

# Shoreline

FALL 1990

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## SHORELINE

Fall 1990

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## BRILLIANT PINK VIOLENCE

by Brian Laferte

**T**he rest room door closes behind Art with a swish and click. He stops at the edge of the hallway. His table is around the corner. He hears Victoria say, "Well, I've finally got him off smoking," then pause and finish, "It's a start anyway." Art presses his back against the patterned wallpaper, raises his hand to his mouth and takes a drag off a cigarette that isn't there. Letting his breath out slowly he catches a woman in purple dress staring from a nearby table. She's five miles past pretty. Her head snaps away. The man she is with is bald in spots like a molting bird. Art stares at her and catches her looking again. There is something to the dress. He throws down the cigarette that isn't there and walks around the corner to his table with a smile as full of sincerity as the cigarette was of tobacco.

Art takes his seat next to Victoria. She is talking to Barbara. Robbie is quiet, finishing his drink. Ice clinks and clicks as he puts his empty glass on the table. Art looks at his own glass. There is no ice.

"Are you happy in Columbus?" Art asks. "It's one of those places that I'd hate to be. I always think, 'What is there to do in Columbus?'" He spins his empty glass. "What the hell is there to do in Columbus?"

"We do the same things you do here," Barbara answers. "The places are different.

We don't have the beach like you. But we go out. We stay home a lot too." She drinks. "There's always something to do around the house." She looks at Robbie. "And we're getting our thumbs green in the garden."

"We're better at brown," Robbie throws in as he adjusts his tie tighter. It is red paisley. Barbara laughs and agrees to his comment.

"That's one thing I want to do when we get settled," Victoria starts. "I always wanted to have a little garden. Fresh tomatoes, cukes, some carrot maybe. I've never had a place with enough space or a good enough landlord though. The house we looked at today has a nice patch of grass on the south side we could use ..." She continues on, talking mostly to Barbara.

"Do you still play ball Rob? The league down here is better than ever. A lot of new guys. Nobody as good as you in left though."

"I don't play anymore." Robbie says. There is a finality in his voice.

"But you loved it so much ..."

"There are things to do at home." He is monotone. "That house takes all my time."

"I could never give up ball. I need the exercise."

Barbara interrupts, "Robbie gets all he needs at the club. And he doesn't need seventeen other men to do it." She wriggles back into her conversation.

Art looks around for the waiter but can not find him. "That kid hasn't come back with our drinks yet?" Robbie shakes his head. He grasps the knot in his tie and loosens it. Victoria spits out "No" from the middle of her conversation with Barbara. "I ..." Art says to Robbie, but he is listening to the girls so Art finishes for himself. "I'm sick of waiting. Boy am I going to stiff this kid." He lifts his chair back and stands.

"Anyone for another drink?", Art asks the table. Barbara shakes her head. Art turns to Victoria. She nods and winks. "Another cooler," she says. "Cherry." Art winks back and turns for the bar.

"Hey, what about me?" Robbie asks. Art hears the hard legs of Robbie's chair stomp down behind him.

"You're a big boy Rob. Come get your own."

The bar is downstairs from their table. It's empty except for Francis, an older man, maybe sixty, smelling like old scotch. Grace is behind the bar. She's got a dry sense about her. Art pulls out a stool and sits. Robbie stands at the bar.

"What for you, men?" Grace asks three feet from both of them. Art stares into her face. She stares back and he hopes Robbie hasn't noticed. He orders Absolut tonic and a berry wine cooler. Robbie puts his elbow on the bar and leans pushing his tie aside, but it falls back into place. He orders quickly, almost trying not to, then looks around the room, stopping his head at the cigarette machine behind Art.

"Good you stopped," Robbie says. Art feels his voice, heavy brown and trapped, a voice Art had never heard two years ago, before Robbie left for Columbus. Thoughtless, uninterested. "You feeling any better?"

Art turns toward Robbie. His head is pointed at the machine. It's old and has eaten more than enough of Art's money. "Sure. I'm better. Not coughing so much. I get urges though." The drinks come. Grace delivers them softly, retracting her long soft lingering fin-

gers.

"Of course you get urges." Robbie says knowingly, then picks up his drink. "You ready?" he says, leaving the bar.

"I thought we'd sit a minute."

"The girls are waiting. Let's go." Robbie isn't looking back.

"I haven't seen you for two years. Let's sit. They'll get along. They're probably talking. Girls do that, they talk. Come sit. We'll be like girls a little." Art hears Grace laugh as he finishes. Another dry spot. Robbie is at the stairs when Art looks away from the hands of the bartender. She's pouring scotch for Francis. It is almost as good as Southern Comfort, but not so sweet. Robbie starts up. "I didn't know you liked hearing about plants so much," Art says as he takes his drink and follows.

Brilliant pink violence. The lobster waits on Art's plate, its tail curled under for support, its claws grasping onto a bed of vermicelli. The antennae are down, more red than pink, resting on a tuft of kelp between the claws. Its left eye is dark brown, the right missing. Lemon butter works down the lobster's back, into the shell and onto the flesh where it can find its way, the vermicelli where it can not. It tastes good but there is no cheese, so he takes the canister of parmesan and shakes it. Cheese falls and trickles its way through the vermicelli mixing with the lemon butter. Art sees pools form in the patch of vermicelli, like little meringue pies, and puts down the cheese.

"This isn't cherry is it?" asks Victoria tapping her glass.

"I thought it was berry you wanted. Sorry about that. I'll get it right on the next one." Art smiles and she smiles back then grabs his hand and rests it on her knee. She is a light skinned girl of twenty four. She has a small round mouth with appetizing red lips and a dimpled smile. Her eyes are hazel toward brown to match her shoulder length hair. Its curls are soft and natural though Art knows her sister puts them in every few months.

"How's the chicken?"

"Not as good as usual. A little cold too. Barbara, how's your meal?"

"This is good veal. This is a wonderful place. I'm glad you two took us here. The food is fabulous." She pats her lips with her napkin. She and Victoria are the same. Like frames. Both small, both thin. Her face is attractive. "My veal is perfect." She sips from her diet soda. "What do you think of the lobster Robbie?"

Robbie puts down the claw he is working on. "Tastes like Maine lobster. Nothing special." He continues working on the claw. "The butter sauce adds a nice taste."

"Rob." Barbara looks at him, annoyed. "Maine lobster. Is that it? Tastes like Maine lobster." She rolls her eyes angrily. "Is that all you can say about it?"

A familiar lightness that hasn't shown all night sneaks into Robbie's voice. He stares at Barbara. "The lobster is out of this world. Not a bit over cooked. Steamed to perfection. Fresh as today's flounder." His eyes and arms go crazy. "Oh and the vermicelli, mmmph." He eats some and over-smiles. "Yes. Made fresh in Italy, flown over last night. Cooked solely for my benefit." He raises his hand toward the kitchen. "Bravo Chef. Bravo." Robbie turns his eyes at his plate and picks at the lobster claw with his fork.

"There he is." Art says, turning to Victoria. She squeezes his hand. "Robbie is finally here Tori." She is not smiling. "I thought you'd never get here Robbie. For a minute I thought Columbus Ohio had taken your old personality and thrown it in a closet. Seemed like you had gotten old." Victoria is smiling with her eyes.

"We..." Robbie clears his throat. Authority comes out. "We haven't seen each other for over two years Art. I'm living in a different atmosphere. I'm out of school. Work isn't much like school. More pressure. Been married for over a year. People change when you don't see

them for a while." Robbie's voice is heavy again. "You've changed too Art." He looks to Victoria. "Your taste in women has increased a thousand percent."

Robbie tightens his paisley noose and turns quiet. The table is quiet. Art eats more vermicelli. He is almost finished all of it but hasn't touched the lobster. Victoria eats more of her meal and Barbara finishes her drink. Barbara asks Robbie to get her another. He leaves the table before she is finished.

Art looks at Barbara. She is looking at Victoria. Art looks at Victoria. She is looking at

Art. Art looks at Robbie. He's not there. Art stands up. "You want cherry this time, right?"

**She and Victoria  
are the same. Like  
frames.**

The tension in Robbie's back stands him out. The room is full and he is waiting at the bar to place his order. Francis waves to Art

when he enters the room. Art makes his way to Robbie.

"Did you want another drink?" Robbie asks. "Sorry I didn't ask." His voice is heavy again.

"Drink's fine. Just looking for someplace I can get comfortable." Art stops. Robbie is quiet. "Let's be like girls for a while."

"No." Robbie hasn't yet looked at Art since he has come up to him. "I'm getting the drinks. Going back up. Things will be better." He orders and waits.

Art grabs a table opening by the staircase because there is no point in standing. He sits and waits. Francis is waving at him violently. Art ignores him. Robbie is at the stairs with his drink.

"Are you coming?"

"No. You sit." Art raises himself. Robbie starts up the stairs but Art grabs his arm and stops him. "God damn it you bastard, sit." Robbie is pulling away. "The only reason you came back here was to see me." Anger. "Now let's do some seeing." Art releases Robbie and sits. Robbie submits to standing by the table.

"What's wrong with you," Art asks.

"Me? With me."

"That lobster stuff is the only glimpse I've seen of Robbie Becker the two days you've been here. Then you turn it off. What happened to Robbie Becker? Barbara break you? She make you old and boring?"

Robbie's anger is noticeable. "People change Art. I was wrong before about you. Obviously you haven't." Robbie walks up the steps.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Art follows a few steps.

Francis walks by them, humming.

"I'm married. Stable. Making a living. Happy..."

"Killed! Trained to death."

Robbie stands on the step above Art. "Six months from your April wedding you'll be the same."

"The hell I will."

A couple passes them muttering something between themselves. The man is one Art has never seen, the woman a regular Art knows now and then. Robbie is staring into Art. The higher step makes the two the same height.

"So you quit smoking on your own then?" They are silent.

Art stammers. Francis waves as he stutters his way along the stair rail back down to the bar.

"You can't have it all. She made you give up smoking. She'll make you give up baseball. In a few months you'll be gardening too." Robbie backs up one step, his tie high and tight around his neck. "If you don't want that then don't choose Victoria." Waving down to the bar he says, "Try that bartender. You two seem to be very well acquainted."

Art hits Robbie with a left on the side of the mouth, dropping him to the stairs. He looks at Robbie without regret. Robbie is up immediately. His tie is hanging over his back. Blood is dripping off the hand covering his mouth.

"Grow up." There is more than enough blood. "Make your choice. You can't have it all."

Robbie turns up the stairs and is gone, swallowed by the light of the dining room. A woman in slacks is going down to the bar. Looking at his choices, Art descends.

The bar is not full, but busy. Francis has moved across the bar and three men in suits have taken his old place. Grace is bringing drinks to the table the woman in slacks is sitting at. Grace sees Art and throws him a quick smile. He falls over it and lands in the stool next to Francis. He puts his hand to his mouth and takes a drag off another non-existent cigarette.

"What do you say Frank?" Art asks. Francis is finishing his scotch. He pushes his empty glass to the edge of the bar and looks to Art. His face is full red. There's too much scotch in there for his blood to be red, Art thinks. Maybe he's wearing make-up, blush maybe. He looks at the face longer. It's cracked and worn, drier than usual. Francis shifts toward Art. The color is still red.

"Thought you gave that smoking up," Francis says. Art is taking another drag. "You wanted to be healthier. 'Live longer' you said. 'I'll live longer.' Christ, you want to live forever. Look at me, then tell me you want to get this old."

"I gave up the tobacco, not the smoking."

"Same thing. Looks like you're smoking. Just don't smell it so much."

Art pulls off the cigarette again. "I just couldn't give it up all the way. Grace" is midway down the bar uncorking a bottle of wine as red as Francis' face with an experienced tug. "Grace, get this man another will you. He's making too much sense for me."

Francis gets up. "Don't leave, Smokey," he says. "I'll be back."

The bar is slowing. Grace is pouring scotch into the old man's glass. Art picks up his own glass and tips it. "When you get a chance Grace?"

"I'd give a lot for a chance." Art hears

but does not acknowledge. "You should slow up on that Vodka, Art. You have too many and you might forget the name of that girl with you up stairs." Her face is a solid smirk showing smile lines around her brown eyes.

Art chuckles to himself. Shaking his head, "Just pour it, will you." Looking around the bar he doesn't see regulars. He really only knows Francis and Grace, but most of the others are good faces. He turns back to his drink and finds two Chips-Ahoy cookies on a napkin. Art smiles. Grace is like that. She's at the other end of the bar making martinis for the three guys in suits. Her gin move isn't good, vermouth worse, but Art smiles when she starts shaking. He starts on a cookie.

A pair of hands cover Art's eyes like death descending. They are soft but cracked in places. They could be a woman's if they weren't so big. A ring needles his left eye. "Guess who", Grace says from across the bar. They could be his father's hands. Neither this pair or his father's has gotten hard from work. The ring sticks deeper into his eye. "Okay, okay. Take the second cookie, Frank. It's yours." Francis pulls his hands away and sits. "At least you could have guessed wrong once. Once. Give me that. I'm old you know. You owe me at least once. First you ignore me, now this." The old man turns his body away but eyes the cookies.

"Next time then. I'll give you once, or even twice." Art pulls on another cigarette, blows out no smoke then pulls on his glass. Grace is gone. He turns himself toward the stairs. Francis is pointed the same way, looking around the room. "I'm not going up to that bastard," he says to himself. He wonders if Victoria will come after him but knows she will not.

"Here, take these," Francis says as he puts a fresh pack of Camels in the empty glass Art is holding. "If you're going to smoke, do it right." He hands Art matches. They are cheap paper ones, the kind you only get from machines. "You'll need these too. Now light up. Grace?" He sees Grace at the end of the bar.

"Grace could you find an ashtray for the invisible smoker over here? Something with a little substance." Francis laughs at himself.

Art looks in his glass. He has never smoked Camels and wonders if they taste much different than Newport. He takes the pack and gives the glass to Grace when she brings a glass ashtray. Francis says something and laughs louder. The three men in Francis' old spot laugh too. Not at the same thing probably. Art pulls the end of the red line on the cellophane and tears the plastic off. He turns for his drink. His cookie is there, half eaten. The other one is being finished by Francis. He puts the wrap in the ashtray, takes up his cookie and turns back around.

The woman in purple sits beside Art before he is finished opening the pack. Her dress is shorter than Art had thought, somewhere around mid thigh. It shifts between blue and purple in the bar light. Her hair is brown tinged red.

"Could you spare a cigarette?"

The voice is terse, quick like Robbie's. Art has the pack opened with one pulled half off. He offers it to her. Her face is soft with one eye green, the other hazel. She puts the cigarette in her mouth and waits for a match. She's out of lipstick or doesn't use it. Art pulls out a paper match and lights it with a brush on the back cover of the matchbook. She draws roughly as he puts the match to her cigarette. The cigarette smoke is light and grey, smelling pale mixed with the smoke from the match.

"What are you drinking?" There is no pause. "Could I have a JB and water? And another for this gentleman please, whatever he's having." Grace is still busy, but acknowledges. Art finishes his last bite of cookie and looks at the pack of cigarettes. "Not smoking. You do smoke don't you. I saw you before, smoking without a cigarette. Isn't it a great habit?"

"I quit. I don't like to anymore. It makes me sick. A little. That's just something I do. I'll get over it."

"He wants to live forever is what he

wants Miss. 'Live longer,' he says to me. 'Look at me,' I tell him. 'You want to end up like this.' Francis starts to laugh and drink again. 'You gave up the tobacco four months ago. How much longer will it take?' He gets up from his stool and walks toward the stairs.

"Have one will you?" the woman says. Grace brings the drinks. She's rushing around. "What is your name anyway? I'm Kathleen White. You should know that, since I'm paying for your drink. You should always know who's paying for your drinks." She sips the JB.

"I'm Art. Who is that you're here with? Husband?" Art is fidgeting the pack. He puts it down by the ashtray.

"I wouldn't or I him that." She seems nervous. "We're separated. I meet him once in a while." She pulls hard on the Camel.

"I never let him take me home anymore." She breathes in deeply and holds the smoke. "Are you going to have a cigarette? Come on Art, have one. You want to, I know it."

Art looks at her. She's still pretty. The cigarette doesn't look so bad in her hand, but in her mouth it's all wrong. Art wants to smoke. He glances over her dress. It's a dress he'd like to crawl up into. He picks up his drink.

"No. I ... I don't want to smoke right now."

"Oh come on. I'll smoke with you."

"You're already smoking. I don't want to smoke."

"You do." She puts her hand on his. It's like Francis' but not so cracked, and as forceful as Victoria's. Art rubs her fingers. There is no meat.

"No. You smoke. Have this whole pack. I don't want it." She is pinching his fingers. "Take it." Art looks for Grace but can't find her. The bar is less busy.

The woman takes another cigarette out of the pack and lights it herself. "This one's for you. No, both of us. We'll smoke it together."

**"Are you going to have a cigarette? Come on Art, have one. You want to, I know it."**

She stops to adjust her dress. It's a nice dress. "Here," she says, forcing the cigarette to Art's mouth. "I've started it. Now you go ahead. Smoke."

"No," Art says. He takes his hand from hers and bats the cigarette onto the cold white tile of the floor around the bar. "Not like this," he thinks to himself. He stands and looks for Grace. She's still not around. Francis is coming back. The woman says something loud but Art doesn't listen to it. He pats Francis' back as he heads for the stairs, then up them.

A couple passes by Art at the top of the stairs. They are just being seated. The girl is wearing her dress easily, but tight in the waist. Art walks toward his table. The others are gone. A bus boy is clearing the table. They didn't finish eating,

the entres are still on the table and all the drinks, half finished. Art's lobster waits limp on the plate in a yellow pool. Art scans the room with the violence of a man left behind. Victoria, Robbie and Barbara are gone. The bus boy has his tray stacked.

"Excuse me. Could I have that lobster wrapped?" Its shell has gotten a deeper red, away from pink. "Just that lobster. If you could." The bus boy says he will see it done. "I'll eat it later," Art says to himself. He waits at the table.

The restaurant is almost empty. The couple that came in is sitting against the far wall, away from the door and rest rooms. Art sees the waiter coming toward him. He has a white styrofoam box.

"Sir, this is your lobster. And here is your bill." He hands them to Art.

"Did you get some of the juice? The sauce."

"Yes, I poured it over the top. Could you pay the bill?" The waiter smiles. He is younger than Art thought. "I'm off whenever I get the

money for this table."

Art looks at the bill. "When did they leave?" Eighty seven. "How long ago?" He juggles the box and his wallet. He hands the waiter ninety five dollars.

"Thank you sir. It was ten minutes ago. I ..." His age starts to show. "I really thought you had stiffed me. I didn't know you were still here. I hope nothing is wrong. The others left in a hurry."

Art says to the waiter, "Nothing. It was one of the girls. She's been sick. She'll be all right. Good night." Art takes his lobster and lie to the rest room. The couple is laughing as he walks in.

Art stands and stares at himself in the aluminum framed mirror. The waste basket is stuffed. The paper towels on the top are deep red with blood. In the sink there are brilliant pink spots of diluted blood. Art opens the white box. The lobster's claws pop out. It is bathing in a pool of butter sauce. On its back are a few strands of pasta Art missed. He pushes the claws back in. The sauce seems as if it should be warmer. He holds the claws and looks in the mirror. The shell is deeper than before, but not as deep as Robbie's blood on the paper towels.

Francis walks in. He is leaving for the night. For a drunk he never stays late. He is stumbling but swallows the scene in one hiccup. His face sobers. Art closes the box hurriedly.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you not to play with your lobster in a public bathroom?" Francis roars. "Just think of the diseases!" He laughs louder.

Art can hear Francis carrying on and laughing from outside the door. The couple is also laughing. Art goes down to the bar. The room is empty, darker than before. Grace is washing the end of the bar where the three men in suits were. Art walks over.

"Closing down Grace?" He smiles. She smiles.

"Yup. An early night. Everyone left ex-

cept Francis and you I guess. Frank probably slipped out." She chuckles and yawns. "But you two never leave do you? Francis is here every night."

"I'm not here every night. I'm not here that much."

"No. No you don't come to see me often. When you do though you never leave. You're here at five or six. Then you stay 'til after closing." Her hand smooths a moist rag over a final glassing and she moves to other end of the bar like a wave through water. "I've still got some cookies left. Want one?"

Art moves closer to her. The pack of Camels is lying where he had been sitting with the lady and the dress. He takes them. Grace is clearing the last of the glasses and washing them quickly with both her hands. Art sits on the stool across from her. Her backside is to him. From his angle she is not a dish washer. "Shouldn't you be going? Aren't you with Vicky?"

"Victoria. That or Tori. Not Vicky." She knows that. "They left me."

"They get mad because you spent time down here?" She moves down the bar with some glasses. He follows her. "Or did you go off the handle?"

"Doesn't matter. They left." He sits.

"I guess I'll never get to meet Vicky then." She floats back up the bar. She's arranging napkins and straws. "What's in the box? Not a present for me?" Art remembers the lobster. "I'll be back in a minute," Grace says. "Getting my coat."

She is leaving and Art wants to leave with her. He has no way to get home. He came with Robbie and Barbara in Victoria's car.

"I'm leaving, Art. How about walking me out?" She is searching through her brown leather handbag for keys. Art lifts his lobster and self and follows Grace to the back door. "Maybe you can tell me what's in the box. Whatever it is, I hope it tastes good."

Art and Grace are beside her car in the parking garage. They are underground two levels, immersed in a dark yellow light, like yellow neon mixed with grey.

"I love Maine lobster." Grace looks between the box and her car. "You do want to eat at my house?"

"Yes, alright." Art's pulse jumps. Grace finds the right key. "I'll get it." Art takes the keys from her hand. He puts the lobster on the roof of the car. It tilts toward the ground slightly. He unlocks the door and opens it. Grace gets in and he hands her the keys, slamming the door shut.

The white box springs open when it slaps the concrete. The lobster jumps from it and stops, like a dog escaping from a cage stopping to pick the best way to run. The lemon butter seeps out of the box like blood. The lobster is dark grey. Its claws, back, legs, and tail all grey. The tearing claw is disjointed and there is a wide crack in the center of the back, revealing yellow flesh. "What the hell happened to the lobster?" he asks, shocked. Grace opens her door.

"The lights do that. Anything red looks black. Some trick. Anything with red in it ends up having black in it. Really screws me up sometimes." The pool of blood is spreading. "I guess dinner is out." Art is staring at the lobster. He wants it badly. Grace yawns.

"You're coming home with me, it just doesn't make sense now." She is still sitting in the car, her feet swinging gently just above the ground. "I think maybe I'll just go home and sleep. I've been working some crazy hours." The blood is still spreading. He knows she has rethought it. He does not want to. But he agrees.

Art slams the door behind her. Grace backs out. The Chevette puffs black smoke into the grey garage. Art can see the lobster. It is grey. He reaches into his pocket for the Camels and pulls one out. Grace waves as she pulls away. He puts the Camel to his mouth and searches his pockets for matches. There are none so he searches the ground. The lobster is

grey. He thinks of Francis. He would have kept a box of wooden matches. He lights the cigarette with an imaginary match, inhales deeply and start toward the stairs to the surface where he will catch a cab. His lungs pull hard. He has no choices. There is no Grace, Camels taste nothing like Newports and the lobster is grey.



## THE LEGACY UPON MY MOTHER'S DEATH

*by Ava Rogers*

When the package came,  
I opened it.

The tenement cardboard carton  
housed my mother's old blue  
wedgewood china

and I stalked the memory  
of the death before,  
the death last used  
by the old blue china

I had an old quilt,  
wedding ring pattern,  
laid out  
on the old sofa  
that mangled shoe of furniture  
and the family  
over for a traditional dinner  
of turkey  
or some such omen  
showing us  
a family  
of means

and the divorce came after  
the traditional family dinner  
placed against  
the warm familiarity  
of the old quilt  
on the old sofa  
of the family  
we omended

and when I tried to explain  
how I felt caught  
between the rim  
of mother's wedgewood blue  
china  
that day,  
circled in the illusion of my marriage  
reflected in the hard  
gaze of glass

in the perfect gilt edged gold  
and the ancient floral tapestries  
a promise bound  
in circular safety  
of fine plates  
a veneer, foregone  
like erroneous conclusions

and all that showed  
was my new porcelain face  
well honed, sculpted  
shining in my mother's  
wedgewood blue  
fine bone china

and I saw  
at once  
my reflection  
stark and bare  
as wintering trees;  
bound bough  
caught in the rim  
of gold fluted edges  
and the dead wedgewood blue  
of fine bone china.

## DOCK SOUNDS

*by Gary Whitehead*

In the creak and groan  
of boats tied  
with old rope  
I hear my grandfather  
in the morning.  
Mixed light of  
setting moon  
and rising sun  
white upon the water,  
in reflection rippling  
his wrinkled,  
weathered face;  
he lifts and heaves,  
his body creaking  
like the bowline he  
unties. Still  
docked, I  
call to the bent figure  
unfurling,  
but only a gull's cry  
carried on curling fog  
and the bump of hollow  
hulls responds,  
reminding me of time  
and space.

## WINTER SUN

*by Mary Frawley*

Nothing nothing  
like the winter sun...  
unforgivable as a raw apple.

It is a daisy  
wheel wanting to become a buttercup.  
Bones, face crave its rash heat.

Refuses to melt  
egg snow.

Breaks heartstrings  
tied on fingerjoints,  
glass house windows.  
It is brick

light,  
poker-piece of diamond chalk  
scratches glass sky like nails.

Nothing, nothing  
like the winter  
sun:  
an orange lemon,  
gold fire peelings  
string whites of eye,  
circle and ring  
or a-cross,  
third degree burns.

## FALL TIME

by Denise DiMarzio

*Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in Nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on midmoon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.*

— Emerson in "Circles"

The walls of the cowbarn, built by my grandfather nearly fifty years ago and still stable and sturdy, hold the past firmly in place, and keep the inside things intact, despite or perhaps because of the seasons. The clock remains on the wall, high up near the ceiling. Now a rusty circle, the once sharp black numbers hide and seem to waver beneath a covering of yellow grime and brown dirt. In my comfortable self, my flannel shirt and blue bib overalls, my thick tan boots, I stand with my hands in my pockets, look through the great door of the barn, and quietly observe a younger me. The Fall wind settles down around me as I watch myself at eleven or twelve, dressed like I am today, but smaller and wearing a dark green, dirty and misshapen cowgirl hat. We chew on pieces of straw, and I am still as she skips around the barn. As soon as I step across the threshold into the barn, she disappears, but I am not alone. I peer at the clock, and see that Time chose to stop here somewhere around six, the usual morning and evening milking times. Perhaps this clock, this circle, stopped years ago, its once clear face laden with a veil of gray spiderwebs and black dots of shriveled flies. Or maybe it stopped this morning, as I slept. Or perhaps examined Time never moves.

The odd light of Fall afternoons peeks through the many windows and rest upon tiny pink pigs and their mothers. Fall days are hazy like some dreams; shadowy, cool light carries with it the message of the approaching Winter, of a season preparing itself for a long hibernation, of a Time offering the last of its larder: pumpkins and winter squash, apples and dried corn. Fall is a Time of giving thanks, of planting bulbs deep into the ground, of stacking wood and breathing in the last remains of Summer. The wind carries with it the familiar dry and sweet hay smells, swirls the scent around and within the squares of dusty light, and makes me sneeze. The sound awakens the day-dreaming pigs and they lazily look up at me.

With no cows left to continue the ritual dawn and sundown milkings, my grandparents make use of the space in the cowbarn by converting the left half into farrowing crates. Sows about to deliver piglets, their "young ones," are brought here to live for a while, a place cleaner and warmer than the larger, crowded pigbarns. In their frequent half-sleeps, the pigs' grunts sound much like people snores. My laughter seems to bump them, and they curiously grunt and breathe at me, wondering

who observes them in their new, more private home. I touch their beige-pink bristles, scratch their ears, and laugh again at the surprising soft skin beneath the coarse hair. They seem offended by my forward touch; if they had distinguishable eyebrows, they would raise them, aghast.

The smell of pigs does not change. It is people's sense of smell that receives the strong, sharp scent to greater or lesser degrees, mostly greater. It is a family joke that whenever anyone has a cold, she or he should stand in the pig barn for a few minutes. We guarantee it to clear up a stuffy head better than Vicks Vapo-

porub. The pigs run around in circles in the small pens, hide behind their mothers and peek out at me. Like children meeting strangers, they are at first hesitant, but their curiosity overwhelms them and they eventually approach. Also like children, they do not heed their mothers' warnings to keep away. I reach in and scoop one up, and she squirms around in my hands, but finally quiets. Her small body warms my hands. I can feel her heartbeat in my fingers. We look at each other and speak softly. Her skin is remarkably smooth and soft; she has not yet grown bristles. Her mother grunts loudly and rattles her pen, so I reluctantly release the tiny warmth of my new friend, who scampers back to the safety of her mother.

The metal stanchions and farrowing crates and farm implements rust to various shades of reds and browns, steady colors, sensible and plain. In keeping with Fall colors, hay bales are the color of butternut squash, the rusty vertical ladder is Macintosh apple red, and some of the sawdust reminds me of pumpkin orange. The outside colors have worked

their way into the barn, and lend a dreamy quality to a season getting ready to go to sleep. The hay bales are neatly stacked along the edges of the barn, keeping the crisp winds out and the animal warmth in. A sturdy old wheelbarrow, its work done for now, rests in a dusty corner. A shovel with a well-worn wooden handle and a silver bottom, once top heavy for me to lift, stands in another corner.

I am supposed to love the wild and the good, and as I inspect the barn, two fears leap out to remind me that I did not feel safe all the time here. I recall toting a pitchfork around, in case any mice or rats or possums decided that

a little girl was no one to be afraid of. Even more frightening is the deeper memory of the black bulls, huge creatures to a tiny girl of six or eight or ten, shaken loose from their stanchions and angrily stomping around the barn. These bulls come back frequently to me in dreams, their horns piercing my sides. Like the clock, their presence is unending. So the ladder leading up to the hayloft became an escape route.

I run to it now, sure that the clack of hooves on the cement floor is again real. Rung by rung, I climb upwards through a square hole and pull myself safely into the vast hayloft.

It is almost silent here, with the sounds from below muted. The loft smells sweet and musty, and light pours in through slender panes, some cracked, some missing, all layered in dust, which floats in and speckles the light. The bales are stacked at various heights, creating an enormous soft and scratchy staircase. I climb it until I am high up near the rafters, but I recall finding a kitten, wedged between bales of hay, frozen stiff with one paw raised about to step. The kitten died in a position of motion

Time chose to stop here somewhere around six ... Perhaps this clock, this circle, stopped years ago ... Or maybe it stopped this morning ... Or perhaps examined Time never moves.

and the thought puzzles me stiff. But with the memory of newborn calf sounds, and the real noise of baby pigs below, I wish to put the idea of death away from me.

In the main part of the barn, although muffled, I hear an unfamiliar sound. The noise of metal parts clanking together, I later discover, is a result of the sows pushing their round mushy noses into the new water mechanism that allows the pigs water any time they wish. Quite a convenience for the pigs and for the people. No more filling the watering troughs by hand. Even this separate world of the cowbarn is not safe from change. The pigs are new tenants who enjoy free appliances included with their new home. My grandparents are the generous landlords. The clock watches over it all, and spiderwebs are flung everywhere, holding on to the various Times with their gossamer threads and filaments.

Down from the hayloft, I roam around a small side room, the milk room. This square room houses a large metal storage tank, which used to hold and stir fresh milk. A big paddle inside the tank, like two boat oars stuck together, silent and unmoving now, used to mix the steamy rich milk. The heavy cover could lift up on hinges, but four circular openings in the top sufficed for us. My grandmother and grandfather and I poured milk in through these circles, and heard the splash far below. When I was small enough, my head could fit into these holes. I would find a crate or bucket to stand on, remove my hat and carefully hang it on a nail, then peer through and down. I would listen to my hellos bounce off the sides of the tank, start concentric circles forming on the top layer, and be halted by the deeper layers of milk. It felt damp and warm inside the tank, and I got a sleepy feeling whenever I absorbed the sweet warm milk smell.

Even now, mixed with the scents of Fall, I think I smell the milk, and hear the paddle turn and slosh. The scent rises out of the empty tank, and fills the air with a sweet humidity. My head no longer fits into the circles, but the nail where I placed my hat,

though rusty, remains in the all. I yell my hello into the tank, and head my voices echo and reecho. We never thought about pasteurization. At the night milkings, especially in Fall and Winter when it got dark early, Grandma and Grandpa and I turned the lights on in the barn, and shut the rest of the world out. We milked the cows, and carried the metal buckets frothing to the tank. We dipped our cups into the circles, drew out the milk, toasted each other, and filled up on that bubbly, sweet smoothing warmth.

My clothes have absorbed the smells of the barn, both new and old. I've chewed on some pieces of straw. I am ready to leave for today. If I were tall enough or had a ladder, I just might look more closely into the face of the clock. As I leave the barn, I imagine that the hands have moved slightly.

Outside again, the leaves from the trees fly about in the air. As I look back across the threshold, I smile to see the little girl me back again, sitting on a hay bale, hat lopsided, swinging her feet and thinking. In the distance, I see my grandfather cutting down cornstalks and piling them up. In the window of the house, I see my grandmother indicate to me that tea is ready and would I like some. I do not look back as I walk to the house. I do not need to because I know that the circles move through the barn, holding the past in place, and moving Time and me gently forward.

## KOOCHICHING COUNTRY

by Brad Russell

There are Indians in these woods.  
Ojibwa I think.

They called this place Koochiching  
But now we call it International Falls--  
So pale a name compare to Koochiching.  
Our lake is Rainy, our river Rainy,  
The spring so wet you can jump on peat bogs  
And watch the ground ripple toward distant pines  
Like ocean surf.  
Uneasy ground.

The Indians are still here.  
Most now live on the Canadian side  
On a reservation called Koochiching.  
I see their homes as we drive past  
On our way to swim and fish in Canada.  
They've been here for years  
But these houses still look temporary--  
Squat pre-fab boxes hugging a rocky hill--  
Without trees, without history.

We drive through what's left of Koochiching  
In the great white bulk of our family sedan.  
We stop talking each time we cross reservation land.  
All eyes turn, look out the windows, and  
Respectfully acknowledge the scene.  
But offer no commentary.

Children play with sticks and run together  
Down to the white-capped lakeshore.  
A woman in sunglasses sits on a wooden staircase  
And leans against an aluminum doorframe.  
She swigs something from a brown bottle.  
She mouths something to her neighbor hanging laundry.  
The woman stands and brushes her long black hair away  
With the back of her hand. They look at me  
Or through me to the sunset beyond.

I see them once more pass quickly out of sight.  
My nose presses against the window to retain the view,  
But every breath fogs the glass, obscuring my vision.

## RIDING WAVES

*by Gary Whitehead*

It's a summer day,  
hot, at Bonnet Shores for the first time,  
and with a bunch of Jews. I'm old enough to notice. My  
shoes crunch on the gravel drive, on the beach flip  
off with a kick that's meant to impress a blonde city  
girl who knows she isn't one of them. Her father teaches  
karate.

We ride. Now and then the right wave comes, and  
I make a prow with my hands, and aim to collide. When I  
wreck upon her my hands glide over her thighs. We  
walk back to the house and she talks about waves, not  
about touching, so I  
love her.

On the patio they slump, gorging for hours  
on gossip, cigarettes and well-done shish-kebabs.  
Pinned between two of them shouting about nuclear war  
or Cuba, I persuade her to go digging for clams.

While she squats, arms black in the mud, I can't help but  
ask her about karate, can't help but look at the  
curve of her. I see myself old with her.

By bonfire light I spy my shoes, half-buried, forgotten,  
soaked by the creeping waves, and I gather them into  
my sunburnt arms, brushing off the salt and the sand.

And driven home in a diesel with neighbors I don't  
understand, I replay in the flicker of every headlight the  
goodbye kiss I didn't give.

## WE LIVED

*by Ava Rogers*

We lived then  
in a large colonial mansion  
pecan trees basking in the front;  
paths of wild blackberries in  
the rear; hell and damnation  
in between

my father bellowed from the portico  
like a well bourboned country gent;  
and in the resounding echoes,  
I would hide  
and go blackberrying.

I'd flow from the backyard acres  
wild with the musty sweat of  
stallioned withers; replete  
with the pounding of my father's  
bray and my own snorting breath  
as I galloped through the thorny  
paths, blueblack die trickling  
down my taut, muscled flanks

and as the juice of the blackberries  
fell from my lips, I crushed the  
ground with raging hooves, living  
just one more day to chase  
forbidden blackberries and  
stain them to my chest  
in bold defiance.

## KICK THE CAN

by Gary Whitehead

"kick the can, kick the can, kick the can,"  
I heave in the flow of a streetlight;  
and suddenly feel an urge to hide.  
Though far from Rhode Island I listen  
past crickets for my mother's whistle,  
but there are other noises I hear.

In the city night air I can hear  
a mongrel knocking over a can;  
a loud, distant, familiar whistle;  
a soft murmur beneath a streetlight;  
and turning, looking back, I listen  
for unseen children trying to hide.

Memories swell, my age wants to hide  
its diminished head; inside I hear  
with younger ears and strive to listen  
for a young boy shouting, "kick the can!"  
A block back two boys near a streetlight,  
as if to make it all real, whistle.

My own lips, unpuckered, I whistle  
jigs to a milestone. Far off I hide  
from my two boys, who, by a streetlight  
perhaps play their own game. Now I hear  
in passersby their cries, and listen  
closer for the one inside. I can

almost see her sitting with a can  
of beer in hand, waiting to whistle  
for the boys. They must sit and listen  
the way I did, striving as they hide  
silent somewhere in the yard, to hear  
her call. Someone under the streetlight

scrambles to arrange cans and streetlight-  
attracted moths scatter. I listen  
hard pat the groan of the train and hear  
only locomotion. A whistle  
sounds, reminding, and this time I hide,  
in first class, trapped in a moving can.

And when I hear the final whistle  
move past the last streetlight, I listen  
as hard as I can for the two boys who hide.

## AGNES AND THE GRAY DAY

by Jill Jann

Agnes teeters backward  
on a floral print kitchen chair  
in any of several apartments  
and drinks a flat coke.  
Feet knickknacked on the windowsill,  
she tries on a hard squint  
and eyes her inventory:  
30,000 fears of one self (her own),  
3 different laughs with 2 worn pockets  
to carry them during disuse,  
1 long distance phone bill  
with 23 calls to 8 cities,  
\$4.36 to pay for it, and 100 thank gods  
for the 1 voice spoken to 12 times,  
9 color photographs of 5 pets  
(1 rescued kitten, 1 dead-from-disease cat,  
1 age-killed dog, and 2 flushed goldfish)  
each with 1 name and 2,000 tears,  
1 pair of boots on their 3rd set of heels  
for moving 10 toes toward 1 spot,  
a 1/2 pack of cigarettes  
beside 8 finished ounces  
of 1 cup of coffee  
that used the last 2 drops  
of 1 quart of milk,  
1 lover (not there now)  
who cannot hold the gaze  
of her 2 eyes,  
1 lover (the same)  
whose 2 eyed gaze  
she cannot return,  
1 guitar with 6 strings,  
2 hands with 0 training,  
and 1 scrawny book of poetry  
for every 1 year of her 1 life  
with lines entirely uncountable  
because each 1 leaps out the window  
like a kite puncturing the clouds.

## APPALACHIAN NIGHTS

*by Ava Rogers*

Women grow stark in the mountains;  
peeling their lives back slowly,  
runs creeping like cracks--  
the big toe peeking  
from the useless head  
of silk.

They blink  
as their daughters choose alcoholic men  
to feed themselves to  
and barlights  
shine brazen on bare legs.

Mountain roads rest under  
white breast feathers;  
cars lie still,  
metal hearts beating  
to the drip of snow  
on their tin tops.  
The wind catches the feathers,  
wafts them  
into the black chasm  
while crows, watching closely,  
swallow the stars.

Dusk huddles in the fireplace  
licking the dry, crisp husks of day  
as evening,  
spitting and hissing  
crackles and ignites  
into night.

The grandmother plays solitaire  
old skin fingers shuffling,  
shuffling,  
dog-eared cards in the wrong combinations  
fall through cracks in the old pine table.

Snowdrifts capture footprints,  
swallow silent snowmen.  
Miners, returning home,  
fall into the drifts,  
leaving grease spots in tin buckets.

Children find carrot noses  
sleeping in the snow  
and bring them home for supper,  
while starlight,  
still hungry, tongues the rim of the shaft.

Moonlight and stripped trees rise from empty chimneys.  
Women latch their doors and eat their men.

Blizzards roost on frozen porch stoops.  
Children, put out for the night,  
thaw,  
dripping red into the snow.

When the mines explode,  
women wait outside  
for leftover men.



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## DREAM STORIES

by Jim Dowling

Margaret is trying hard not to fall asleep. Her sister, Carol, has promised to tell stories as long as Margaret wants. Carol has brown hair and blue eyes, just like Margaret, and smiles alot like the people on TV. And Carol's old. She can go out with boys but she won't tell Margaret why she does. She never tells Margaret anything except they don't put bugs on you and stuff when you're older. Carol says they change, but not too much.

When nobody's around to see, Margaret likes to pretend she's Carol, because that's what she's going to be like when she gets big and old. Sometimes Carol lets her use make-up and everything, and asks her all kinds of questions about mornings. Mommy takes her to school early and Margaret waits for the bus with Daddy, and Carol always wants to know about that.

Tomorrow Margaret will practice the way Carol tells stories. "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The three Little Pigs" are her favorites. Margaret loves the way Carol huffs and puffs like the wolf, with her cheeks full of air and her voice all funny. Carol says a wolf is kind of a big mean dog who likes to eat little girls like Margaret for breakfast. But it's okay because they don't have any around here. And that's good. But it's too

bad too, because the wolf never wins anyway. The little girl and the fat little pigs always make him go away.

The mice are all dressed up in suits and the pumpkin is a coach. That's like a big fancy car, Carol says, and Cinderella is on her way to the ball. Margaret knows she'll meet the prince there. Then there will be trouble, but everything will be okay at the end. It's a nice story, but it's hard to stay awake in, because nothing really happens too much. They just dance and stuff and there aren't any wolves or anything.

The clock is ringing at the ball and Margaret can see it when she closes her eyes. It's pretty and makes jingly noises like the one at Grandma's. But she's only going to look at it for a minute because she knows she's getting tired. She doesn't want to fall asleep, she just wants to stay up and listen to Carol. Tommy's still up and he only, so Margaret isn't going to fall asleep yet. She's just going to keep listening and listening forever.

Thump. It's dark, and the clock that glows has its big hand and little hand in a green line sideways. Margaret is confused because Carol's gone, and she thinks she might have had a dream, but already it's gone away. At school, when the other kids tell about their dreams,

Margaret has to make things up, tell stories. Her dreams always get away before she can catch them. Carol says that's okay though, sometimes you need dreams in the daytime more.

Another thump. It's louder this time. It woke Scotty up all the way in Tommy's room. Margaret can hear him scratching at the door, making marks. She can hear the voices too, like always. There are two kinds of noises but she hasn't seen either one. This is the louder one, so maybe if she squishes her ear to her door, she'll hear something good. At least she'll hear but she'll have to be quiet, quiet as a mouse. She'll be a mouse, that's all. It's one of her favorite games, being a mouse.

She sits up in bed and tucks her feet up to her chest and wiggles sideways, little by little, so the bed won't make any noise. She points her toes to the ceiling and brings her legs down straight, like Mommy when she's exercising. Quiet, quiet, quiet. No squeaking. Listen. She puts her hands under her bottom and pushes herself up slowly. Now it's okay to let her hands up.

With her arms out like flying she walks to the door. No heels. She squishes her ear to the door. The thumps and voices are louder, but the door is still mumbering the words. She hears Mommy's voice fast, and Daddy's, low, like a big dog's. But she wants. Maybe if she opens the door a crack. Just a crack. No fair opening wide. Only mouse-size. She keeps her thumb on the metal thing so it won't click.

There's a sparkle in the vase she's not supposed to touch, by the stairs, and there's light all over the place.

They always stay in their room when they're noisy, but Mommy's coming out now, kind of fast. Only not too fast, sort of funny, like she's maybe wearing only one shoe. It's hard to tell. The light is behind her and she keeps almost falling against the wall. She does have two shoes. And she has her purse in her hand. The other hand keeps touching her knee like it's got an itch.

Now there's no light at all, almost. Daddy's

in the doorway and he takes up the whole thing. Only little streaks can sneak by him. Mommy's going to the stairs and he's following her. He keeps getting bigger and bigger until he's right where Mommy is at the top step. He shoves her away from them, right into the table with the vase and it wobbles. It falls. She tried to catch it but she was too slow, like she was tired. It was already broken on the floor before her hand reached up.

Now that Daddy's away from the door, there's more light. Margaret can see Mommy's hand is dark when she takes it away from her leg. The leg is all dark below the knee too, all the way down to the shoe. She's trying to get up. The shoe makes kissing sounds. It leaves marks on the rug.

Tommy's awake now because of the vase. He's crying like he always does, screaming. He cries so hard he can hardly breathe, but he keeps it up anyway. So Scotty's barking now.

He's growling too, even though Daddy always says it's dumb, he couldn't scare anybody, he's such a little dog.

The hall light comes on, and it must be brighter than most times, because it stings Margaret's eyes and makes them itchy. Carol's up, she's at the light switch, and everything is so fuzzy. Margaret feels the itch move lower, feels it on her lip. It tastes salty.

Daddy has Mommy again. He has her by the arm and is trying to pull her back to the room and she's crying. She's not supposed to cry—she's too big. But he's so much bigger than she is, and he's slapping her and telling her to get up, but she won't. Her purse falls down the stairs and everything spills out. He's hitting her and it's not fair, because he's so much bigger than she is, so much. She's not even crying anymore, she's just trying to put her hands up in front of her face. And she's whispering to him to please stop, please, please please please stop, stop.

Everything's fuzzy again, fuzzier than before with the light. Margaret's throat is burning and her face is tight and she can hear her own voice, loud. And Carol's running by her

toward Mommy, but Margaret can't even tell what's going on, with Tommy and Scotty and everybody moving so fast. Carol's going down the stairs backwards, holding Mommy up. She's pointing her hand at Daddy, telling him she'll do it again if he moves. The tip of her hand is sparkling, and Daddy is staying still with his hands together in front of him.

When the front door closes and the car goes, he turns to Margaret. His hand is dripping. The other hand is squeezing it to make it stop. He comes very close to Margaret, so close she can smell his breath like cough medicine. He wants to know if it isn't kind of late for Margaret to be up. He wants to know what she's waiting for, then.

Margaret closes her door and listens. She hears water run in the bathroom. She hears the mirror open over the sink. She remembers him looking at her with his eyes all red in the corners and green in the middle. Not bluey-green or green like a Christmas tree—green like the part of the cheese Mommy cuts off and throws away.

She hears his bedroom door close. Margaret listens to his sounds, the shoes kicking off, the hangers in the closet, the clock winding. It's quiet again. She waits until she hears him grunting and the bed squeaking. That means he's asleep. Sometimes he dreams so loud, he wakes himself up.

She crawls on her bed and crouches up by the pillows. She is facing the door with her nose and mouth on her knees. She knows she has to stay awake in case he wakes up. She hears her clock. It's loud. But she won't look at it. It might make her sleepy if she does. And she won't fall asleep.

Margaret, Margaret, Margaret, she hears

from the sun pushing in her window. But it's Daddy, and he's saying it's time for breakfast, she doesn't want to waste the whole day now, does she. He's talking to her in his nice voice, the one he uses on the phone to tell people about things they should buy. He's telling her to come on, quick like a bunny.

Margaret knows she's awake but she doesn't feel awake. It's like when she gets up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and it's harder to see with the light on. Daddy's all dressed up for work and he doesn't look like he's mad about anything. He holds out the hand with the bandaids on it and tells her to come on. She's afraid he might get mad if she doesn't go with him, so she goes.

Feet into the blue fuzzies. It doesn't matter which foot is which, because they're slippers. She ties her robe. Walking behind him, she smells his morning perfume. He calls it something else though, because he's a man. The glass is cleaned up in the hall. The table's

standing up again, only now it has a statue on it. The rug doesn't have spots anymore. It's wet and smells like soap.

She walks with him downstairs into the coffee-smell. He talks to her more in his nice voice. He wants her to know things happen sometimes and you have to pretend they didn't, pretend like they're dreams. You've got to put them out of your mind and you can't ever talk about them. Does she know what he means?

Margaret thinks a second, but she's too tired. She nods anyway. Only it took her too long to nod. That was a mistake. He's mad now, she can tell. It's always wrong to think first.

Margaret is frightened. She doesn't want to be with Daddy and say something wrong or not say something she should. It might be terrible like last Summer when she didn't want to swim. She eats her cereal fast and asks to be excused. He lets her go.

She walks slowly to the stairs, then runs up them. She wishes there were more stairs, stairs that went so high he could never find her.

At the top, she misses her Mommy and Carol. Carol won't be back until tonight, she knows, and Mommy will probably go visiting again. After she comes back from visits she hugs Margaret a lot for no reason. But she's quiet and always puts her make-up on before she comes down to make breakfast, and Carol stays out a lot. Margaret feels lonely and wants someone to hug her now.

She opens the door to Tommy's room and Scotty runs toward her like he always does when he's glad to see her. Only he runs past her and out the door. She can smell why. Mommy wasn't there to let him out this morning, so he had an accident.

She goes to the crib and lowers the side. She helps Tommy down to the floor. He sees his beach ball by the closet and tries to slip out of her arms and play with it. Margaret loves him so much all of a sudden that she pulls him back and gives him a great big kiss. Margaret loves him too much to let him play with some stupid old ball. He can play with her. He needs her. He just doesn't.

Margaret looks out the window as she puts one hand under his shirt, the other under her own. She pinches both at once because it wouldn't be fair otherwise.

Tommy screams and stands still, yelling at the air. He doesn't try to get away when Margaret hugs him now, and tells him it's okay, everything's fine. She puts his face against her shoulder so he won't make so much noise.

... things happen sometimes and you have to pretend they didn't, pretend like they're dreams. You've got to put them out of your mind and you can't ever talk about them.

## AN OLD MAN SITS ON A STEP

*by Walter Chomka*

An old man sits on a step  
 his old man pants pulled  
 high above his sandals and socks.  
 Between his legs a child  
 stares at something off the page.  
 Behind them iron, cement, wood,  
 a house, a railing, the old man's cane.  
 Lunch is strewn on the step.  
 A bag of chips, water in a mayonnaise jar,  
 one cup for two mouths.  
 Two bottles stand empty, a third,  
 full, lies on its side.  
 The old man's face is cracked  
 one crack makes a smile,  
 another creates a frown.  
 The boy still stares, wide eyed,  
 open mouthed, at the shadow to his right.  
 The old man's veins cut trenches  
 in his skinny arms.  
 The paint on the building tears and chips,  
 the door falls from its hinges.  
 A force from beneath  
 buckles and cracks the sidewalk.  
 Around them the city  
 begins to collapse.

## KENTUCKY NIGHTS

*by Ava Rogers*

The closest I ever got to Kentucky  
 was a picture book  
 of the Derby  
 and a husband  
 full of bourbon lies  
 and hot Kentucky nights

and the romance of flying hooves  
 and arched, hammering thighs  
 lasted  
 only as long  
 as the pain

and when I discovered  
 the difference between a racehorse  
 and a nag

it was almost too late  
 as I lay full  
 of Kentucky lies  
 and late bourbon nights.

## GEARS

*by Gary Whitehead*

Tassels hung  
from the mirror of my uncle's  
beat-up Ford,  
and when he gunned the engine  
I spun through time.  
I could afford to.  
The wheel cool  
on my heavy hary hand,  
the pedal too close,  
I run a bearded cheek  
and try to recall  
how it's all done,  
I gun it, brake,  
and I'm back staring  
at tassels. Reflecting  
another face in rear view,  
a body in a space too  
small, my uncle hanging  
like tassels from the backyard  
oak, I  
race in reverse  
this time.  
I have to.

## MY RADIATOR LEAKS

*by Ron Montenaro*

and I chipped my tooth  
my wristwatch broke just yesterday  
and the table I'm building won't take shellac  
tomorrow I see the lawyer to divorce my wife  
but sometimes my car won't start at all  
(its radio only plays in subtitles)  
and I can't pay the rent because I can't find a job  
the board of education won't give me certification  
because I paid them twice  
my kitchen faucet leaks again even as I fix it  
the house is cold I hate winter dirty dishes in the sink  
my refrigerator runs constantly  
but won't freeze a thing  
my Mom died a year ago this February  
it was Valentine's Day, a sweetheart she was

my feet are cold  
and tomorrow I see the lawyer to divorce my wife  
my father doesn't call, but says he loves me and does  
today I read Exodus and want to go out and kill a country full of people  
in the name of the lord I didn't catch your name  
tomorrow I buy eleven paperbacks to read one a week and forget my life  
I broke my shoe

all this catapults me into some kind of unknown understanding  
about why this is happening to me,  
and for a while I actually feel ok  
pointing to a clear retrospective moment in the future  
maybe it will be a year from February  
my wife won't call me, but says she loves me and does

birds sing outside my window as they simply eat seeds  
a warm mist rises up effortlessly from the melting snow  
inside my dogs snore sweet dreams in synch  
accompanied by the drone of the refrigerator and the drip of the faucet  
whose handles I replaced backwards, and now,  
after years of turning in known directions  
I must forget to remember those directions  
in order to turn in another

my life is perfecting my life.

## LUTHERANS

by Brad Russell

We near the end of Confirmation  
For membership to Zion.

Tonight the class splits, Pastor Jerstad  
Keeping the girls in the community room.

Pastor Schumacher leads the boys  
To the other available room--  
The Nursery,  
Seats us on six-inch chairs  
Amid plastic toys  
And talks to us of sexual urges.

Seven boys  
In variable adolescence  
Sit with knees to face,  
Wishing they had left their penises at home  
In the same drawer with Dad's *Playboy*  
And that deck of cards.

Pastor Schumacher swears he's one of us.  
Desires our confidence in his intentions.  
But I think of gym class showers  
Where football thugs grab small boys  
And put icy Hot on tiny white pricks  
Just to watch them dance.

Seven boys in ill-fitting bodies,  
Each praying to be spared that evening  
From involuntary erection.

Pastor Schumacher peers inside each boy.  
Burns their ears with hushed incendiary tones.  
His hand draws across moist lips like a caress.  
Glittering eyes beg guilt from downcast faces.

Soon, freedom. But for the next three hours  
Seven boys will dance for the reverend.

## INLET

by Gary Whitehead

We bend, the three of us sinking  
our arms to the shoulders, groping for clams.  
On the Cape again, the place and the sun are the same, but we  
are three families now not one. I dig up one too young, toss  
it with a handful of black mud  
and two decades.

We wade knee-  
deep through the warm green  
water, my two brothers and I,  
sunburnt, careless of the stench  
of the rotting crustaceans overturned on the sandbar.

The oldest leads us to the marsh banks, where armies of  
fiddler crabs retreat from our invasion under cover  
of seagrass, and drops splashing  
up to his waist to gather sunken,  
barnacle-covered stones for the attack. In

sideways flight the awkward army falls back  
and burrows. Rank. I bend to struggle with a buried stone  
my foot has discovered,

submerging my lower half. It is warm, and I piss.  
The first throw I miss, but I heave again and hear  
the wet splat of a direct hit, see  
a round stone the size of a sand dollar stare out of the mud  
and sand, a giant eye, unblinking and

solid in its accusation. Spiny claw tips poking out  
make lashes. The besieged stash themselves  
into perfect holes, and some we trap inside, till spent,  
out of time and stones, we wade back towards the beach.

I take up the rear, afraid to turn back, feeling  
the weight of a thousand tiny stares.

## HURRICANE

*by Jill Jann*

The hurricane should be arriving  
at midnight--the mother,  
my mother, says  
as if waiting for company  
while she smooths a tablecloth

over the daughter,  
their daughter, who doesn't listen  
to broadcasts. She, daughter,  
(who am I?) prepares nothing  
so solid as candlesticks

yet the mother (oh, my mother)  
shelves canned food enough  
for a disaster's appetite  
while (must he be mine?) the father  
paces the room, chewing cashews

while the daughter (who?) ventures  
into the streets where the wind  
falls, laughing, like the childhood mate  
shepherding her away from safety  
in the only game of tag ever played

while the two fear a power  
failure, tree limbs shattering glass,  
or the tragedy of a front page  
but continue the vigilant wait  
in their best clothes of belief

as wayward She (me?), with sweatshirt  
wet against breasts, climbs through  
downtown construction past the warm  
public spots of her friendships  
and shares coffee-to-go with the rain

although somebody's parents (I think I know  
their faces) expect a new house to lock  
out an uninvited past. They barricade  
the best china against chaos but the old  
visiting smiles bears too many stains.

I, myself, say  
to my mother and my father  
(while dropping porcelain on the floor  
and explaining how the blues and greens  
of patterns are shaped from pain lived)--  
I won't be coming home.  
This year, finally, I won't.

## SURVIVOR'S CANCER

*by Mary Frawley*

Alone inside her  
living room  
a widow  
cries cold sweat;

Shadow spades dart from fireplace  
pierce veins of memory,  
Seconds split in half.  
Lucky star is crossed.

Drinks coffee--  
universal mother's milk--  
nerves bottled--calm: nervous--  
heart murmurs.

The park lake  
a touchstone's throw  
from her front door.  
Often she walks there at midnight,  
water diving in downy mildew,  
Casts an evil eye  
upon weeping willows,  
lost nothing but leaves.  
Sleeps beside this womb,  
thin-iced, snowflaked.  
Cloud banners pinned across sky,  
wish bones brittle as her own.  
Suddenly rain blows  
as if ashes wet awakened.  
--walks backwards destination--

Nine months later,  
under full moon's light  
a blue body like cheese  
floats on watery waste.  
A pink scarf  
tied in a lover's knot  
around a tree branch,  
arm substitute.  
Black wig worn on bald head.

## IN THE SHOWER

*by Brian Laferte*

There is no pastel fish-patterned curtain.  
The head is loose and there is a brown streak  
of rust where the water runs down to the tub.

Nights I don't like the bathroom.  
Thumb-nail sized dark gray roaches laze  
by the water that collects in the tub  
in yellow and red stripes.

When I turn on the light they scramble  
trying to climb up the fiberglass walls,  
but fall back down like mountain climbers  
without ropes. I close the drain,  
turn the hot water, use the toilet  
and take a look at the sports section.

They look like lobsters boiling;  
First they swim around, fighting each other,  
then float. Their shells turn lighter gray,  
the stripes orange, and their antennae curl  
like pubic hair.

I check the line sores then make sure  
all of the roaches are floating. Opening the  
drain, I let out the water. The roaches spin  
in the funnel around the drain, but clog it.  
I wipe the empty caracasses out with the  
paper and flush it down the toilet.

From under the sink I get the foam cleaner  
and spray the tub. It bubbles up, sounding  
like the cries of roaches being crushed under  
a sneaker. With a hard brush I scrub every last  
antennae out. Then, I rinse the tub, dry it  
with a bath towel and put everything away.

At the door, I listen to the dripping  
of the shower head, turn off the light,  
and wait for the clatter of the feet  
of the next wave.

## CHOICE

by Yan Shen



**M**y wedding party was being held in a big restaurant. Following the customs, before the party started, I stood with my wife at the entrance, rigidly and with a never-changing smiling face, greeting friends and relatives. I did not fancy the idea of exposing myself to the public. But my wife was adamant with the reason that it was her first, and probably the last, chance to ever attract the attention of large crowds of people, most of whom were passers-by.

It was 5:25 p.m. We had been exhibiting ourselves for more than half an hour. In another five minutes, we were going back to the large hall where the wedding banquet was given.

Most of the people invited were already comfortably seated in the place reserved for them. For the few who were missing, I did not worry too much; they were party enthusiasts, and never gave themselves the excuse to miss any to which they were invited. However, the absence of one person, Wang, stirred me with some disturbance and uncertainty, which I could not tell exactly what it was.

Wang was my best friend, to whom I could unbosom myself. We grew up together, fought other boys together, attended the same

schools, and adored the same teachers. We were both enthusiastic about football and shared the same unflinched passion for basketball. In fact, I used to regret that he had not been my brother.

Our friendship flourished long after we graduated from school until one day I told him that I had fallen in love with Xu, now my wife. Wang was apparently not prepared for the news, for he kept silent for a long time, looking beyond me, his face blank of any expression. I was unnerved by his taciturnity. Under my gaze for explanation for his silence, he said slowly and reluctantly, as if the choice of words mattered a great deal: "I...know her."

Immediately I sensed something wrong. Realization, and then fear, crept slowly, but insistently, into my mind.

"Do you...?" I faltered.

Wang stared expressionlessly.

"Do you mean to say you love her, too?"

I forced myself to ask.

Wang's lips moved, tightened, and then opened a little.

"Yes."

My mind started to function fast under the stimulation of the cold fact. So that was why Xu refused to give the definite answer to

my proposal, despite the fact that she was very much fond of my company.

"I never thought!" Wang said, "you were behind her resistance to me. But she has never discouraged my advances." There was some satisfaction in his wry smile.

"So..." I said.

"So what?" Wang asked.

"So...you don't want to give up, do you?"

"...No, not until she says no."

"I see. And...I have no intention to give up, either."

Wang smiled. Suddenly, I felt very embarrassed. Wang was apparently amused by my seriousness. A man can be serious, but never showing it. To be a man is to be serious about being serious. After all, why are people serious when there is nothing to be serious about? But...I was confused.

Wang smiled again, this time graciously. "Oh, sit down, Pal. Relax yourself. Look, right now, we can do nothing but to wait, wait for her to make up her mind. If you're chosen, I'll step away. If I'm lucky, you'll do the same, will you?"

"Oh, sure." I answered. But I did not mean what I said. The idea of being rejected shook my heart fiercely. I had felt attached to her in more than one way. I was living for her. There was nothing that I could not do for her, even kill and murder. Every moment of my life, I was thinking of her, her inviting eyes, her begging lips, and her temptingly soft laugh. What else did I need if I could not marry her, or if I could?

"But how long have we got to wait?" I asked.

"Ask her."

"I can't wait forever."

"I can," Wang said.

"No, I mean...I mean I can't wait forever in this way."

"What way?"

"Never mind." I said. "I think we've got to let her know that we know each other, and ask her..."

"beg her." Wang cut in.

"...ask her to do something about it."

"To save us?" Wang's brows tipped smilingly upward.

I was mildly annoyed at Wang's flippancy and his straight forwardness was smarting, though I could not say it was not without some truth. For the first time in our relationship, I wished that we had thought and felt differently. Feeling unfortunate that we should both be attracted to the same person, I suggested competition on a fair-play basis. No petty tricks. No unreasonable undercuts. Wang readily accepted my proposal. We departed that day with a gentleman's agreement that we would let Xu make the final decision.

Xu apparently had very hard time to choose between two equally good suitors. In spite of our daily increased pressure to end our agonizing waiting, she delayed infinitely, making no move on our behalf. It was a test of patience, which was stretched so long that it might snap at any moment. I was fortunately saved from disgracing myself by acting ungentlemanly when a brief note from Xu arrived, inviting me to her house on a certain afternoon. I was secretly disappointed, however, when I learned that Wang had received the same invitation. Disappointment was immediately followed by confusion. What did she mean by putting two of us together? Was she going to announce her choice? But why not spare the embarrassment and sensibilities of the unlucky one? I became indignant. My own feeling was involved because I myself had half the chance to be told to retire early, if not permanently.

Nevertheless, we went to her house on time. Xu was apparently waiting for us anxiously. The sign of worry was still faintly visible on a face of now relieved expression. Brief greetings were exchanged with formality. Then an embarrassing hush fell. None of us took the initiative to talk, as if the first talker was bound to get hurt for being the conspicuous target in this confused war.

Feelings unbearably oppressed, I ven-

tured to cough softly once, and then, with a decent interval, another. Taking my coughing as a positive signal to break the suffocating silence, Xu lifted her chin, bit her lower lip, and said:

"I made some food for you."

Suspicion rushed into my mind when I detected a controlled quiver on the word "food." My eyes followed her gentle rise to her airy way to the kitchen.

When Xu came out of the kitchen she had one bowl in each hand. She placed them gingerly on the edge of the table, withdrawing her hands quickly as if from shocks. Two thin clouds of smoke but resolutely toward Wang and me with the gentle but firm fingers behind the brim of each bowl. Through the haze of smoke and confusion I saw in each bowl about ten huntuns immersed in onion-dotted and sesame-oil seasoned soup. Before I came out of bewilderment I was offered a pair of chopsticks.

But I had no appetite for food, smelling inviting as it was. I had come for business, a life turning-point business, a decisive moment in my life, but why now, when the wind of fate was blowing most uncertainly. But I could not afford to show my temper in Xu and Wang's presence, losing both favor and respect. To calm down, I inhaled deeply; but before I let the breath out of my nostrils, I saw the straight upward smoke from my bowl. Quickly, I whirled my face, then the pent-up breath hastened out, sweeping Wang's smoke into nothingness.

Xu was standing in the other side of the table, looking down at us. Seeing the bewilderment in our gaze, she smiled a timidly bold smile and said in an excitedly controlled voice:

"Sometimes I think it's very unfortunate that I should meet two of you. If I knew only you, or you, I could be spared the anxiety to choose between two fine people. I think I can marry either of you. But my choice will in-

evitably hurt one of you. Besides, I hate the idea that I'll have to decide which one of you'll have to sacrifice when neither sacrifice is acceptable. Perhaps I'll feel better if the decision is made by someone else, or by circumstances, or by chance. Now," she pointed with a slight lift of her chin at the bowls in front of us, "I made twenty huntuns. In one of them I put a small coin. If one of you happen to have that huntun, I'll accept his proposal."

She paused, to see if we understood the rules for the game. Satisfied that we were quick with comprehension shown on our faces, she said:

"Now, you can start to eat."

I had an impulse to grab the chopsticks. But Wang's coolness checked me short. He remained still, staring at Xu who, under his gaze quivered almost invisibly, but then quickly recovered her composure. He

picked up one chopstick carelessly, examined it from one end to the other with the same careless manner, and then, without warning and with all his might, thrust at a triangle-sized huntun, and missed it. With a shrug, he dismissed the attempt.

Repressing the eagerness to try my luck, I picked up my chopsticks with a seemingly casual manner I observed in Wang. Aiming carefully, with a quick movement and hidden strength, I forced the end of one stick into a huntun in my bowl. There was no feeling of the expected metal resistance, to my disappointment. I poked around the point of the stick inside the stuffed belly of the huntun. Again, nothing. The broken, damaged huntun lay miserably like a ravished proud maiden, wishing to leave the scene of her disgrace. Full of mercy, I picked it up and put it into my mouth.

When I was swallowing it halfway down the throat, I lifted my head, seeing Wang's gaze at me with one of his cheeks swollen. It was a posture of abrupt stop. He was observing me,

I thought, but I had no luck yet. Noticing my attention, He resumed his mouth movement, but the movement was so slow and so strength-demanding, that each chewing seemed to be a pain. We both had our first huntun. But neither seemed to have any luck.

Once engaged, I quickly got used to the way things were going. The second huntun, with the same experience as the first, but less suffering, speedily found its way to my mouth. Before its total disappearance from my throat, I served myself the third one. When this last attempt proved to be futile, I began to worry. Now, at any moment Wang was likely to produce the precious coin from his mouth with a happy cry.

I looked at him again. He was still chewing his first hopeless huntun, as if each chewing was a patient investment, and might turn out to be a profitable one.

Xu was looking at Wang, too, incomprehension written on her face. But she kept silent, not showing anything, if she had anything to show.

My observation was not a stop-and-look business, but was accompanied by a swift transportation of huntuns from the bowl to my mouth. The coming of each new one was a heart lifting expectation, but they all ended in spirit-draining disappointment.

When I looked at Wang again, I found that he had picked up his consuming speed. Now he was another man. The heavy clouds of confusion and despair had drifted away from his face. He seemed to enjoy every bite now, freely and heartily, not at all afraid of biting into the hard metal that might lurk in his bowl.

I was feeling envious of Wang's ease when my teeth clicked with a bone-splitting pain, which sent me headlong into cold sweat. For a moment, consciousness collapsed and was eaten up by an intense pang. But the flaming fury of being caught unawares abated when a realization flooded to my mind: I got in my mouth the coin for marriage. It was hard and unflinching, but it could buy.

Without further thought I spat the coin

into my palm. It was stained with red stuff of huntun. Hastily wiping it with my fingers, I cried with excitement:

"I got it! I got it!"

I turned to Xu, presenting the coin. She took it with her palm, folding it tightly as if an open palm was a dangerous place for a coin. Her ceremonious smile beamed into a genuine laughing face. We looked at each other, seeing only each other. Expectant happiness and plans for our future danced in her eyes. I was intoxicated, relieved as a conqueror over the final battle. Then a pity for the defeated rolled in. I wanted to say some sympathetic words to Wang. But showing sympathy was not appropriate. Maybe a casual joke would do. However, as I turned Wang was nowhere to be seen. He had left amid our joyousness.

The next few months I did not see much of him. I was busy with the preparation for the wedding party, because Xu wanted to have a big party in a big restaurant.

But Wang did not show up by the time Xu and I had to go back to the banquet. I felt a bit uneasy. He promised that he would come when I called him two days ago. What did this absence mean? Was he still bitter over that luckless afternoon? I was very sorry, but what else could I do? I looked at the empty seat reserved for him and sighed with understanding.

In a few minutes, Wang was completely out of my mind when my bride and I started to toast around for everyone present at the party. My tour finished with my face red with wine and happiness.

I was still smiling when I caught sight of Wang, sitting in his place expressionlessly: he nodded at me, showing his notice of me. I touched my wife by the arm and we went together toward him. He rose swiftly to our greeting.

With one hand in his trouser's pocket, He said:

"I'm sorry for being late. Congratulations."

His dismal mood brought my attention to the food in front of him untouched.

"Why don't you eat something," Xu said, "We're going to toast your health and happiness. And wine is no good for empty stomachs."

Wang stared at her, as if her invitation to food reminded him of something that somehow pricked.

"I've something for you," Wang turned to me. He withdrew his hand from his trouser's pocket.

I saw a very small paper packet in his hand. I took it, it was weightless, and before I was going to tear it open, Wang said good night and left.

I was standing with the unweighty packet in my hand, speechless and puzzled by his abrupt departure. It was not like him, who usually took things easy. I looked at Xu for explanation. But she seemed lost in thought, not noticing my bewilderment. When she returned from her reverie, she fixed her gaze at the packet in my hand. There was no curiosity, nor eagerness in her eyes.

I tore the packet open; in it was a small dull coin. I picked it up with two fingers. It was stained with bits of vegetable. I looked at Xu.

"You each had a huntun with a coin in your bowl," she said. "He had his coin before you did. But he didn't want to show it. I'd marry a man who thinks only of me, and who has the guts to express his love openly and directly."

I did not respond to her explanation. Carefully, I tried to wrap the coin with the paper Wang had used, but the paper was too torn to do any good.

## THE WEIGHT OF MORNING

*by Roy Collins*

Orchards of plum  
hang still  
above black humus  
and the forest air  
bends to the weight  
of darkness.

On this morning of ghosts  
a single gray hand  
can rise from the river  
to dictate a course  
to swimming fowl.

One silent finger  
points my presence.

In the absence of light  
I follow the slanted water,  
past vertical vines  
while tracing the forms  
of unborn hills.

Between source and goal  
I stand holding  
a thousand dreams.

If I can pass  
a stick through  
the water's surface  
it bends  
and becomes a snake.  
If I could learn  
to bend beneath  
the weight of darkness,  
to pass my body  
through shadows  
as through water,  
I would not need to see  
the line that divides  
sky from earth.

Come light,  
come cut dark  
from the forest, dew from orchard.  
Split their shadowed limbs  
with the same yellow  
that scents fennel  
and gives curve  
to the egrets neck.  
Come,  
cut into the slits  
of my eyes.

## DRIVING BACK

*by Kevin Costa*

I should not have been driving the car that morning  
when we day-tripped to Connecticut,  
tired, hollow, and unstable.

Slim, silent, and tender,  
breathing Spring and birth  
that Thursday morning.

I remember your sunglasses; half metal, half  
plastic, even though it rained that day.  
I shook with happiness then we ate,  
closer than raindrops. We left now close as the sea.

And it stayed gray.  
The sun would have distracted from you;  
the sun inferior, stayed away.  
Your sad profile, sharp to me,  
dissolving to go unnoticed. I could  
not kiss, cannot  
touch.

Driving back, both voiceless.  
Familiar music, and the rain gradually stopping,  
we noticed familiar places, eventually your house.

By the time you left the car  
we became as closed, as  
separate as raindrops.

## WAITING FOR THE CALL

*by Walter Chomka*

A boy is stopped in mid-swing  
his arms and legs twisted  
like strings in a tornado.  
The yellow plastic bat, a blur.  
A half smoked cigarette  
squeezed between his lips.  
Behind him, the ump,  
a tire propped on a crate,  
leans on a rotted, red washed barn  
and waits for the motionless ball  
to echo a strike  
in the tire's rubber cave.  
His fans, three blond heads,  
loiter near an oily tank,  
among the steel, wires and dirt,  
waiting for the call.  
One, sitting hunched over,  
between two oil stains,  
the tip of his cap tilted up,  
stares just past his  
untied sneakers, at the dirt.  
A second, t-shirt ripped,  
one hand behind his back  
mimics the pitcher's grip  
as he watches the batter, the unmoving ball  
and the unseen pitcher.  
The third looks at the sky  
above the batter, the pitcher.  
His eyes are closed,  
as if asleep.  
All wait for the call.

The photo turns gray.  
The boys lean forward, further, collapsing.  
Their faces wrinkle and sag.  
They are now old men,  
still holding their breath,  
still staring, still waiting,  
still dying, still  
waiting for the call.

## Light Blues

by Brian Laferte

She sees past the second story window,  
the top empty except for two dull jags of glass,  
bottom holding a rusty white curtain rod  
with sunburnt yellow curtains and light blue panties  
drying on a metal hanger painted black.  
The roof of the First Union and Trust collects  
rain drops for puddles and colors them  
with oil that sifts to the top like  
the worst prize in the machine at the supermarket  
when you're on your last dime.  
In the street two old women outside their interlocked  
cars nervously bicker over who is more sorry.

The phone rings with the desperation of the caller  
and she lets it. It is the easiest way to let him go.  
She looks to the old women both wet from the rain.  
The heavier one, a sky grey skirt, leans against her car,  
hands clasped, begging mercy for what she has done,  
while the lighter circles the cars, surveying the breakage  
knowing she has done nothing wrong.

A police car arrives. From the second floor,  
the cop looks short in his brown uniform.  
He curses and steps over a muddy puddle.  
From the second floor she can feel his boots  
clunking in the wet street as he walks from one  
end of the crash to the other, an unmistakable outsider

Each woman gets one inch on a clipboarded form.  
The officer stops them when the space is full.  
He stomps back to his car and fills out the rest,  
then tells the verdict. The heavy grey skirted one  
lets out the deep thick moans of a rejected lover.

The phone rings with more desperation and she answers it.  
His words are indecipherable. She rests  
the phone on the end table and walks to the window.  
The rain is still coming and the light woman is driving away,  
her tires kicking a soft spray back to the sky.

She takes the hanger with the panties from the rod  
and goes back to the phone. He's still pleading.  
The phone clicks when she puts it back onto the hook.  
His voice doesn't fade, it stops altogether.

She puts the hanger on the table, taking the panties,  
stiff and less blue from two good days of exposure.  
Opening a bureau drawer, she paddles through  
a mass of socks, searching for something yellow or red.

## YELLOW CAB

*by Jill Jann*

At 1:00 a.m. on Larch Street,  
 sadness and a kiss  
 are the only streetlights  
 touching his cheek.  
 We falter on the wooden stairs  
 as the heart blasting  
 of the Yellow Cab demands  
 to feel the weight of its own door.  
 We almost laugh at the intrusion  
 of tires and vinyl upholstery  
 which relieves us  
 from perfecting our gestures.  
 It's all movement:  
 the last inadequate words,  
 the bewildering lips,  
 and the grazing of palms  
 latching their curled fingertips  
 before one line of information  
 severs the touch  
 and starts the red numbers  
 to metering the distance travelled.  
 The driver scrutinizes me  
 in his rear view mirror  
 and decides to converse past  
 Dunkin' Donuts and traffic lights.  
 He was once a merchant seaman.  
 I want to explain  
 to his disembodied eyes  
 that sometimes the only love  
 is in ending,  
 but I say nothing.



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