to approach us, but I guess she did have telepathy since she immediately took off in the opposite direction as if she had forgotten something, leaving us to our moment. I rubbed my thumb over the palm of his hand, feeling the rough spots which he had developed over the years of masonry work he’d done. He could have done so much, I thought ruefully, had he only quit drinking and smoking.

He looked up after a few minutes, amazed that I was holding his hand. “I really am sorry Tessie. I am sorry for everything.”

“It’s all right Dad” I told him, choking over my words. “I forgive you, and. . . I still love you.” It was so hard to say those words I know he needed to hear. I wasn’t even sure that I still loved him. No, I thought, that’s not true. If I didn’t love him, I wouldn’t have spent all those years waiting for him. But in some ways I felt like I was lying because I hated him at the same time too. It was a weird feeling. Maybe it wasn’t hate, just disappointment at all the things we’d lost. He missed seeing me grow up, missed harassing the boys I went out with, missed my performance in the eighth grade school play, missed all my

etc.

birthdays, missed seeing me win a scholarship to Braxton University, missed everything for the last eight years of my life and most of it before that.

Maybe his heart attacks had changed him and made him see the mistakes he made and all the things he'd lost - Mom, Ricky, and almost me. I was the only one who still half-way trusted him to stay, but then again, I didn't. I had a flashback of one Christmas when he promised to come back to open presents with us the next morning. He disappeared as usual and we didn't find out until almost three months later that he'd headed to Denver on Christmas Eve rather than stay home with his family. I wasn't sure what to feel towards him anymore. Love? Hate? Disappointment? Anger? Disgust? He'd abandoned us years ago and now that he'd shown up again, was I supposed to take him back in with no thought of the past?

Dad glanced at me and I could see his soul dying through his eyes. He appeared so old and depressed suddenly. The Dad I remembered had been full of nervous energy, but now he seemed like a plastic bag after the air had been squashed out of it. I wanted us to start over, but how could we? We'd lost eight years of my life that neither one of us could ever bring back, I thought miserably. Where did we even start?

I reached over to Dad with my other hand and cradled his fist as if it were a delicate new hatched bird.

"Let's go home Dad."



etc_____

Mr. Evanrude

by Tyler Parris

Every Friday night I climbed the stairs and tip-toes like a ballerina into my bedroom. I was graceful when I did. I put on the dress I bought almost fifty years ago. It's the one I bought to go with the dance lessons my mother and father had arranged for my twentieth birthday. The lightness of lace balances the weight of the padding in the shoulders, when you look at it. It's pink, damask, long and silky until it laces out at the bottom. It dips to touch the floor with each step I take forward. It bends carefully around the glossy carnation slippers I wear. It's a waltzing dress. I feel young in it.

And I waited.

I waited for Mr. Evanrude. I met him in front of his lawn one evening, as I walked around the block for my exercise. He seemed nice enough, so I placed hints in conversation for him to ask me to the seniors' dance at the county auditorium. I feared the very thought of going alone, but he seemed not to pick up on my suggestions.

One Friday in October, I sat in the rocking chair passed on to me by Uncle Tawney's family and looked through the windows in the doorframe. I saw children stack red and gold leaves high into forts on the lawn catecorner to my house, across the street. They thrust cap pistols toward one another and when the chambers didn't pop any more they wrestled inside the leaf fort they had

etc_____

made. Their shouts and the sounds of leaves faintly drifted in to me. They made me smile. I watched the cars drive past, down the hill, up the hill, back and forth. Their taillights bobbed on bumps in the brickwork, and the cars scattered the leaves Mr. Evanrude had carefully collected on the curb, off his driveway, away from his lawn.

I thought about the years I worked at the Mansfield County Library. There wasn't much social life involved, certainly not of the caliber my parents must have dreamt for me, grand ballrooms and dances and the like. Dee-Dee would come for tea or coffee from time to time, and twice a year I traveled north and east to enjoy vacation in the mountains. Once I'd stayed at the Greenbrier and admired a chandelier in the grand ballroom. I'd never owned real crystal like that until I saved enough to buy some scotch tumblers last year. Buying ceramic dishes from local artists always made more sense to me. They were cheaper, and when I bought them the money helped someone eat another day. I've never dared to open the cabinet of depression glass in the living room, the pink ballerina pattern of plates and glasses, much less use those dishes. The cabinet sits next to the bookshelves where I keep my literature. I spend much of my time with Dickinson and Rilke, not just reading them, but reading into them, savoring them like twelve-year old Chivas Regal. I began a few years ago to listen to sermons at the Episcopal Church on Charter Avenue on Sundays, and I still do. The choir there always makes me cry. And I did love to waltz, ever since the lessons.

I continued waiting, waiting in the two-story house with three bedrooms, by myself, for someone to waltz with. The heat blew around my dress from vents by the door and I smelled the

etc

burning of dust collected from last winter. I love that smell, sweet like the woodwork at Jackson's Mill, at the arts and crafts fair. A bluejay hopped up the branches just off my porch to squelch at the children, and I laughed. Mr. Evanrude stepped down the concrete stairs in front of his house and cast me a glance, a smile as he got into that blue Lincoln he drives. Then he drove off to the dance, as usual, and as usual I was not with him. I didn't know why he had bothered to look at me and smile.

At Thanksgiving I found out. He invited me for dinner at his home. He prepared a feast of turkey, yams, broccoli casserole, and cranberry sauce to complement everything. The table had been set with attention to detail, including a dessert spoon across the top of the gold-leafed china plates.

"So," he said with a mouthful of casserole, "you're retired?"

I had to wash down a slice of turkey with iced water. "Yes. I worked at the library in Mansfield for twenty-four years. Before that I worked at a small community library in New Hampshire."

"New Hampshire. What brought you to this place?" His voice had a distinct northern quality, for the northeast, New Jersey.

"You go where the job is, I suppose."

"Yes, I suppose." He forked a piece of meat, and shook it before he put it in his mouth. "Do you like the turkey?"

"It's magnificent," I said. "Really. And the cranberry sauce."

"Thanks."

We ate without speaking for a moment. I only heard the clank of silver against the plates and my own throat swallow. Mr. Evanrude finished his meal, and stood up. He walked over to a victrola in the corner of his living room, searched through a stack

etc.

of records stored in shelves inside the machine, and removed one from its place. He slid the thick disc onto the turntable, cranked the Victorola, and gently placed the needle onto the record. The speak began relaying Stravinsky's "Three Dances," a single masterpiece crafted from a tango, a waltz, and a ragtime, in succession, from the "L'Historie du Soldat."

As I finished the last piece of turkey on my plate and set my fork down, Mr. Evanrude asked me to dance with him.

"Oh, I've never dance a tango," I said.

"There's nothing to it. You'll learn." He motioned for me again with his hand. I stood and took it.

The tango moved fiercely, and his hand firmly gripped mine. The choppy saw of the violin sent chills through me. The music acted like a spirited snake charmer's melody over a hard and fast timpani drum. Boom-bong, boom-bong. I forced myself out of Mr. Evanrude's grip and stood off to the side. Mr. Evanrude continued to dance, as if he hadn't noticed. I hated to be rude, but I felt like a slain deer after a hunt, being tugged and pulled with such force.

Eventually the cello crept in below the violin, soothed it, and the drums hummed out of a softer, slower beat. Boom bum-bum, boom bum-bum: a waltz. Mr. Evanrude held out his hand again and I took it. I knew this dance. He was clumsy, as if he didn't.

"You're not a waltzer, Mr. Evanrude?"

"Please, call me Mel."

"Mr. Evanrude. You don't waltz very often?"

Boom bum-bum. Boom bum-bum. A trumpet riff overpowered the violin sharply, then faded.

"Not really. A few of the heifers down at the auditorium like

etc_____

it from time to time, but it's not really my style. I'm a tango man. Can't you tell?"

"Really, now," I said. "Heifers? Why do you say that?"

His eyes drew wide in surprise. "Well, they are. Candace Billingsly. Do you know Candy?"

I was intrigued how he would explain Candace as a heifer. She had worked next door to the library at the historical foundation and I knew her quite well. She said the men at the dance often pressed themselves too hard against the women. "No, the name doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, then, I'll tell you about her. She likes to dance with all the men down there, and then she never joins any of us for a nightcap. She's a tease. A damned heifer, if you ask me."

Boom bum-bum. Boom bum-bum.

"Do you read poetry, Mr. Evanrude?" I asked, trying to get my mind away from heifers, away from the way he drew his leg against me, as if he still wanted to tango. The flute poured sad over the violin, the violin cried loud with it, screamed over it. Boom bum-bum. I continued to dance well, leading him, except for the times he violently leaned me back, pressed himself a little too hard against me, then withdrew. Step, step, close, I thought to myself. It was the first time in years I'd had to think about the dance.

"No, not a word of poetry that I can think of. Why?"

"No reason, really. Where did you learn to dance?"

"My old man used to run a place in Atlantic City, a dance club where the Spics hung around. I hung out there, too, with my old man. Those Spics, they taught me the tango. Boy, they could dance."

etc _____

"I see."

"So what are your favorite waltzes?" he asked.

The waltz faded into a ragtime melody, with the intrusion of brass and woodwind upon the strings and the dominant violin. I was finished dancing.

"I love Strauss." I wanted him to ask me which Strauss, but he did not. "I love 'Der Rosenfavalier' and the 'Treasure Waltz.' They're both enough to make me giddy."

"Giddy? You make it sound like a romance. Do you have a thing for Mr. Strauss?"

"I'm not sure you'd understand if I told you what I have with them - both Richard and Johann Strauss."

"Well, yeah. The Strauss brothers," he said, and my stomach knotted - more with disappointment than with anger. "We'll see how much I understand," he said. "Try me."

"No, I think I'm through now. No more waltz. No more tango. No more dance."

"Aw, come on. We're just getting started."

"I don't think so, Mr. Evanrude."

"Well, then, how about some gin? I've got Tanqueray. Wait, no, you waltzers are more sophisticated. How about some brandy?" Mr. Evanrude sauntered to the hideaway bar in his bookshelf and removed two snifters and a bottle of Cognac.

"Look, it's Hennessy."

"No, Mr. Evanrude. I don't think so."

"Please, call me Mel. Just have one."

"No, I really should be going."

"Aw, come off it," he said. "I can't believe you're just like .

.. "

etc.

"All right, Mr. Evanrude, if you insist," I said. He wanted a kiss, and hand something warm and wet coming to him soon enough. What an impatient man. I was trying my hardest to be polite. He poured the brandy, swished it around in the snifters, and held it out to me.

"I'm going to make a toast," he said as I took the glass. "To the first lady in damn near forever who's stayed for a drink."

"Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea. You've helped me to understand some things. Thank you." I trust the brandy in his face, into his eyes, and set the snifter gently onto his table. He shouted and tried to reach for me, but I know his eyes were burning too badly to see that I was heading out the door. I closed it quietly, and in his din I suppose it took him a while to figure out that I had left.

I crossed the street, watched my breath rise into the glow of a streetlamp. The children in the house next to Mr. Evanrude's were again thrashing about in their leaves, although it was after dark. One of them bid me good evening and I returned the gesture. I climbed the steps to my home and entered into the comfort of that empty space. I chained the door and tip-toed upstairs.

My phonograph player sits against the living room wall, below a window along the side of my house. Outside, a row of spruce pines draws back and forth with the wind. I place the "Waltz from Serenade for Strings" onto the player and tug the blinds shut. Tchiakovsky couples well with the smoke from six candles I lit, and they dance together across the room to me. This time, the cellos hum the bass notes. Boom bum-bum. The violins gently roll over them, like autumn foliage over hills, expansive. I remember the music they played in Rockefeller Square in New

etc.

York, in winter, when I skated there. Skaters love the waltz. It's the music of grace and aloneness.

I breath the aroma of peach and wax from the candles. I feel the lightness of my dress. I drape my right arm out across the air, where I imagine a leading hand would be, and my left where a waist would be. I can almost feel the weight of a hand on my hip, guiding me in 3/4 time, squeezing with each accent on the first beat. Step, step, close. Then the trill of piccolo and bounding of trombones in "Waltz from the Sleeping Beauty Suite" startle me. I pace fast, as a skater does for the final lutz or spin. Step, step, close. I don't need a hand to guide me. Step, step, close. I switch my left and right hands and I am the guide, now. Step, step, close.



etc.

The Box

by Matthew Perry

I usually don't pick up hitchhikers. I usually view it as an unsafe thing to do. But since the snow had already covered the road, I felt obligated to give the man a lift. After all, there are certain times when rules should be broken. I slowed the car to a stop and watched him through my rear view mirror as he jogged towards me. I leaned over and rolled the passenger side window down to see where he was going.

"Looks like you could use a ride, buddy. Where ya headed to?"

At once, I surveyed him up and down to see if I could see any signs of treachery. He looked to be in his early thirties, but with the hood of his coat, pulled over his head to protect him from the biting wind, I couldn't discern his face or his motives.

"I was on my way to Worcester, but my car died a couple miles back. To be honest, I don't know what I'm going to do."

Since I was heading that way, I offered him a lift and he gladly accepted, opening the door to get in. The man was wearing an old army jacket with a tag that said Larkin, and carrying a box.

"If you think you would be more comfortable, I could put your box in—"

"No, that's OK. It doesn't bother me at all. I really appreciate the ride. The name's Alex. Alex Larkin." He offered me his hand after removing one of his blue ski gloves.

"Benny Dudding. Nice to meet you. What a night for your car to break down. I bet you're freezing your ass off."

etc _____

As I tried to break the ice, I studied him as inconspicuously as I could, and with his hood pulled back on his shoulders, I was able to get a good look at him. He was much older than I had first thought, maybe early fifties. He had black hair that was streaked with gray, and a neatly trimmed beard. His face was worn, and he had wrinkles that befitted a much older man. But what I noticed most was his cold, blue eyes, eyes that seemed to look tight through mine, and the box that rested in his lap.

"I need to find a phone and see if I can make some arrangements for getting my car fixed tonight, so if you don't mind, I would really appreciate it if you could drop me off at a phone," he said, as he settled himself into the seat.

"That won't be a problem."

I pulled back onto the highway, turning my attention to driving in the snowy weather, but my eyes were quickly distracted by the silhouette of the object in his lap. It was an ordinary box, about one foot by one foot, constructed of thin slats of wood that were attached at the corners with large staples. It looked old and weather-beaten.

We drove about five or six miles down the road before finding a payphone at an old gas station in a tiny, rural town. Alex hopped out of the car, and before going to the phone, turned around and pulled the box from the seat.

"I'll wait on you, if you want to make sure you can get everything taken care of," I said, wondering why he needed the box. "I'm headed down to Providence, so if you want a ride to Worcester, I don't mind dropping you off on the way through."

"That would be really great. But hopefully, I can get that piece of junk running tonight."

etc.

Instead of putting the box back in the car, Alex shut the door and walked to the phone, setting it beside him as he skimmed through the yellow pages. I felt sorry for the guy, but most of all, I wondered what was in the box. It's not like me to be so nosy, but sometimes, if you don't know something, it eats away at you until you do.

Alex slammed the phone down and walked towards the cart. About half-way to it, he spun around and went back to get his box, resting against the base of the phone. I could tell he was upset, and when he got to the car, his face verified his feelings.

"Damn country towns! Whoever heard of a towing service not being open on weekends? My car has to sit where it is until Monday. If it's all right with you, I'll take you up on that rife to Worcester. I'm going to stay with a friend of mine down there for a few weeks and maybe I can get it towed from there."

"Sure. Some company will help driving on a night like this, and it's only a couple of miles out of my way."

Alex slid back into the car and put the box back on his lap. The snow had started falling heavier during our stop, making it tough to see, and after thirty minutes of driving, I had only gone fifteen miles. AS I studied the road ahead my eyes kept being pulled to the silhouette of the box in Alex's lap.

"That's an odd object to be carrying with you. I bet it weighed you down pretty good."

"Not too bad. So, are you from around here?"

"I was born in Rotham, about thirty miles outside of Providence. Benn around here all my life and I don't figure I'll ever live anywhere else."

I glanced down to Alex's lap and tried to get another good

etc

look at the box he was holding, but his eyes caught mine with a fixed stare, one that seemed to dare me to look downward. I cleared my throat uncomfortably, and turned my attention back to studying the road ahead. Cracking the window, I lit up a cigarette and took a deep drag and held it in, trying to calm my nerves. The snow was tiring to drive in, but my mind raced with ideas. I watched the snow covered pines flash past, making everything but the road seem like a blur. The roads were all empty, with only one car passing since I had picked up this intriguing man.

“How about you? Where are you from?”

I’m from Athens, Georgia, but I’ve been up here in Maine doing some skiing. A friend of mine lives in Worcester, and I’m going to stay with him for a couple weeks. I’ve been trying to make up my mind if I want to try and move up here, but I don’t know about these winters.”

You get used to them after a while,” I said, blowing smoke through the crack of the window. “I see that you were in the military,” nodding toward his jacket.

“Yeah, I served four years in the Army. I even saw some time in Vietnam, but not much, I was a little young.”

Silence filled the car after our brief conversation, and my mind started to drift to the trip ahead. But what was in that box? It sat on his lap, seeming to be twice its usual size, beckoning for my appraisal. But how could I get a look at it without him looking at me?

Then an idea hit me. Feigning a yawn, I asked Alex if he wanted to get a quick cup of coffee and a bite to eat before we finished the last leg of our journey. He was up for the stop, eager to get some warmth into his body. My plan was already firm in

etc_____

my mind, having mulled over it for the past few minutes, and I began to anticipate my next move. A few minutes later, we saw a sign for a town and both agreed that we would make our stop there.

By the time I had parked the car, I had covertly removed my wallet from my back pocket, in order to have an excuse to return to the car – unaccompanied.

“Since you’ve had such bad luck tonight, I insist that the dinner is on me.”

Alex accepted graciously, getting out of the car in order to stretch the ache from his cold-stiffened bones.

“Make sure to lock your door. You have to hold the handle up when you shut it.”

“OK.”

Alex got out of the seat and pulled the box out with him.

I checked my temper and silently cursed my bad luck. Why in the hell would he carry the box inside with him? And now I was buying him dinner for nothing. I found myself wondering more and more about the contents of that hell-sent box. Curiosity is a strange thing – once it is planted, it takes root and grows, filling your every thought.

We grabbed a booth in the tiny diner and waited to be served. Alex set the box in the seat beside him, out of my sight. I began to wonder if he knew what my intentions were, since he so steadfastly guarded his box?

The diner was old. It smelled of stale smoke and greasy food. The booths were done in a dull green, and yellow and brown striped wallpaper covered the walls. Through dinner, the snow stopped, to the relief of both of us, but it little to ease my mind.

etc.

We quickly finished, eager to get back on the road, and each got some coffee to go and took a piss before we headed out.

On the next leg of the drive, I changed my approach. What I had to do was gain Alex's trust. After buying him dinner, it was a simple matter. And once I gained his confidence, I gained access to the box.

Over the coffee, Alex and I talked about everything from politics to sports, and I found him to be a fairly intelligent man. He seemed eager to talk, maybe to get his mind off of his car.

"Benny, I want to thank you again. I don't know what I would have done."

It's no problem. I'm the kind of person who'll pick up a hitch hiker anytime I see one, it's just my nature. I know what it's like to be stuck."

"I can't believe tonight of all nights I broke down," Alex said, slapping his hand down on the wooden box.

The noise shot through me, and I made a quick glance over to look at the box. Alex was staring back at me.

"Hey, do you think we could stop at the rest area up ahead," Alex said, pointing to the sign through the pelting snow. "That coffee went right through me."

"Sure, I think I could handle a piss too," I said, immediately deciding that the only thing to do was leave Alex and take the box. I know it was cruel to think like that, but the box had to be mine, one way or the other.

I pulled off the main highway into a small rest area surrounding in a half-circle by snow-covered pines. The rest area was nothing but a small building, big enough for two single bathrooms, and a picnic bench to the left of the tiny restroom. I

etc.

parked right in front, and shut the car off to make sure that I didn't rouse any suspicion.

"Since you have to piss bad, go ahead and go first. I think I can wait it out."

"Thanks."

Alex hopped out of the car, grabbed his box, and headed for the bathroom. I glared at his back as he jogged to the door.

"Damn him!" I muttered.

I stared out into the desolate darkness, and slammed my fist into the dash. The snow was still falling, adding to the three or four inches that was already on the ground. With the car off, an eerie silence filled the crisp air, the snow creating an absolute silence. A few minutes went by and Alex came out of the bathroom. The first thing I noticed was that he wasn't carrying his box. He hopped quickly in to the car.

"Damn, it's cold out there," Alex said, rubbing his arms briskly to try and bring back the warmth. "Shit, I left my box in the bathroom."

Alex grabbed the handle of the door, getting ready to go back and retrieve his box.

"Don't worry, I'll grab it while I'm in there," I said, seizing my chance.

"Oh thanks, Benny," Alex said, staring at me with his ice blue eyes.

I couldn't contain my excitement. I hopped quickly out of the car and jogged to the bathroom, my mind racing with the end of my quest in sight. I was so preoccupied that I didn't notice the inside of my nose freezing with every breath until I reached the door of the bathroom. I opened the door and searched for the box,

etc_____

and there it lay in the center of the cold, concrete floor. I shut the door, not taking my eyes off of the small square object.

As soon as the door was firmly closed, I jumped to the floor, no longer able to hold back my curiosity. I touched the lid of the box gently, as if it were a baby, not knowing what was inside. My heart pounded against my chest, and I was afraid that alex would come knocking on the door, not willing to wait for his box. I removed the lid.

The box was empty.

Feeling betrayed, I stared at the inside of the box, wondering what could have happened to the contents. I heard a car start outside, but it took a couple of seconds to register. Those few seconds had been my downfall.

I threw the lid of the box across the bathroom floor, and ran for the door. I came out in time to watch the red beams of my taillights fade off into the darkness.



First Place Poetry

The Priest's Operation

Ben Kline

Wheeled in to a room
with white walls and blue people
I hear, "Dr. Newman,
"you're needed in proctology."

and wish I were back at my church
hearing confessions or
singing beautiful hymns

with my parishioners, even
though they warble together
like Placido Domingo on estrogen and speed.

But their voices would comfort
as I lie naked beneath this sheet,

the nurse drawing lines on my shaved chest,
the surgeon's assistant preparing the tools
with special attention to the large,

toothy bone saw
that will cut open the ribcage
that holds my irregular pump
and expose my tender insides to the

etc.

cold and sterile air with the greatest of care
and the Medicare—paying for the doctor's
custom Lexus and his daughter's

Donna Karan original gown. The nurse
approaches with a long, glinting needle.

I think of my parishioners' prayers as

the anesthesiologist puts a mask on my face
and I escape to the happiest, most heavenly place.

etc_____

Second Place Poetry

Lilies

Laura Tussey

“There are always two deaths, the real one
and the one people know about.”

-Antoinette Bertha Mason

(for my daughter)

Last fall the brown wrapped package arrived;
Musty Dutch bulbs
a “cavalcade of color”
waiting to explode.
We turned them happily
into the rich soaked ground
to anxiously await
April’s final thaw.

This spring the lilies poked up defiant
golden hooded sentinels
along the walk;
They bowed sweetly as we passed
and surrendered amicably
to the persistent plucking
of your baby-hand,

etc_____

limp heads held demurely
in complete subjugation
to a higher force;
And I scolded you harshly
for presenting me with loveliness,
seeing not your disappointed eyes,
only the gap left
in the yellow lines we'd made.

Now—though I don't deserve them—
your small hands bring me clotted dandelions,
Queen Anne's lace, and purple horse-weed,
Then tentatively ask if it's "O.K."

etc

Third Place Poetry

Playground Serenades

Michelle Hodges

On rainy days, the playground lies abandoned,
Asphalt dreams unplayed. Slides
Stand alone, slick with disappointment.
Jump-ropes lie coiled in shadows
While clouds sing their drowsy chant
To the earth below. Children sigh
Behind windows fogged with boredom.
The teacher too wishes for freedom,
To dance in the afternoon air,
Warm sun on her back
Sonorous chatter of children at play
Filling her spirit with music.

etc_____

Honorable Mention

Mr. Appalachian

Shawn C. Ayers

I wasn't "Appalachian" until I heard it in school.

It is not enough to be simply "American."

Now I am defined.

I have new ideals to live up to; a collection of non-running cars

in the front yard,

a rusty trailer and an unashamed smile with gaps,

Cough coal dust,

Drink Weideman's or Fall's City,

Fish when I'm not hunting,

Bruise my family.

My gut must hang down under a stained t-shirt, and I will

sleep with my dogs, I will

hurt my back and get on worker's comp, and

Move to North Carolina at least once before I die.

etc_____

On a cold dreary morning

Gusti Newquist

splashes of gray
clouds hover
above burnt

tips of rust-
colored leaves

specks of
white flakes
flutter harmlessly

over the deep
red-brown wood-
paneled porch

roof and bright orange-
tinted bricks
defiantly break

through the mask
of crumbling
gray paint

HAIKU NUMBER 190 Nandini A. Shastry

ON A QUIET ROAD
WE TELL EACH OTHER SWEET LIES
AS THE ICE THICKENS

etc _____

Summer Night Vinson Street, Williamson, W. Va.

Oak leaves big
as my hands.

Jack Spadaro

Murmured softly in the dark.

Warm rain

In the trees,

And rain on the tin roof

Of the shed we stood in

For shelter.

It rained all through

The darkening hills

On your eyes,

Mouth,

Hair,

As we walked through the rows

Of leaning houses.

The rain soaked through

Your dress.

I could feel your warmth

Standing close

Breathing the solemn air.

etc_____

Waterfall

Sean Kinder

Molten water

crawled over the edge

to become soft muslin,

suspended, airborne, free,

Fragile,

it splintered on the rocks

below

leaving a short-lived gift

behind:

frozen shards.

etc.

Conform

Robert L. Jones

It's lonely on this mountain
wave so I know you're there,
 There's so much to conform to,
 I feel a sudden need to leap.
 Cool shadows surround me
 icy dark fingers of nothing.
 Still I almost feel your breathing
 rhythmic puffs of dislike
 I can't hold on much longer
 help me down before I fall
 Keeps your superior stares for another
 cats do look at kings.
 I'll climb into your mold another day.

Bleed For Me

Robert L. Jones

I am a razor
against your pale skin
feel my cool sharpness
my sweet steel.

Bleed for me,
let your crimson droplets
caress my skin.

I need this,
your life spilling out
swallowing me
in rich redness.

etc.

Lure of Affection

Michelle Hodges

We kneel in mud by the shore
Ankle-deep, as you teach me
How to bait the hook. The worm
Does not frighten me like it does mother.
She thinks they bite. But I know better.

The hook glides cleanly through the body,
No pauses or snags. No blood in this.
I cast the line out into the water
As far as I can, then reel it backwards
Like a movie in slow motion.

A sudden jerk, and I know the worm
Has done his job, attracting tomorrow night's
dinner.
We scoop him with the net, and you call me
Daddy's little girl.

etc.

Lamont Reeves

I look to the hills from which my help come

Messengers Chavez, Akbar, and Farrahan
Washington D. C. a modern day Babylon
Nebuchadnezzar seen the vision amidst a flame
His son saw the writing on the wall
The message came, not for another messenger
but a message, we long for
But you have our support it's a million men strong.
The hanging vines crept down Capitol Hill
Whose leaves we'll brew
our own medicine for self-induced ills

Standing as brothers to this country we did amaze
A powder keg has been lit to set this whole nation ablaze
Fire, not to destroy anyone in defeat
To wreck a stronger sword forged in the heat
It's time for our people to get back to business
The black Muslim, Christian, Jew and Jehovah Witness.
Not all of us can be celestial bodies admired from afar
On October 16 I seen a million different stars
We are taking responsibility for our own misery
To write another page to the book of Black history.

etc_____

Fist Wisdom

Cliff Eliot

Noticing the deep chrome blend of color
glazing some oil slick puddle and catching scent
of the coal grim tar, gone soft from august heat,
just before spiraling bruiseblack
into unconsciousness from the locomotive roundhouse
delivered by the sasquatch grease monkey
wearing deer stained denim, sidewinder shitkickers,
and a thin scarecrow smile like a straight razor slit
cut in pumpkin skin and faintly, distantly hearing
dogs howl, clocks tick, and insects die
in white, sharp, bugzapper cracks.

Haiku's

Brenda Brock

(for the politically challenged)

Elephants flap wings
through pink cotton candy clouds...
What was in that drink?

Orgasms are nice
but nothing can compare to
a really good sneeze.

etc _____

January Evening Charlene Smith

On my way back
from my grandmother's,
we stopped at the store,
going on about our business.

I waited in the car,
silent, alone, and cold,
watching the people
come and go.

My grandfather died yesterday,
and tomorrow,
we would go
and say goodbye.

I leaned my head
onto the back dash
and watched the snow fall
toward me,
the glass stopped it,
before it touched my face.

etc_____

Incident in Hell's Menagerie

Mark Dilorio

On a night so dark the absent light begs for forgiveness,
in a part of town where degeneracy bargains for phantoms,
walking by a junk-filled alley
between greasy buildings,
a limping man, not tall, not short,
ragged Navy pea-coat held slightly ajar by a hand dipped in fear,
emerges from obscene shadows into pale glow
from a distant yellow streetlight,

a raspy voice asking if I wanna see something special,
nuttin' like it anywhere, take a peek, yah won't be sorry.

The rustle of cloth, then advent,
when, on a palm as flat as a cadaver's affect,
a tiny elephant doll appears - shockingly real,
petite diamond folds of gray, leathery skin,
polished garnet eyes capturing
the dim, far passion of another jungle.
My breath stopped, and I reached out to stroke
the slim dead pinkie of a trunk.
It came up warm, pliant, alive,
to coil around my outstretched finger.

In a part of town where perversion means sanctification,
I watched, halfway between insanity and greed,
as the man began to stroke the exquisite living jewel
behind its rubbery ear,
whispering a secular prayer.





