Threshold
San Jacinto College South
Literary Arts Journal

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**Authors:**

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- Jennifer Salas
- Caroline Cao
- Alex Winemiller
- Emily E. Vega
- Melody Clay
- Mignon Isaacs Bryant
- PJ Melton
- Teri Mills
As consciousness swirls away from me
my mind submerges into thoughts that have yet to exist.
Morpheus allows the wind to whisper the honest intentions
of a day that hasn’t been lived.
I’m no Sigmund Freud—
I need answers.
Those who state the obvious to my minds’
deceitful imagination
that trails my humble emotions,
which I buried deep in Mother Earth’s ground
with a seed that hasn’t been planted yet
but it allows my caged heart to beat for a love unseen.
Subconscious intimations reassure me
that I am alive.
That I am somebody.
Artwork by Martin Whuk
His teeth: jagged edges of a broken glass bottle,  
an orthodontist’s walking paycheck.  
A stale and crusty bathrobe draped over a hollow frame  
flaps,  
the wings of a scavenging crow.  
An ambivalent savor like grapefruit:  
a nondescript gray beard beseeching and importunate  
under the cold embers of once-bright eyes  
mired  
in the claustrophobic shadow of a blinged-out Benz.  
Cardboard plea.  

Best bud of the bottle.  
Jack Daniel’s?  Samuel Adams?  
Comrade of the can.  
Drink ‘til you live, stranger.  

Winds waft the scent of the odd whisper.  
In hushed tones:  
“C’est la vie.” “Lo que sea.”  
No boundaries, no borders.  

Again,  
those men  
wearing pin-striped suits  
and polished smiles  
sweep the tarp over the rusty  
cage of that dusty gray bird,  
price tag still attached.  
Election over.  
From within  
an inconsequential flapping.
She’s got little velvet slippers. She tucks her feet into them when she goes for a stroll through the big house, when it’s the middle of the night and she can’t sleep because she’s thinking too hard. Her velvet-shrouded feet whisper along the corridors and down the stairs; they pass the sleeping cat, the basket of half-knitted scarves, the old toys left strewn about by the children. Those feet sit quietly at the table while she pours herself a cup of tea, and they swing contemplatively while she thinks some more. The velvet silences her footsteps; quiets a room that should be filled with music: a piano, a violin, a cello. Her warm feet rise as she stands on tiptoe: look at the pictures on the mantle; look out the window.

She wants to go out into the garden; the calm will calm her, but alas, her delicate velvet slippers cannot tred through damp grass or rich soil. So she steps quietly off her window seat (look out the window – to the garden) and pads down some more stairs until she is on the ground floor. Her footsteps collect dust; sheets of paper in a thoughtful room, within it still the solidarity of the past. She steps toward a thin door – thin as she is, thin as her feet! — and opens it, toes pressed together timidly. And there – always there – is the pair of shoes: not dainty little velvet slippers, but good solid leather shoes, with only a little bit of fraying, much too large for her. She slips them on nonetheless; the velvet tucked forlornly into the closet, and her small feet slipping in the large size. She kneels down; the laces are tied with trembling fingers, and she stands again, a lovely lady in her nightgown and men’s leather shoes.

But now she is in the garden, calm, if she can be, trying not to trip in the overlarge shoes, trying not to trip in her overlarge thoughts. See the moon? The garden is illuminated, vines and mosses trailing every which way, weeds carpeting the ground. Sit near the stones; breathe in, breathe out. The largest one – smooth and worn but never old – says: “A dance captures the music; so capture love, forever.”

And under the stone, under the grass, under the soil, deep within the earth, deep within her mind, is he of the big leather shoes. He is the one whose music still lingers in that quiet room with the piano, the violin, the cello. He whose face is clear: look on the mantle! He whose breath, whose life, resides in that thoughtful room full of dust.

And in a rush she leaps up. Forget the leather shoes too big for her feet; she runs to the big house, through the lonely entryway, her small feet causing the air to shake, into that thoughtful room. Tear open the thin little door, from the closet pull out those little velvet slippers, race down to the garden again; a lace is untied! Drop those little slippers at the stones, and leave them there, because she would rather be still and listen to his music than to dance and be deaf to him.
“I’m so sorry,” the beautiful girl working the reception desk said to the man. “I forgot your name.” The girl’s name was Sarah, but the nameplate on the desk said Jennifer. It was the nameplate of the previous secretary who had quit two years before. Sarah had originally complained about not having her own nameplate. But after months of I’ll-get-to-its, she found that she liked being a Jennifer at work and a Sarah at home. It enabled her to make a whole different life for Jennifer. One day she had a sister, the next she became an aunt, then a Godmother. It was a way to keep from becoming bored.

“That’s okay,” the man responded sheepishly. He removed his bowler cap and tapped it against a beat up pair of wool slacks. He nervously pulled his long raincoat closer to his body to cover up the frayed edges of his pockets. “I don’t expect you to remember.”

“Why’s that?”

“You meet so many people. And, I don’t come in that much. So, I understand your confusion.” The man shifted his weight uncomfortably to his other foot and hoped he would be able to get through this small conversation without making things awkward. He glanced around the room and let his eyes linger on the red flower in her hair for just a moment too long as she was saying something he had no interest in hearing. He brought himself back to the present as she concluded.

“No, but I will remember your name from now on,” she smiled.

“You will?”

“Yes.”

He felt his spirits brighten a little bit. This cute little angel might give him the small gift of grace that is recognition of identity. He laughed as she smiled. “You promise?” He teased.

Without missing a beat, she replied. “No.” He stared at her for moment with his eyes squinted. He pursed his lips in terse disapproval and turned to walk past her towards the door to the private office behind her. “Wait!” She interjected, rising from her seat. “I have to announce you to Mr. Franklin!”

“Go ahead,” he sharply challenged.

“But, I don’t know your name,” she pleaded.

“That’s your problem,” he said and pushed open the door, slamming it in her face behind him. On the other side of the door, he leaned against it for a moment. He felt her attempt to force her way inside before rapping on the door with her knuckles with vociferous intent.

The pot-bellied man behind the desk raised his face in alarm and struggled to put his suspenders on over his striped dress shirt the second he saw the man with the raincoat walk through the door. However, he was not nearly as startled as the girl who raised her face from his lap in alarm at the thought that it might be Mr. Franklin’s wife. Upon seeing the man with the raincoat, she let out a small sigh of relief, but as the silence between the two men persisted, she felt it might be much worse. The man in the raincoat jerked his head to the door and raised his eyebrows, indicating the knocking which was quickly becoming a nuisance.

“It’s alright, Sarah!” Franklin finally shouted. Sarah’s footsteps could be heard walking petulantly back to her desk.

“You know why I’m here.”

“I don’t have the money yet,” Franklin said.

“But, you have enough money to keep trollops on the side, huh?” the man with no name asked.

When the girl got up to leave, he quickly said, “No need for you to go, sweetheart, just making an observation.”
“I’m not your sweetheart, asshole.” She hissed.

“Mouth on her too…. Well, we already knew that.”

“Julie—” Franklin began.

“No need to get nervous. This isn’t a rough visit. At least, it doesn’t have to be.” He eyed the office and rested his eyes on a golden pocket watch on the desk. Its value was undeniable, and both men knew it. Franklin cursed and prayed silently that he only suggested he pawn it.

“That’ll buy you another week before I come for your thumbs,” the man said, gesturing toward the pocket watch.

“My wife gave me that,” Franklin argued.

“Oh-huh, spare me how much you care about your wife’s feelings, eh? Toss it over.” Mr. Franklin begrudgingly did so. “I’ll see you in a week. Have the payment, and you’ll get your watch back. Don’t, and I’ll be upset for the trouble of having to pawn this thing. Understand?”

Mr. Franklin nodded his head and glanced downward in self-reproachful shame. By the time he looked up, both the collector and Julie had left the office.

As the man in the raincoat walked by Sarah’s desk, he caught her glaring at him. He smiled and said, “I thought your name was Jennifer.”

“What difference does it make? I don’t know yours,” she sulked, still resentful of the small betrayal.

“Frank Nitti,” he said, still smiling, as he walked out the door.
PLEAD

Natalia Frangullie

The prophets seek the God’s advice
They strain their necks looking above
Bowing down, they scrape their calloused knees
They chant and hum

Pleading for enlightenment
Of the cure to man’s lost faith
They cower beneath their robes,
Cross their barren legs and meditate

Zeus glares down among them
He shakes his head at their ignorance
He knows that any answer given
Will be received with blindness

For the prophets are flawed
They will never understand
They, for now, are incapable
Of healing the broken faith of man

Artwork by Caroline Smith
FOOTSTEPS

Jessica MacFarlane

Clasp of jeweled amber
I remember your eye
with the tiger intent behind it.

Saffron is the color
which you use to sting
little children and words used daily.

Hug my knees tighter
maybe then you will cry
like winter petals; dry.

Heated up I am escaping
to a place in the woods
let alone no more city.

Keeping her in mind,
I hunger for bread and wine,
travel the footsteps of women before.

Do not keep me behind.
As far as I could tell the area was clear. All that was left here were corpses that had been dead probably for a few days. I relaxed a little, tugging at the neck of my oversized hoodie. Normally you wouldn’t find dead bodies robbed of their life all that calming. To me, however, it was a welcome site compared to what else could be greeting me. I was standing in the shadows of a half standing building; its other half had collapsed, leaving a plain of metal wreckage. It looked like it had been a large office building at some point, not like I really cared; all it was to me was a hiding place.

Hiding only holds so much appeal for so long though. I pulled my hood over my head and gripped the bat in my hand. Just because the area looked clear didn’t mean it actually was. I stepped out slowly from the shadow cast by the building. Out in front of me was the destroyed half of the building and even farther in the distance were the remains of a bustling city. And of course there were the bodies, scattered here and there. I took comfort in the fact that most of them weren’t human.

Scratch that; it didn’t really make much of a difference to me. To me almost everyone was alien; to me the world had been full of aliens before The Bombs dropped. Anyone would try to kill you this world.

Whether it was for the “Revision” or to take the granola bar you had in your pocket. The “Bombs” is what humans called the aliens, because they might as well have been literal bombs. They destroyed everything, for the most part; some things are more resilient than you might think. Humans were putting up more of a fight than they expected, I guess. The Bombs’ destructive power and technology were pretty tough, but not something that was inconceivable.

Also their skulls were pretty easy to bash in.

I began walking over the rubble, slowly, especially when walking past the corpses. It only takes one time of being ambushed by an alien playing dead to make you cautious, even around the lifeless. I didn’t need to be worried about the dead this time, though.

“Don’t move.” It was the unmistakable gurgling voice of an alien.

I stopped walking but turned to my left, where the voice had come from, and spotted its source. The Bomb had been hiding behind an overturned car. But it wasn’t a Bomb after all, I recognized from the picture plastered on its armored chest: the face of a bug, its tongue hanging out stupidly, with a giant “X” crossed over it. This was an Exterminator.

“Time to die, Roach,” it grinned, showing off its rows of flat teeth with jagged bottoms that could grinding up anything that got caught between the alien’s jaws. These aliens were the same race as the original ones that had come, but had arrived later, when it was discovered that humans didn’t care to have their world undergo a Revision. Despite wanting to Revision humans, however, these aliens were highly impressionable; since the six years they had come here they seemed to have mimicked
humans quite well. Many in this city spoke English with more intelligence than some of the humans.

“Like hell,” I said under my breath. The alien’s wide, dark eyes flickered and I placed my other hand on my bat. In the next instant it was running at me. It fell to all fours; muscled back legs pushed it forward. It dug its scaly three-fingered hands into the ground, and sparks lifted from the wires running along its rough talons. It flew at me; the flaps on its back fell and rose in rhythm with its loud breathing. Down I went, falling to my back. I kicked my legs up and connected the bottom of my beat-up shoes with the alien’s torso. It landed on its side, skidding a little way before it popped back up like a spring.

“Come on.” I got to my feet and lifted my bat. I swung a few times. The alien watched me. Its ashy skinned mouth twitched.

Bang!

The loud shot echoed over the metal plain; the Exterminator stumbled to its side. There was a bellow, a laugh coming from above. From the top of the half destroyed building stood a bearded man swinging a rifle and screeching out chuckles like a madman. The alien spat out something in its native tongue then wiped the oozing liquid from its scathed forearm.

“One outta two ain’t bad!” The man lifted his face towards the sky, laughter spewing out like lava from a volcano. “A fat, ugly bulk like yourself ain’t too hard to miss...I think my next shot will be luckier.”

The sound of the alien’s teeth grinding together made me cringe, but this was my chance. I was quick on my feet, and thank goodness for this alien’s anger management problems. His attention was completely off of me. I shot forward as fast as possible. The alien was screeching at the man on the roof, throwing its hands up at him. Exterminators were known for being prideful; they didn’t think they should have to fight their prey from a distance, so not many of them were known for carrying long distance weapons. Lucky for me, this one was no exception, or else he probably would have shot that guy off the roof like a sitting duck. Now the enraged alien stepped forward, probably intending to try and find a way to scale the building. But I was next to it now, with my bat raised.

Moments like this don’t really happen in slow motion. It would be nice if they did; then you wouldn’t have to rely so wholly on instinct. It only took a second. In the mid swing of my bat, the alien had turned to lunge at me. Above me, the man yelled out something that almost made me grin: “Swing, batter batter, swing!”

A spark from the alien’s electric charged wires singed my face as I planted the cold metal into its head. The skull collapsed under the force, and some sort of crap sprayed onto me. The alien crumpled to the ground, its broken face bubbling the same stuff. I slammed the top of the bat into another part of its skull, and its whole body undulated before falling completely still.
“Very nice!” the man called. The air always seemed unnaturally still after a massacre, so I had no problem hearing him. “That was pretty good, man! Oh, is it man? Lady? You a girl or a boy? I can’t tell with you having that hood up.”

“Does it really matter?” I yelled back up, then turned away. I didn’t want to stick around here for very long.

“Sure it does, if you’re a girl, then that was hot. If you’re a guy, then it was badass,” He laughed as he rested the gun on his shoulder. “Either way I wouldn’t mind teaming up. Hotties and badasses both have their purposes.”

“Not interested.”

“Hmm? Why not?”

“I’m not your kind.”

“Seem pretty similar to me.”

“I’m not.”

“Hey, you’re a Cockroach right?”

I glanced back up at him.

He grinned down at me. “You’re one of the ones that’s survived since the first wave of them bastards came in.” He put his thumb to his chest. “Just like me.”

I tugged at the collar of my hoodie. “So?”

“So as far as I’m concerned, as long as you stay alive, you’re my kind.”

I snorted. “Whatever, think what you want.” I turned towards the city and began walking. Getting mixed up with a lunatic like him didn’t really appeal to me. Did that guy ever stop laughing? I heard it follow me as I walked. Before I could get completely away from him his voice entered my ears.

“Remember, slugger, as long as you’re alive, you’re our kind.” The words echoed past me, followed by his final statement. “And it’s pretty damn hard to kill a Cockroach.”
A KITE CALLED HOPE

Jack Ales

“A shadow is a shadow all the same.”
from A Book of Surrealist Games
(compiled) by Alastair Brotchie and (edited by) Mel Gooding

* Amid sagging, wise brick faces
on a high summer day,
when umbrellas are unlucky
and the breezes won’t come out to play,
when a dollar short is un-fare,

When the sprinklers jet out warm water
disappointing and tasteless
baked reality after a bold recipe

When A.C. is as good as a faithless prayer,
a mirage in the distance
above the blacktop
shimmers – a flirt:

The infant arms
of a small sapling reach out
and you run
to the ephemeral bathtub bubble
because
a shadow is a shadow all the same.

Artwork by Audra Spradlin
I love the fact that we don’t understand gravity, so seemingly simple.

We have

\[ F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2} \]

from Newton; yet, what more since then?

And then one night hearing a meteorologist exclaim “we just don’t understand water vapor” – so, I guess the clouds are safe too.

The boundaries of what we don’t know are limitless

and all the stars in the heavens are content to wait on our theories forever.

---

**ROOTS**

**Hilda Cruz**

The firmness of your foot compressed upon the earth sustains the curves so envied by human eyes.

Your arms uplift in offering the fruits in season’s time.
THANATOS

Destiny Hooper

Remember the day we laid him down to rest
We tried to stay bright like
The keys of the piano singing the melody
Stare in my eyes and you will see the light imprint
Of the memory of our feet moving across the floor
Dancing to the notes—our chests pounding
Into each other—sway this way and then that
Twirl and swirl and loop around a little spin
Your fancy feet jumped away to your own tune
You flew away to where no one knows
I am left standing on the ground below
Watching you leave in disbelief
Seeing you clear and then every second you fade
Faintly out of my sight like the red balloon we sent to the sky
The day that he died—I still feel the sting of the tears in my pores
And the warmth of your hand in mine
We said it then as the balloon disappeared that we would always
Have him in our heart
You’re right here

We turned away and wandered into
The darkest woods—
Explored the unmarked trails and we laughed when we were lost
We skipped rocks across the pond
I close my eyes and feel you
With my eyes closed shut
I see your dirty pant leg
The twigs and thorns caught in the denim
The sweet smell of your sweat still lingers
On your shirts that I couldn’t bear to part with
I am surrounded by leaves of every fall color and
I swim around in the dirt searching for you
I shove my arm far beneath the mud and I
Find your hand—I pull you up and you sputter dirt
From your mouth and it falls from your nose
I giggle and wipe off your eyelids and lay in your lap
Your arms provide me strength to face the day
I thought after you left I would forever be alone
You’re right here
I.

“Can I just get some mineral water please? I’ve been waiting for almost an hour,” the woman with the botched nose job spits out at her waitress. Jane straightens her starched black kimono-style shirt and clears her throat.

“Um, we don’t have mineral water, ma’am.”

“Excuse me?”

“We don’t have mineral water.”

“Yes, I heard you. What do you mean you don’t have mineral water? How do you not have mineral water?”

Jane feels her teeth start to grind. “Well ma’am, we don’t carry mineral water, but I can bring you some green tea if you’d like.”

“Fine, I just - I don’t understand how you can’t have any mineral water in this place.” She rolls her eyes.

Jane refrains from rolling hers and plasters a smile on her face. “Alright, I’ll be right back with that for you.”

She turns and drops her smile before disappearing behind the cloth tapestry that leads to the brightly lit kitchen. Two of the Habatchi chefs, one stork-like and one pudgy, are speaking to each other rather loudly in a language she does not understand. On the line, three cooks work silently among hissing pans and a chirping baby bird they caught in the parking lot to keep them entertained. The only other Caucasian, the dishwasher, talks to himself behind a small mountain of plastic plates, bowls, and cups. Passing him, Jane catches a whiff – a mixture of vanilla, cigarettes, and gasoline.

The teapot sits on one of the steel counters. Jane snatches up a jade-colored tea cup and matching saucer and wipes the plate with her apron. She quickly pours the steaming liquid into the cup and carries it out, setting it down before the woman who is now gabbing into her cell phone.

“Can I see a menu?” she puts her manicured talons over the phone’s speaker to ask Jane. Jane grabs one and hands it to the woman, who almost immediately tosses it aside, ignoring both it and her waitress.

Jane starts to walk away when she is flagged down by a large man sitting alone at the sushi bar. His bottom is much too large for the stool and his red-tipped nose is, and has been, running non-stop. He coughs and tells her he is ready for his fried dessert. Nodding her head, Jane rings it up then disappears behind the curtain once again. In the back she prints out the man’s bill, sets it in a check presenter, and grabs the ice cream one of the cooks pushes out for her. She places the dessert before the man and the black book next to it.

“Just let me know if you need anything else.” He is already halfway done with the fried ice cream by the time she completes the sentence.

Jane looks up to see another woman has joined the plastic-nosed lady who has finally put away her cell. This one has implants, orange skin, and platinum blonde hair. They wave her over,
although she is only inches away from them.


“Oh, and I didn’t ask for this,” the first woman tells Jane, pointing at the green tea before her.
“You never asked what I wanted to drink aside from the mineral water that you don’t have.”

“Alright, I apologize. I . . .”

“Just get me a Diet Coke, no straw and absolutely no ice. Please.” The botched nose snorts.

“No problem ladies. Can I go ahead and take your orders?” Jane digs her nails into the palms of her clenched fists. It takes fifteen minutes worth of irritating questions about the menu for Jane to finally turn in two complete orders. The obese man with the cold, long since done with his dessert sits sipping from a glass of sweet plum wine, occasionally coughing into a white handkerchief.

Jane grabs the drinks and rushes them out, disappearing again before the plastic women can annoy her any further. In the back she leans against the drink station and gives a long winded sigh.

“You okay, dude?” Jane’s friend Mary, a petite half-Asian brunette with dark almond-shaped eyes and fair, lightly freckled skin, asks her.

“I hate this job.”

“I know. By the way, big family with a busload of brats just sat in your section.”

* * *

“Twenty-six fucking dollars on a Friday night?! Seriously?!” Jane shuffles through her tips discontentedly for the second time, shaking her head in disbelief.

Both she and Mary lean against the restaurant, smoking cigarettes, exhausted and upset. Mary sucks on her menthol Marlboro as Jane, red-faced, steams, “I mean, she was such a needy bitch and then she left me nothing. Stiffed me. And the fat guy left me a goddamn dollar! What the hell am I
supposed to do with a dollar?! Buy some fucking bubblegum? And the lady who got mad because her sushi wasn’t cooked! I mean, Jesus-fucking-Christ, what do I have to do to get a tip? Get on my knees?!”

Mary breaks out with laughter at this. She held out her arms and motioned Jane over to her. “Come here, dumbass.” She wraps her arm around her friend and smirks. “You know what would make this shift better?”

“Burning the damn place down.”

Mary chuckles as she flicks her cigarette away and pulls an emerald green bottle of rice sake out of her apron pocket. “Jacked it from storage,” she unscrews the lid, takes a long swig and passes it to me, “when Kaji was giving you the stink eye. I think she thinks you’re gonna lose it one day. Gives me a lot of wiggle room actually.” Mary smirks.

Jane takes it gratefully, the alcohol in one hand, a lit cigarette in the other. “Seriously, wanna burn it?”

“Sure,” Mary laughs.

II.

Danny sat on the edge of the rusted tub in the back room, where the mops and buckets were kept. He ran cool water over his bare, blistered feet, his fingers gently peeling away the dead skin as his palms rubbed over his raw heels. He examined the reddish scars that had never properly healed from the night he had accidentally stepped in a bucket of searing hot grease. Although his foot was no longer a blotchy bright red he could still remember the flash of searing pain and the rapid swelling from the second degree burn. He passed his hand over his foot’s uneven surface, wishing he had been more careful. He knew the frying grease was poorly stored, that the whole thing was a freak accident, that the bucket would have never been there in the first place had the dump truck not crashed into the grease interceptor. And yet he blamed himself for not seeing the bucket in the darkness. That was just the kind of guy he was.

Danny was slender, but not weak. His arms, muscular from years of manual labor, were also covered in scorched red scars and discolored blotsches of burnt flesh – souvenirs from his childhood obsession with black cats and roman candles. He covered his dark scruffy hair beneath a worn baseball cap and was always a few days unshaven. He lacked a single tooth within a set of otherwise straight white teeth. His clear eyes, his best feature, were a pair of blue flames within tired sockets. Eyes that could pierce but instead chose to look away.

He was a good man of many misfortunes, and an odd man for them.

His girlfriend, his ex-girlfriend, had never been the kind to handle his oddities or random remarks. He had been standing in front of his hamster cage, smiling down at the little guy. She’d lain on the bed, annoyed. Like always.

“You know why my hamster lives alone,” he said. “When he lived with other hamsters, they
always fought and he was never happy. Alone, he’s happy and productive.”

“Productive?”

“Well, yeah. He runs on his wheel all day.” Danny explained without turning his head, his gaze still excitably intent upon the energetic creature.

“How is that productive?”

“It is, sweetie. You just don’t see it.”

“What are you saying? You’d be happier alone?”

“I’m happy. Sunny-side up, in fact.”

“Screw you Danny! I’d be a lot happier without you too! In fact, I can’t stand you and all your stupid bullshit! I’m sick of it!”

“You want me to call the doctor? I have pills if you need them.”

“What?! No! I’m sick of you! I’m tired of your... weirdness. Of having to constantly explain you to people. Why do you always insist on not wearing shoes when we go out? It’s disgusting. And then you tell people it’s for ‘religious reasons’ so they won’t kick you out. Which makes it even more humiliating when they do. Oh, let’s not forget that time you almost burned down my parents’ summer house with your damn joint. And when are you gonna get a better job?!"

“Mr. Biscuits and I got a good job. We run on the wheel all day. Isn’t that right Mr. Biscuits?” Danny had cooed at the hamster.

“Ugh, you act like I’m not even here! You know what, I’m leaving. You talk more to that damn rat than you do to me or your therapist anyhow.”

And that was that.

She had grabbed her suitcase and stormed out. The way they did in the movies. He had stared at her, admiringly. Bravo, he had thought.

Danny still wasn’t sure why she’d left. No matter, he would get her back. He turned off the faucet, pulled on his socks and shoes and returned to the heap of dishes waiting for him. Whistling a tune he’d heard on a cartoon once, he scrubbed the dishes with great vigor.

Suddenly he stopped. “Rat?!” he shouted. The cooks stopped their silly sounds, startled.
Danny looked over them, his hands waving in the air. “It was a hamster!” He laughed to himself and resumed washing the dishes. The cooks watched him wearily, watched him stop again. His smile was completely gone, his face was reddening. “I’ll show her! I’ll show all of you!” He screamed as he ran at the bubbling fryer, a crazed look in his liquid eyes.

III.
Natsuko Kaji had been born a thousand summers ago atop a mountain as red in the sun as the koi in the pond. She was not born male. This had made her father angry. So angry his blood would boil like the water placed over a charcoal fire. His anger would steam from him the way the tea water would steam from the iron pot over the burning charcoal. And it would burn in much the same way.

For many years she had been his servant at his tea house. His kimono kept as white as the winter snow because of her cracked hands. His tea utensils and powders kept orderly because of her nimble fingers. His garden kept trim, not a single blade of grass out of place, because of her aching back. Her father drank the custom tea. She swallowed cupfuls of sorrow.

One summer’s day, Natsuko grew hot and decided to stop drinking her tears, too salty to quench her thirst. That very same day the charcoal fire grew as well. The iron pot could no longer repress the coals beneath it. They spat out in anger, setting tatami mats, wooden beams, and paper walls aflame. The tea house burned as bright as the sun. Her father’s heat finally consumed him. They became nothing more than ashes.

She swam across oceans and seas, and then became her own master upon reaching land. But in all the years that passed she could never feel dry.

Now it was the restaurant that used her, making her back ache, roughening her hands, draining and straining her. Again she makes tea, but this time with cheap bags with paper tags not at all like the fine powdered tea leaves from home. Her servants know nothing of hard work or tradition. They laugh at the caged bird, laugh at his imprisonment. The pale man is foreign in too many ways. And the younger ones? One girl’s fingers are as sticky as the rice she served, the other girl’s mouth as foul as the inside of a fish market.

She feels her tea cup has become too full once again.

IV.
It was eleven o’clock at night on Friday when the residents of Harris county first smelled, then saw the thick gray smoke coming from their local sushi bar, Kaji Habatchi. Those closest could feel the heat coming off the building now engulfed in blinding yellow and orange flames that licked away at every wooden beam. They were sure they would hear what had happened on the midnight news, but for now they stared in awe of the truly brilliant scene. Finally, the roof collapsed and the building burnt down to the ground. Such a shame, they thought. Sushi should really be eaten raw.
How lost are you, little boy?
How lonely are you, little girl?
How scared are you that you won’t find
your place in this world?
Dirty hands like garden tools,
Neglected in the rain.
Soot stained faces aching for a bar of soap.
Empty stares,
Blank expressions,
Afraid to feel.
It’s not your fault you live this way,
If it’s living at all.
A shitty hand dealt by the dealer,
And you can’t fold.
All in,
Nothing to lose.
Begging for no pity,
Asking for no help.
A walking ghost in a world too selfish to care.
Sunken cheeks,
Bloody, chapped lips,
Matted hair,
Clothes to big to fit the skeletons
that are your bodies.
With my windows rolled up I cannot smell
the sweet stench of hopelessness.
My light turning green,
I drive away, too selfish to care.

Artwork by Caroline Smith
SECRET GARDEN

Garrett White

She walks
Alone
White fabric
The bright sails
Of a sole ship
On a hidden sea

The soft ground
Caresses her toes
Her fingers stroke the ancient trees
That sway under her light touch
They are lonely companions

In the silence of morning
Her eyes pierce the mist of time
And grasp an older forest
One not tainted
By the sins of the world
She revels in this secret place

The world changes around her
But the forest
Senses no change in her
The mossy path still blessed
With her wandering feet
The trees still soothed
By her silken touch

Her movements
Lithe and graceful
A goddess in her garden
As she moves, she sings
The melody at first utterance
Is soft and sweet

Like a hesitant first kiss
The long notes linger
Matching her stride
The sweetness hovers
And the tune turns solemn
Full of melancholy
A sadness enters
The sadness of knowing
That the world will not change

No birds stir
Except
For a lone white dove
Gliding on the wind
Its pure color standing out
Against the dark storm clouds
It glides on
Wings filled
With the lonesome melody

The clouds enclose her world
Only the forest and the sky exist
The sweet smell of fresh rain
Flows down from the brooding sky
And still she moves on
Singing
Wandering
Lost to the world
Alone
PSYCHOANALYSIS

Destiny Hooper

Take note to this melody of the erosion of my mind
Hanging in the power about us
It is the liberated society of the birds
Free to fly from mountain to riversides
Each one of those dispersed words
Flicker like a mermaid dash
From our minds we slash
Bounced from brain in the grain of your kind
Creation from sperm to egg
The notion of certainties and inaccuracies
Let your blood release from your body and take to the air

Each wave that pounds the bank of the seashores
Feed into a river that makes the stream that pours
Onto the root of the tree that guards the bones of ancestry
Stir up rain with the dirt, the ash, and the dust
The wind crafts energy that feeds humanity

Take note of the evolution song of earth inhabitants
From the division of peace to the destruction of land
We devour and prey on any one thing different than me
We seek and explore every cavity, even our own
Yet our brain, what makes us think, gives wings to our thoughts
And we are lost, medulla oblongata, we all got it
Oh the intelligent race to industrialize the world
Resist our history and embrace the screen
Our bare feet loved the feel of green
Now nourish impulse to toil and waste away to the lake
For the largest jade in your bank
FREEDOM ANGEL

Crystal Melzow

Will you leave while I cry?
Shed my tears before we say goodbye
The time has come to walk away
Break me down one last time this way

Because I can’t imagine life
Living in a world of pain, I would die
Knowing the comfort is no longer there
Crying out the depression with my soul in fear
The beauty has been revealed
Knowing how to share and hide, it’s that real
Being one with yourself is how to be
Losing control in your own spiritual way

My mind is gripping tight with reality
I feel as if I’m working with everyone
But I know they can’t see what I see
To shed the light just the right way
It’s the perfect picture that allows me to say
What I want to say

So open yourself to who loves you the most
Embarrassment will be there, it comes and flows
Living in a world of heartache and change
It’ll be around forever, let your mind decide when to rearrange

Rely on yourself and free your soul
Hold nothing back, let loose and lose control
Because growing up is difficult, nothing is easy
Living with your true self and speaking what is in your mind
That’s beautiful because that’s me

Artwork by Jennifer Theriot
I knew Kurt.  
He’s the one  
who wrote all my favorite songs.

He screams through his choruses  
so I don’t know what they mean.  
It’s ok though,  
With the lights out  
I can be myself,  
and I don’t have to know  
what happiness means.

Jamming and head banging  
with an iPod  
walking through the halls  
in the winds of electric folk thunder;  
I love you,  
I’m not gonna crack.  
And I didn’t crack,  
until he died.

I miss him to death.  
I must be the only one  
who misses him.  
Everyone I’ve talked to lately  
has said that his songs were too simple.  
So what if they were simple?  
Simple is better.  
He knew that.  
How many of us want complicated lives?  
It doesn’t make anyone stupid  
If we like simpler things,  
relationships,  
or times.  
He felt stupid  
but I know he wasn’t.

The other day  
I read a comment on YouTube.  
This guy was bitching.  
He said that he was “glad Kurt was dead”.  
I clicked on his link.  
Up popped a purple and pink glittering profile  
and pictures of men in tights  
with long hair draped over their pink tinted faces.  
A glam fan!  
His caption reads “if it doesn’t have tights, I’m not interested…”  
Well, we’re all sorry that grunge killed glam  
but as Tim Curry said “It was a mercy killing.”  
He knew,  
and he was a glam fan too.  
I don’t miss the parties  
where the guys wore more makeup than the girls  
then sang about the parties  
and how they loved the girls  
and how they lived for rock and roll.  
It’s not... genuine enough for me.

Kurt’s left behind something for us all.  
Every one of us lonely emo kids  
who prays that someone can feel for us,  
Every one of us college kids  
who hopes someone might scream for us.  
Every one of us rock stars  
screams to the lovers swaying on each other  
and nodding in rhythm.  
The people who surf the crowd  
reach out for a piece of our soul.  
Kurt gave his soul  
to the stage floor  
where it shattered with an electric roar  
and that soul still hums  
even though his speakers are unplugged.
ROSES & WHISKEY

Caitlin Rampy

Beautiful Tramp sucking slowly on a lit cigar
Roses & Whiskey
Smoke curls ’round full lips
The room pulses with her breath
Doe eyes blinking
Temptation wears a black dress...

Someone’s Dirty Secret arched against the matted wall
Horror & Ecstasy
Twisting pearls like men
Around her slender fingers
Ivory chest quivering
Seduction wears stilettos...

The World’s Favorite Playmate when the lights are turned down low
Worshiped & Damned
Closer than you think
Choking on her breath
Lips loosening
Lust knows your name...

Sin owns your heart.
His finesse and value are skyscrapers in an era past,
his presence dizzying.
It triggers her disorientation, and the struggle
ignites a hot horizon.
But his eyes hold her like a warm blanket,
and when his voice touches her open hand she is stuck to him
hopelessly.
Her identity is twisted in the grooves that makes his soul.
Love shot eyes stuck in a wakeful state
relief is a dream unattainable.
DEAR MR. PRESIDENT

Monica D. Garza

Dear Mr. President,

this is what I ask of you:
Will you change the world like you want to?
Will you try your hardest and do your best?
Or will you bow out and give up, just like the rest?
By chance, do you actually care?
Or are we just people here and there?
Is that compassion I see in your eyes?
Or PR smothered in clever lies?

Just a second of your time.
I’m here to find out if there is a crime

to keep all free-thought banned.
Unless there is not—
then, maybe this thought

is silly and messed up
just like the rest of
the world as we knew it.

Dear Mr. President,

one more time:
this question may be out of line,
but perchance do you really like your job?
Do you go out of your way not to rob
the people of this country known for freedom?
Unless that knowing is really just some redone
silliness dressed in fancy furs.
Seeing as the world goes round.
then why the hell do you we think we’ve found
someone who can lead us?
Hey, it’s not my fault that you may cheat us
out of what we need to survive.
That’s just the vibe
that comes off of things like these…
you know, fancy parties and fancy cheese.
Those places you go to without a care,
prepare your suit and comb your hair
to make sure you’re presented well.
«The rest of the country, ha! What the hell?»
Unless you really do care.
Then go ahead, go comb your hair;
we’ll be waiting for you to come down,
throw away your crown,
roll up your sleeves,
dot your i’s, cross your t’s,
and stay with us for a while.

Maybe then all the guile
you’ve been showing up until now
will be drowned and then you’ll wonder how
you ever thought you could manage this country
without us.
Because in the end all that fuss
was cleverly made to fool you.
Now that you’re in that seat, is it so cool to you?
Think you’re so hot now?
My man, sit down.
Don’t drown your sorrows in a drink
or stray the path and require a shrink
We, the people, deal with this every day.
It’s the way, the normal way.
Don’t you know about all of this?
Or did you fall asleep not knowing the risks
of making our country unhappy?
Don’t worry because all that clapping
out in the front, center and back rows
should mean something; maybe trust will grow.
And our nation forged on the backbones of lies
may one day take off its disguise
and show the world that we can don a new face:
one for every boy, every girl, of every race.

So Mr. President,
I ask of you:
are you ready? Do you want to?
Save the day and in all of our hearts
you’d better believe that that’s a start.
Our heads will be held high
toward the mountains that touch the sky.
“America,” we will sing,
“Beyond the chains of slavery,
our world united and our lives secure,
we have a great president, of that, I am sure.”
“A High and Lofty place...”
That’s where we all go.
Once a week, maybe twice, but never more.
Today is The Day.
The Day we go.
A High and Lofty place.

I see it long before it’s close.
Large, bulbous.
Grand, daunting.
But as I near the door, I sense its decay.
Old, faded, dead.
I say nothing.
“We don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings...”

They unlock the doors and let us in all at once.
Like last time.
And the time before.
Ever since I can remember.
My seat is waiting for me.
Everyone sits where they’re assigned.
No one’s feelings are hurt.
“A High and Lofty place...”
We all look forward.
The Exhibition is due.

Three come from the multitude and take their place.
The platform.
We watch silently.
They open their mouths, the words drum out.
Unison.
I don’t remember when we first banned music.
But it was done... so we wouldn’t hurt someone’s feelings.
The chant of the three continues.
“...High and lofty place...”
End.
They return to the masses.

The shadows of the pews grow long.

The Instructor climbs the platform.

He is to speak.
He sits himself upon the throne and drones out numbly to the crowd; “Blessed are we, for mine is the Kingdom.”
Blessed.
We nod in reply.
Agree.
Always.

“She don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings...”

A third of the crowd raises their hands up slowly, covering their ears.
No one’s feelings are hurt.
They know the rest will soon follow.
The Instructor leans back into his chair, speaking slow and long.
Only a few still listen while skimming the ancient and worn book they believe may still hold the answers. Hoping to find in it something that resembles the teaching of The Instructor.
To understand.
But the Elders know better, and the others find nothing.
One by one, they close the book.
They won’t waste as much time next Day.

I watch the Instructor, his mouth still moving.
“A High and Lofty place...”
We don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings...
My hand slips:
“Great are we and Greatly to be praised...”
I nod unconsciously.
Yes, surely we are great.
We are great.
Great... great?
A question.
A sin.
Are we truly great?
“Blessed... we are great...”

Are we?
“We don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings...”
No. We are not.
I watch the Instructor prattle on.
“A High and Lofty place...”
For once I feel separated from the others around me.
I am distinct in myself.
I am whole and yet afraid.
And quietly, oh so quietly, a still small voice takes form and reverberates in my mind...

“God is not here...”

Breath escapes me. I choke.
And yet I know... for so very long, I have known.
My arms fall to my side.
My ears laid bare as well as my once numb heart.
“We don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings...”
A tear, small and cold, pours onto my cheek.

They know.
The Instructor stops... looking me straight in the eye.
They all turn and fix their gaze on me.
His eyes do not waver as he speaks to the masses:
“Let us pray for our sister... and her healing.”
“Pray.”
They echo in unison.
I become rigid.
I know what is to come.
They warned us of the price.
It means nothing now.

“God is not here,” I whisper to myself.

“Pray,” he commands the crowd, his eyes piercing mine.

“Mumble, mumble, mumble...”
The crowd chants.
“Mumble, mumble, mumble...”

“God is not here,” I say aloud.
To them.
My voice shaking.

“Mumble, mumble, mumble...”
“Louder!” yells the Instructor, gripping the throne.
“MUMBLE, MUMBLE, MUMBLE...”

They are shouting now, but I will not be drowned out.
Not yet.
I rise to my feet, standing tall upon the pew and scream with all my might:

“GOD IS NOT HERE!”

Artwork by Mariel Fraley
Still.
Silence.
They stare at me, their eyes full of fear.
They know it too.
An Elder begs, pleads.
For his sake. And mine.
“We don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings...”

“Afflicted!” shouts the Instructor rising from the throne, venom dripping in his voice.
“Healed she will be.”

I breathe in deeply.
My fists are clenched.
I am not afraid.
They rise.
Unison.
Mechanical.
They grab me harshly.
I flinch but do not fight back.
Pulling me towards the platform, they throw me to the ground.
My head aches as I try to focus on the faces in the crowd.
It’s good that they see this.

They make me kneel.
The Instructor stands tall before me.
I am not afraid...

“Repent.”

The word falls cold upon my heart.
I stare defiantly.
“Never.”
“You will be healed.”
“I have been.”

“Blasphemy!”
Pain.
My mouth fills with blood... I cannot keep the tears from forming...
He grabs my face, forcing me to look into his own.

“I will win...” he threatens.
A smile plays across my torn and blooded lips;
“You have already lost.”
He pushes me away, and walks over to the table.  
He returns to me with a sword in one hand and a book in the other.  
He reads aloud, condemnation in his voice:

“Exodus 22:24 ‘My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword...’”

“So let it be done,” he finishes, slamming the book closed and throwing it to the floor.

I reach for it, wrapping my shaking fingers around the old cloth.  
Slowly I pull it into my arms.  
The Instructor stands still, waiting to see.

I turn the pages carefully.  
I find what I need.  
And read it to them, softly for them to hear, that they may know:

“Psalms 13:3-5  
‘Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;  
my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.  
But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.’”

Tears.  
The crowd.  
He sees them too.  
“This will be ended.”  
I am not afraid.  
I clutch the worn book tightly to my chest.  
The steel rubs cold on my bare neck.  
So that they may see and know...  
The sword is raised.  
I feel my heart, and smile amidst the tears.  
“God is here...”

In me.

---

Artwork by Steve McNeely
when the seams of our heads
burst
and all our brilliant ideas
fall out
like threads
that tangle when the wind picks them up
they become a tapestry
that blankets the world
keep us warm
with your thoughts

**TAPESTRY**

**Natasha Lie**

Artwork by Angelina Barreda
sacred rituals of love blossom and explode, 
raining from the sky like a paint box from heaven. 
dancing in the rain of this magnificent palette of love, 
we fall to the ground entwined, 
the grass cushions us in luxuriousness, 
where thoughts of love and procreation are born. 
you write songs of beauty upon my breast, 
where the verses fall freely from your hands. 
pouring out through the openness of my spirit, 
I inhale the sweet fragrance of love. 
and my passions grow as I behold your creation. 
from thin air you have woven love into a tapestry, 
and I am stunned at how easily you have changed the world.
VERSE 1:
When I come to class I know that
All my schemas start to grow because
We use our mental process
To see behavior similarities
Oh hey, in Psych class today
We heard it all in Psych class today

VERSE 2:
Learned about some rats in mazes
Monkeys that can sign in phrases
Puzzled cats in tricky boxes
Steinman's depressed dog... sad!
Little Albert fears white mice
The parrot Alex talk so nice
But still ol' Pavlov's dogs are drooling
Scary bunnies, I'm not fooling... hey
In Psych class today
Yeah, we learned it all in Psych class today

VERSE 3:
All those doctors and their theories
I try to recall, though I'm weary
William James on how to function
Doctor Watson, rats I know that
Freud of course said hidden urges
One day suddenly emerges... hey
My insight today... In one hour, it all goes away

BRIDGE:
Doctor Robins please hypnotize... just so I can memorize
Change my sensory perception... I am open to suggestion!

VERSE 4:
Five more weeks of good vibrations
Ending my sleep deprivation
I've learned so much, my frontal lobe is fat
I'm going home to toilet train my cat
Did you know Psych taught useful stuff like that?
Yeah, we learned it all in Psych class today
poems come when you least expect them
they arrive like
sneezes
coughs
itches
and
orgasms;
you are defenseless
you are frantic:
searching for a pen, pencil or crayon, and
something to write on
something to write on!
an old envelope
a cocktail napkin
a virgin sheet of 20 lb. paper.

poems come when you least expect them
necessary effusions
indifferent
to your preparedness
they bubble up
when
you are in traffic
or on the toilet
or just on the horizon
of sleep.

poems come when you least expect them
those inconsiderate
bastards.

Frank Richardson

Artwork by Theo Santos
TWO ILLUMINATED HANDS

Brianna Wilson

I am walking aimlessly through a pitch-black forest.
I trip over what I hope is just a tree root,
But I turn around to see two large illuminated hands growing from the earth.
I start to run but I am not fast enough.
One hand scoops me up, and I hold on to an index finger.
It is cold and stony, but I feel secure.
Curious now, I jump from this palm to the other.
And this one is nothing like the first.
I have to crawl around to keep from falling,
Because the hand keeps
Moving. Tilting. Shaking.
I lose my balance, and I slip anyway;
It’s a long fall to the bottom.
With a thud, I land much sooner than expected.
I feel hard fingers lay themselves on top of me,
and I hear us going underground.
One tries to hold too tight, one just wants you gone.
I finally dig myself out of my early grave,
And now, I am more lost and alone than ever.

PLASTIC’S TANTRIC

Jessica MacFarlane

The basilisk-tic noun with vapor teeth
I know you understand what I mean;
All of the same sounds in the sand.
If I speak with a grain of plastic
wonder not where all of this goes.
Into the sea,
Into the birds,
Into the fish,
that delve in the grove.
Tantric and moody
with overgrown reasons in your hair.
I care not if you are charismatic
You have destroyed my land.

Artwork by Caroline Smith
at night, in the darkest part of the hour, during the quietest part of the night, my house speaks. painful clanks of plumbing complain of rusty pipes, shifting uneasily in iron skin. walls, old and creaking move restlessly amongst rotting wood. crevices whisper forbidden secrets, guardians of things long past, but never forgotten. loud murmurings of possessions lay claim, placing their mark on me. voices sometimes so loud, so quarrelsome, so contentious, shouting allegations of neglect, pointing fingers of accusation, condemning, entrapping, creating a cage of deteriorating bars, invisible, but strong. until I close my eyes in frustration, too afraid to sleep.
I’LL FAKE ONE FOR YOU

Michael Simmons

Never mind my smile
It’s a killer in the night
Bringing back the past,
The torment of its plight

My mind, how it manifests,
On ignorance, what bliss.
Showing its pretty face,
A gunshot then a kiss

I let it build. I let it grow.
I let it fester like a wound
This madness has its hold
Like the Devil in his tomb

Then the grand finale,
How poisonous it should be!
Here it comes from you,
A smile back to me.

Artwork by Rebekah Spivey
SOMETIMES TITLES DON’T MEAN ANYTHING

Monica D. Garza

You were running.
The street as black and dark as the nether-regions of the human mind. Your footfalls connecting with the asphalt created a rift through the Earth; the ground shifted and folded beneath your well-worn leather combat boots that you insisted you wore for necessity, not fashion. Living far from any war-torn country, necessity was not likely.

You were high.
Not from drugs, but from the “anti-drug.” It was evident from the way your eyes took on an alien-like quality. They bulged and swayed in your “under-the-influence” mind, their cement-colored beauty masked in the coal-like dust of insecurity.

Your heart was dead.
It beat you up, spit you out, and left you cold and bleeding, like you felt everyone else you knew had done to you.

You were laughing.
Not out of mirth but of the sheer willingness to perform the action, the acceleration of the flow of the polluted air within your lungs, the air that you have gotten used to, polluted or not.

You were flying.
Suddenly, you leapt up, your sheer will colliding with the pure insanity of your current world as you careened into the air.

You died.
You thought you were invincible. We all did. You were wrong. We were all wrong.

You saw me.
And as your eyes passed over me, something registered in you. You snapped out of it. You looked back at me. Your chest lifted and fell with the new breaths you took from your new world. You were no longer in an abysmal pit of loneliness. You were back.

“Welcome back.”

You smiled as the robotic arms reached out to fix you. You who were so broken, so frail. You, who were mortal, so small.

You were alive.
You haunt me
Your skin on my back
I carry your flesh inside of my flesh
Bone of my bone
My hair draped over your shoulders
My legs wrapped around your waist
Your mouth painting pictures on my mouth
Ghost…
Vanish from my body so that I may find rest
When the moon kisses the sky
Death won’t erase your memory
And life exists empty without you
I don’t have your heart so mine won’t beat
I can’t breathe
Your eyes your lips your hips your kiss serenaded me
When comfort couldn’t and wouldn’t come
Now they are all a part of the list of memories that haunt me
Just a part of the list

PART OF THE LIST

Teri Mills
CONFERENCES, #5

Jessica MacFarlane

Conjure desire with the gust of gods.
Appetite for this craving I must hunger in silent waiting.
Longing, lust dipping into passion, pining.
Compulsion has been noticed which does invoke suspension.
Mania created among the precious lambs.
Concupiscent towards the very warm mother of sun.
Eroticism is just like a blanket.
Love, oh with all of these, Love, I am tortured by this cage.

THE FLOW

Debra Bonier

I have powerful legs that do not easily bend.
sturdy and unfltering,
they have weathered the storms of my life,
sometimes stumbling, but never allowing me to fall.
although they have entwined with lovers and husbands,
opened wide to birth children,
they still maintain the perfection of innocence,
running with the glee of a child towards new adventures.
they frequently falter, but do not decrease their speed.
ever hesitating, they flow away to the entrance of life,
ending at the junction of my thighs,
where they become pliable, flexible and malleable,
and it is there that they end,
reminding me that I am a woman.
DARK MEMORIES

Michael Allen

A shadow seeps under my door
An Angel speaks to me softly
Death stares at me from across the room
As I fight to keep on breathing.

My life has fallen like a drop of rain
Shattering upon the ground and evaporating before me
Safety, nowhere in sight and never to be seen
For I drown in my own blood and fade into history.

I could have been a loving memory
But I fell without the seed planted
Now I sink into this earth’s surface
Forgotten like a good deed left unwarranted.

HAIKU

Jeanie Tran

Maple leaves falling
Under a dreary sky;
A gunshot screams.

Artwork by Caroline Smith
'TWAS THE WEEK BEFORE FINALS

Adapted by: Pauline Eklund

'Twas the week before finals, when all through San Jac,
Not a student was joking, not even a crack.
The textbooks were worn and highlighted with care,
Knowing that finals soon would be there.
These scholars were filled up with caffeine and dread,
While visions of formulas danced in their heads.
And Bob in his laptop, and I in my book,
Had just settled down in a small study nook,

When out on the lawn there arose so much chatter,
I sprang from my classroom to see what was the matter.
Away to the window, quite out of my mind,
I tripped over a desk and threw up the blinds.
The sun on the sidewalk and newly mown sod
Gave me the feeling that something was odd,
When, what to my bloodshot eyes should appear,
But S.I.s and tutors to make learning clear.

I knew I must run to the ILC quick.
More rapid than eagles with courses they came.
The leader he smiled, and called them by name;
“Now, Algebra! Government! Now, English and History!
On, Science! On Comp! On Tech and Psychology!
To the top of the desks! To the ends of the halls!
Now quiz away! Quiz away! Quiz away, y’all!”
As study notes spilled in a sudden gust fly,
Fall from my notebook and off to the sky,
To the Kaleidoscope room the students they flew,
With arms full of notes and calculators too.
Then, in a twinkling, I saw them all there,
The poor frightened students who came to prepare.

As I drew on my flashcards, and was turning around,
In came the strangest professor with a bound.
His clothes, they were baggy and wrinkled all over,
His head was quite bald, with an ugly combover;
A bundle of textbooks was flung on his back,
And he looked like a gangster here to attack.
His eyes, how they twinkled! His voice was so merry!
I knew right away that this guy was real scary.

“I came here to help you to pass all of your tests,
And don’t you go thinkin’ you’ll get any rest.
There won’t be no texting or Twitter in here!
Oh, I’ll get you ready; you’ve got nothing to fear.”

Then he worked us and crammed all those facts in our heads.
He whipped us in shape, just like he had said,
And when all my fingers were bloody and raw,
A smile on his face. With a nod of his head,
He soon gave me to know there’s a hard day ahead;
He spoke not a word, so I first thought him rude,
But he filled all the tables with drinks and snack foods.

I knew he was leaving and heard what he said:
“These students will pass; they have very full heads!”
He sprang to his car, to his team gave a shout,
“We’ve done all we can, now it’s time to get out!”
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight:
“The Frenzy is over, good skills and good night!”

Artwork by Jan Huff
I'm beginning to idealize long passages, slow trips on steam ships a hundred years ago or more. Summer passages, returning from “the Orient” or “darkest Africa.” Long days at sea, balmy or misty, looking back to watch the green land slip away, weeks or months to drift between places.

Ladies and men, lovers and friends, take tea alone or with family, sleep late in private cabins, or rest on deck in warm sun. Days are spent lingering, or writing long letters to dear ones, capturing in curly script the hypnotic rhythms, seductive women, and mysterious flavors of the land they've left.

By the end of this journey, the experience is distilled. They've grown older, wiser. Maybe they reach the more familiar shore knowing something, feeling satisfied and settled, the passage complete.

Jet travel allows no such luxury. No later than you are strapped in place, the magical land shrinks, immediately distant. You peer desperately out thick windows for glimpses of life, images to imprint. Before it seems fair, clouds envelop and separate you in ether of dry air and altitude—numb. The exotic vanishes and you are all too quickly distracted by carts and elbows, movies piped in, meals brought at the wrong times and no one to share them with.

There's no time, no time to sort the senses, measure the memories, carefully tuck away the rare hours with precious people. The international date line feels too real, too tragic. The whispers of “your” foreign tongue become fainter in the polyglot plane. Steeped in sterile air, twelve hours and two continents later, you are alone, un-oriented.

Suddenly someone opens a window, and a cold light startles. You've traveled back in time, and your old life is now the only one. The place you just left is gone again, like a vivid but elusive dream you keep waking up from. The best a girl can do is feverishly compose a poem in her head before it's too late. The passage is over—home too soon.
FRAGMENTS

Jennifer Salas

Break before dawn, awake
visualizing images
perhaps a tulip ready to bloom
for a sign
decisions, decisions
what can be said,
worshipping, lingering incomplete thoughts
should they be said
perhaps if one knew
what one really wanted
emotionally attached
or physically detached
vice versa
images being visualized
for a thought to be complete
sleep, after dawn
thoughts still lingering about

DRIFTING IN THE STARS

Caroline Cao

Envelop in the stars
The tides of the comets
A place devoid of gravity
The vacuum of no depravity
Climb no summit

Envelop in the life
A place where the supernovas burst with joy
The black holes employ
Your soul

Envelop the stars
Transform into a quasar
The coldness tingling on your skin
To become akin
To join the stars

Disregard that you were a star
Down on the earth
Where you once had survived

Artwork by Joshua Garcia
HOUSTON

Alex Winemiller

Shipper of the nation, space explorer, oil maker,  
Frustrated, star-struck, immovable, underestimated, a quiet giant:  
City by the bayou, clinging to her like a suckling child, 
Gazing so boldly, so closely, at the brown and daring Gulf.

I see the many faces in your streets — dark, light, sad, bright, 
I see the many races — ever-melding, ever-growing,  
And ethnically meshing with your expanding body.

Oily, gritty, art-creating, ever-building city,  
Painting the town with your zeal and fine art, tacky and tasteful.  
Hungry, eager, wanting to be praised,  
You are a star-toucher, leaning on the edge of space,  
Gateway to the ethereal abyss, whom sky-explorers call to.

Brazen with sticky heat, the bayou city clings to its watery mother, 
You fuel the nation, you survey the starry space, you challenge the Gulf.  
Frustrated, star-struck, immovable, underestimated, sleeping like a humble giant.
Holy, holy, holy
I am holy
The world is holy
The word is holy
He is holy
She is holy
His blood is holy
My blood that spills
Running through my veins like a flowing river
Staining the back of a white horse
Horses, horses, running across the plains
Free, holy
Holy, sacred white horses
Bringer of the end
These times are the times I dread
These things, this poem
Contents of my head
I birthed a son
I kissed his feet
I claimed his head
I protected my son
My child
With my blood
Holy child
Holy mother
He was chosen
I was chosen
Chosen, chosen,
I was chosen to be
Holy
TO GET TO YOUR SOUL

Melody Clay

To get to your soul, I must take a train
First I come to the bridge of hope
There I see a boat far in the distance
The train travels on and I leave the bridge behind
I come to a town, where the train stops
  Down the street I go
Seeing a store with red in the window, I go in
Here I see anger all upon the shelves
Feeling fearful, I leave that rage-filled shop
  Back to the street I flee and start to walk
In a store window, I see what appears to be water
Curiosity strikes, and I walk in
Ponds, pools, and rivers greet me
Here lie the tears you have cried
Saddened by this place, I exit slowly
  Back onto the street I go
I glance over and see a toy store
Quickly making my way over, I enter
To my delight, it is a room full of toys
The joys and happiness you’ve felt
Suddenly remembering my quest, I leave
  Back to the street I skip, feeling lighter
A window comes before me with many masks
Anxious to try one on, I run into the store
Surprisingly, the store contains none of the masks I saw
The loneliness in this shop is what you’ve endured
My heart weighing heavy in my chest, I turn to go
Pushing through the weighty door, I leave
  Back to the street I meander
Down the road there are many stores
Each one carrying a different feeling
The road abruptly stops at a river
There lies the boat I saw in the distance
Hanging onto a dock, I jump into the teetering vessel
Gentle as a mother’s hand, I’m pulled away from shore
  On the horizon, I see a bright light
The boat stops when I come to an island
There you live in a house opposite the sea
Kids running around and their mommy is me
Kelley knew she had never liked her job, but today had been the last straw. After two weeks of working late doing mindless paperwork, sorting, signing, filing, and frantic runs to Starbucks for six ungrateful people (none of whom understood the difficulty of carrying seven coffee cups, each one paired with a bakery item, all the way back to the office with only two hands and no help), she had finally listened to the stacks of self-help books piled on the sofa in her townhouse and refused to be a doormat to her coworkers and boss, which had subsequently gotten her fired. Kelley knew she should have anticipated this sort of reaction from her boss. After all, she was at the bottom of the bureaucratic food chain, and her qualifications weren’t exactly hard to find. She was now faced with an evening at home with her boxed wine and the dog her stupid ex had left her with.

It wasn’t as if it would be particularly hard for Kelley to find a job. She knew she was attractive and well-liked and intelligent. It was just that the prospect of finding a new job was so tiresome; there were so many resumes to print and distribute, applications to fill, interviews to give, and the worst thing was that she would probably have two or three weeks off in which she would have to be looking for work and wouldn’t be able to just relax. The holidays were coming, too, and she’d need money for gifts and other such things. Kelley put the cardboard box containing a year and a half’s worth of desk junk in the back of her car and began to drive home.

Contemplating how she felt, she discovered that she was not nearly as elated as she had thought she would be. She had imagined beating her boss over the head with a folio of the reports she’d wasted a year on, or burning her face off with scalding coffee, or sending her to a science lab instead of a spa. She had imagined doing these things, and then emerging the office building victorious, with crowds of admiring pencil-pushers surrounding her and lifting her up on their shoulders and shouting her name. She had imagined coming home, calling her ex, and cussing him out for leaving her. And then she had thought about breaking into his new apartment and leaving his dog on his new bed, where his new, allergic girlfriend, whom he had left her for, would go into anaphylactic shock and die. Once this happened, Kelley would be left laughing to the world and drinking good wine in Hawaii, with attractive men drooling over her everywhere she went. These were the things she had imagined.

Driving home, she felt none of the sinister excitement at her freedom that she had expected. She knew that her ex had left her because she was not worth loving. At least, that is what the self-help books told her she knew. She knew that her self-esteem had killed their relationship, that he could never love anyone who didn’t even love herself. She knew that the books were right. But the knowledge of this gave Kelley no feeling of power, or relief, or progress, and the thought of coming home to an empty townhouse with the overly happy canine he’d left behind gave Kelley a pain in her chest that was too cliché for her to admit.

Kelley pulled into her driveway in front of her townhouse, and the realization leaped upon her that she had not fed Buster that morning. Her ex had been a fan of old movies, and so the dog’s name was Buster Keaton. He thought it was clever. Kelley didn’t care for the name, but she didn’t care enough to change it, so the dog’s name was Buster, just like a quarter of the dogs in the city and three-
quarters of the dogs in the children’s section of the library. Kelley sighed and tried to still the guilt she felt for not feeding the animal. She had been so busy in the last few weeks, since her ex left and her job went crazy, that she hadn’t given the dog much attention, and she knew that she’d walk in the door and he would be just as happy to see her as he would have been if she’d fed him, which made her hate herself even more.

While she was gathering her things from the car, Kelley’s phone began to ring. The ringtone was Darth Vader’s music from Star Wars, which told her that someone from work was calling. She decided not to answer.

Walking in the door, Kelley deposited her purse and the cardboard box in the front hall and proceeded to the kitchen, where she took out a can of dog food, dumped it in the dog’s bowl, checked his water, and grabbed a glass of boxed wine, which led her to the bathroom where she took off her makeup and changed into her “grugly clothes,” as her ex had called them. He thought it was a clever melding of the words “grungy” and “ugly.”

Sitting on the bed after changing, Kelley looked at the little puddle of remaining red in the bottom of her glass. Her phone rang again; Darth Vader was coming in the front hall. Kelley fetched the phone, and enjoyed the sinister ringtone on her way back to the bedroom, where she fell onto her face on the bed, and listened to the two messages.

“Hey, just calling again. Sorry to harass you. Just wanted to make sure you made it home okay. We’ll miss you. I know the pariah will regret firing you once she realizes…. Okay, honey, I’ll talk to you later. Chin up!”

Kelley sighed. Crystal had been her best friend for six months, and since they mostly sent text messages, she hadn’t bothered to change her ringtone to something more welcoming. She sent Crystal a simple text: “Going to bed. Call you tomorrow.”

Wandering to the kitchen to get a wine refill, Kelley noticed for the first time an absence in the house. She hadn’t been able to tell before, but after seeing the dog’s bowl, she was now notably aware that she had not seen him since arriving home.

She had imagined coming home, calling her ex, and cussing him out for leaving her.

Kelley began searching the house, calling out, “Buster! Get out here! Come on, you silly pooch. I know you’re hungry, so come eat!”

There was no response. Kelley’s anxiety increased, and she went to look for him outside. She didn’t know how he could have gotten out, but it was the only available option. Standing on the driveway, she called out as loudly as she could: “Buster! Get over here! Please come back and eat your dinner! Come on, I don’t need this tonight, you dog! I’m absolutely gonna skin your hide, you filthy mutt! Buster! Come here!”

“I don’t think I’d come, either.” The speaker was a fat, wrinkled old man standing in the driveway next to hers in a light pink bathrobe, his bare feet clutching the ground as if he were dizzy.
Kelley responded shortly, “I’ve had a bad day.”

“Apparently. But scaring the poor thing isn’t gonna bring him back.”

“I don’t care anyway. He’s probably gone to find my ex. Good riddance to the both of them.”

“Well, now. Is that really how you feel?”

“Yes.”

The old man gave Kelley an evaluative look, from her ponytail to her grugly clothing to her bare feet and red toenails. “I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it. He’s not my dog. I don’t care about that dog.”

“Okay. You can say it, but I still don’t believe it.”

“Fine! Don’t believe it! You don’t have to believe it! I don’t care if you do or not! I don’t know why I’m even talking to you about this. I don’t know you.”

Kelley stormed to her car, which she climbed into before realizing that her keys were still inside the house in her purse. Running inside, she grabbed her keys and her phone (which had five new alerts, all from Crystal), and then ran back out to her car, driving away as quickly as she could, because the old man was still in his driveway, watching her with a cruelly amused grin.

Kelley drove through the neighborhood, hollering for the dog.

“Buster! Buster! Your dinner’s waiting for you at home!”

There was not a dog in sight.

Kelley drove back to the house, fully expecting the old man to still be there, which he was.

“Found him?” He asked, digging his left big toe into the dirt next to his driveway.

“No.”

“Maybe you’re not looking the right places. Where does he like to go?”

“I don’t know where he likes to go. He’s a dog. He likes trashcans and toilets. Maybe he went to find a house with more trashcans or toilets. Maybe my house doesn’t have enough for him.”

“He might have just wanted attention.”

“He’s not my dog, anyway. I don’t care. I’m going to bed.”

“So tell me about Buster and the stupid ex.”

Mistletoe didn’t seem to be wasting any time in getting to know his neighbor.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“He’s my stupid ex’s dog, and they’re perfect for each other. That dog will love him no matter how big an asshole he is. I hope the dog finds him.”

“Okay.”

“Why do you keep saying that? What do you care?”

“I like dogs. I like how they smile at you after a long day.”

“Dogs can’t smile.” Although Kelley said this, she knew what he was talking about. Buster used to do that whenever she got home, although she had stopped noticing when her ex had left.

“Okay.” The old man replied, digging another hole with his toe.

Kelley took a long look at the old man. His eyes were a bright green that she could see even from a distance. His hair seemed a bad parody of
Kelley turned to leave, furious with this presumptuous and stupid old man, when, without a clear thought process, it became apparent what the man was saying to her. He was right. Her ex had left the dog for a new girl. He had left Kelley for a new girl, but he had also left the dog. He and Buster had been together before Kelley and he had started dating, and now they had both been discarded. They were both the remainders of his former relationships; the relationships that he couldn't, or didn't want to, keep.

This realization brought a wash of guilt and familiarity. She was all that Buster had left. His best friend had left him, and she was now his only friend. Suddenly her ex's treatment of Buster made Kelley more furious than his treatment of her. She had given her ex trouble. She had made life hard for him, to make sure he loved her, and she thought it must have been partially her fault that one day he decided that he didn't. But Buster had never done any such thing. Buster had always been there for him. He had always loved him, always smiled at him after a hard day, stuck with him through several hard breakups before this one, always known he was the most perfect person in the world, and yet Kelley's ex had left him, all because the new girl had said he needed to.
Kelley, realizing she was still standing outside, turned to see the old man going inside his house. Kelley turned to go to bed when she heard Mistletoe’s door open again, and Kelley was unexpectedly knocked over, face-first, onto the grass in front of her house. She felt sharp points on her back, and a weight holding her down, and by the time she realized that it was Buster, she was crying, first out of fear, and then out of joy, and he was licking her face gratefully. Mistletoe was gone.

Kelley took Buster back inside, gave him fresh food, and cuddled with him on the couch until they both fell asleep. The next morning, they slept late, because, without work, they could, and then Kelley got Buster ready to go on a walk. He hadn’t had one since their ex had left, and she knew he would appreciate it. On their way out the door, Kelley noticed a note on her front porch, tucked under her doormat. Looking over at the house next door, she saw that it looked completely empty, and there was a “For Sale” sign staked in the front yard.

The note read: “Kelley Chambers, I knew this dog had a home. He was too lovely to be a loner. I had no idea that finding his friend would be as easy as it was. You have a big voice.

Give him the home that he deserves, and he will be the friend you deserve. You need each other. Know that he will be your friend no matter what, but also know that if you abuse that knowledge, a greater punishment awaits you in the end. I may see you around. Sincerely, Mistletoe.”
FACE

PJ Melton

I cast the first glance at the quarter-round moon,
Waving my hands in its luminous coils,
Scaring myself with its far off stance.
A small figure, I stand underneath the strength of its omnipotence.
And I find myself a forgetful mind,
A mouth at a loss.
My fragility becomes evident to me,
Once again,
Gazing at the quarter-round moon,
So seemingly alone.
I want to take a picture of this conversation
and save it for another day

flash my memory to a part of my brain
that will never forget

these moments are fleeting

and capturing each second to suspend a lifetime is art
age is a privilege
but to remember forever is a gift

I won’t allow these words to leave my lips unrecited

even the wind as it blows will I take in
long term
I will hold on to a thousand yesterdays

and dance in the memories long after eternity
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