

Towers

2007



literary and creative arts magazine

Number 87

Towers

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This issue is dedicated to Jan Knudsen, our faculty advisor who recently retired. We will miss you!

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Jan Knudsen

Linda Watson

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The Editors wish to congratulate the authors of the Editor's Choice works in each category for 2007:

Fiction

Devon Dion for "There"

Nonfiction

Hideaki Noguchi for "Me Silent"

Poetry

Elena Haliczzer for

"Winter sun spreads shadows over my mother's face"

Art/Photography

Thomas Graff for "Motherhood"

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There

Devon Dion

I have this urge
(I can't tell anyone about it)—
but it's there. Burning. Eating. Corroding.
There.

I push it back, far back, back and deep into the abyss of Forget. Somehow
Forget cannot devour it though. Like two predators they tear at each other—
(but the desire)
the Desire is there.

I want her.

I know I shouldn't, but I want her. There is a savage beast that lives in my
soul. He claws, bites and snares and rips at my heart strings
(I want her.)

I know,
I know, I know, I know
I shouldn't.
I know. But knowing and doing do not hold hands. (Burning)

I live in a world, (Eating) where males love males, (Corroding) and females
love females. (2 by 2 they march) Babies are test tube constructs raised with as
much love as it takes to conceive them.

(2 by 2)
The world is a sterile white room, cleaned and disinfected. The green leaves
that once drifted were bleached of their color. Buildings and roads (shades of
gray) burning, eating, corroding the land it stands on.

My name is Ryan.
Her name is Ashley.
(2 by 2 in shades of gray)

Once, time fell upon us all: this is not a story of love.

Name: Ryan Anderson

Guardians: Matthew & William Anderson

Age: 17

Sex: Male

Hair: Brown

Eyes: Brown

"Outbreaks in school, anger displacement. Ryan seems to be having strange antisocial tendencies and slight depression."

My name is Ryan

and the one thing I want more than anything in the world is to love her.

(this is not a love story)

Her name is Ashley.

I have a confession.

"Go ahead, Ryan."

I have this urge.

"What kind of urge?"

There is this girl.

She is in my class...

"Is this girl a friend?"

No, sort of, I want her to be.

"What kind of urge?"

(I can't tell anyone)

You know how men love men? What if...What if...a man, loved a woman?

"Are you saying you love this girl?"

(2 by 2 in shades of gray)

No,

Burning.

Well,

Eating.

...Yes.

Corroding.

"Men can't love women."

But what if—

"Ryan, take that thought, that urge and put it out of mind."

Dr. Ree—

"Put it out of mind."

So I put it out of mind. I put it back into the abyss and cushioned it into the suffocation of oblivion. But the hunger remained like an absolute void. It starved me until my mind was nothing but a husk of what it was; a corpse eaten by the Thirst. It pulled at my heartstrings like puppet master jerking tautly (ripping ever so slowly...)

“Ryan seems to be suffering from terrible delusions...”

Ashley

No,

Ashley

Well,

Ashley

...Yes.

No! Ashley. (Hold her) Burning (Kiss her) Eating. GET OUT! (Caress her) Corroding. STOP IT!

My name is Ryan.

Her name is Ashley.

(2 by 2 in shades of gray)

Hello Ashley.

“Hi...Ryan is it?”

Yeah, yeah. Ryan.

“How’s it going?”

It’s...okay, it’s, listen—

I freeze.

My heart is racing, a beaten drum of desire; pounding harder, harder, harder. My tongue is twisting itself, trying to stop me. My whole body is against me but my broken husk of a mind cannot halt it.

“Ryan?”

Say something! Don’t speak, put it out of mind. Ashley... (this is not a love story) PUT IT OUT OF MIND! I...I can’t...my mind is—Tell her!

I have this-

“What?”

Do you want to go somewhere?

(2 by 2)

“With who?”

Well, just us. You and me.

“Oh...sure, I guess. Where do you want to go?”

Just a walk around the park, maybe out to eat.

“That sounds nice.”

That sounds nice? That sounds nice? Maybe-No, maybe—(put it out of mind) but what if—

Great.

So we walked. So we talked. My nervous banter sputtered out like a congested motor, coughing out stories and theories. She laughed, she sighed, she looked so magically alive in a world decaying. So vibrant and fast (as everything else rotted slowly...)

My heart kept beating louder and louder and I became convinced that the trees in the park were swaying to its rhythm. Every time I thought of telling her though. I started to hyperventilate. My breathes interchanging with my percussion chest: beat, breath; beat, breath; beat, breath; and though my body pulsed with vitals, my rotting flesh argued.

“Ryan?”

I smiled.

Yeah?

“You okay?”

Yeah...

NO! my mind blared. NO, I WANT YOU, I ADORE YOU, I LOVE YOU!

No.

“What?”

No...no, I'm not okay.

“I was gonna say you look whit—”

I love you.

There was a span of eternity from millisecond to millisecond. Everything that existed ceased to do so and oblivion wrapped everything. Armageddon was less than a second and then the universe exploded out to infinity, creating 6 billion years of life in an instant.

SAY SOMETHING.

(Silence)

SAY ANYTHING.

(Silence)

SAY SOMETHING!

Her leg shifted back.

The same shattered-glass-look was on her face from the Apocalypse to the Rebirth. God whispered lifetimes of memories into everyone's minds (but I knew).

I knew for a moment, the universe blinked.

Her mouth twitched.

DON'T SAY ANYTHING.

Never in my life did I realize how dead I was and how badly I wanted never to exist.

(beat, breath) (beat, breath)

Nothing

(beat, breath) (beat, breath) (beat, breath)

Nothing

Her face was slowly distorting into a grotesque version of the eyes I had fallen in love with; twisting, contorting, bending into a freakish mask.

(beat, breath)

The world turned into a slow motion and I stepped out of my body. I looked at my pathetic frail body and cursed it and simultaneously apologized.

I walked around myself and then Ashley in a figure eight. I looked at the sky and the birds were frozen, the breeze half-moving branches and she and I stood. If I could I would have left. Run far from that sack of flesh and blood but something pulled me back—her words ripping me into my own body.

“...What?”

I couldn't tell her again.

I didn't feel like destroying the universe again.

I didn't have to though

She saw the truth in my eyes; I saw disgust in her's. I loved her and hated everything that wasn't her. I hated the fact that I told her I loved her and that I loved her.

“You disgusting freak!”

I deserved that.

Her hand whipped across my face.

I don't know if I deserved that.

In a whirlwind blow time began moving again, almost faster than it should to make up for lost time. (shades of gray) Ashley was swallowed by the dusk and trees. Her legs pumping hard and body being lifted by the wind.

Then suddenly I didn't exist.

The world forgot about me and I got my wish all too late. I sat down with my tears and shame and broken body. I was a freak but so was everyone. Even Ashley as her beautiful face turned demonic. But I was the greatest freak of all.

Then I realized something—suddenly the urge was numbed (so silenced)

and somehow in the mist of my sorrow I felt a faint relief as my ghost quieted.

Some one told me that if you want to know if someone loves you, look in their eyes. The love for Ashley surrounded my eyes, (saturated them) it was the tears that engulfed my eyes and erupted out, (overflowing and leaking).

I prayed and hoped that maybe if I cried enough the love would leave, the desire would stop burning. (but it never did) Sometimes I wake up sobbing uncontrollably and my husband (Jeffery) consoles what he can. The memories of lost love and what could not have been. Sometimes I'm crying about Ashley, sometimes that I can never love Jeffery like I loved her.

(but this was never a love story)

Silence.

Johannes the Prisoner

Addison Hart

Desire, like writing, is a river flowing with Vice and Peril, and he who undertakes to pursue either passion shall taste the bitter fruit of those bastard sons of Fortune. His travails are always the same, embodied as they are in the ghastly specters of Poverty and Melancholy. In such a way was I, when drawn into writing, brought to a grievous extremity; I share my bed with half of the contagious vermin in Mainz, subsist on the gingerbread and branntwein offered by the inn, and wash it down with the most execrable wine known to our race, a concoction strongly suspected to be an unholy union between stale grape juice and the water from a donkey. Likewise was the subject of my story condemned to hopeless abandon as a result of his whims. Were ever two men more pitiable?

But I see that your interest wanes. I shall attempt to stay as much to the point as possible.

I have no desire to waste time—if such a concept as “time” indeed has any bearing on reality, though here I digress—and merely present this account as a moral parable, lest peradventure you should fall into these same errors I take pains to describe. So, then, no more talking—I begin.

Not a decade ago, there lived in an aged and luxurious castle overlooking the Rhine a minor nobleman by the name of Ludwig von H—e. Being of that favored stock that inherits more money than a banker can thumb, Ludwig was always content. He did not worry about money because, having lived in its presence from a very early age, it had become to him like an old clock or boot, being so familiar in appearance and feel as to escape recollection to mind. This is not to say that Ludwig had the sort of mind that would recall much in the first place; his old ally Wealth intervened in most matters of life, and he was blessed with the ability to pay other minds to think in place of his.

In most respects, Ludwig was a kind and excellent gentleman, enlightened by the inner glow of Reason. He was considered at court to be an admirable poet, a tasteful dresser, and a great wit; this fine opinion of him was much assisted by his total absence from the capital and complete isolation from the aristocracy. His high reputation as a savant in the art of music was, however, most justifiable. When heard playing upon the flute, it was said, the very soul quivered with the enraptured ecstasy of sound. At this time, men all over the Germanies were discovering themselves to be far better at musical composition than anybody else upon the globe, and so Ludwig's excellence with the flute was truly impressive. Among artists of that instrument, he was considered to hold the highest place, for the beauty and delicacy of his works—masterpieces all—were of so elevated a standard as practically to defy the comprehension of his race. It was therefore considered both a horrendous tragedy and a crowning display of his unparalleled genius that he was discovered never to have written down any of his works for preservation.

It was a wealthy distant cousin of his, a financier by the name of Johannes Schurke, who eventually learned the fantastic secret of Ludwig's flute—for a fantastic secret there certainly was. Johannes was not of noble blood, I confess, but was possessed of a carriage and bearing as did become all those of such distinction. He was a keen observer of the soul, a philosopher by nature, and very much a self-made man in every respect, save the literal interpretation of that phrase. Though descended from a modest stock, he had so advanced himself in the society of his native city that, by his thirty-fifth year, he was possessed of as fine an estate as any baron and as respectable a reputation in his hometown as any banker is capable of winning. As a connoisseur of the arts, he was of a unique excellence, and his periwig was quite as large and white as court style dictated—indeed, it was both larger and whiter. His face was practically speckled with beauty marks of tear-inducing loveliness, and his lips were never but smeared with the reddest of salves. He was presentable in one way or another before any monarch in Europe, and sophisticated enough

to know how to cheat such a prince at cards without being suspected, or, if not so lucky, quick enough with his rapier to ease any doubts as to his honesty. He was the marvel of his age, and wanted only for fame.

Johannes entertained a hope, it must be allowed, that he would gain this recognition through mastery of the note. He had studied music theory under a knowledgeable professor of that science, and had acquired skill both in the reading and writing of notes. His accomplishments upon the instruments themselves were remarkable, though not outstanding. "Captivating," was the comment of one burgher who had been made to listen. "His music is a veritable cage of noise." It was therefore the particular misfortune of the banker that he, like his cousin, was devoted to the flute, which made the greater accomplishments of his kinsmen somewhat painful to his delicate sensibilities. Happily, he came at length to accept this ill turn of Fortune with all of the grace and patience of a saint. Hidden though this disappointment was, it proved to be his only true sorrow in life—a fact that displays fully the inadequate sufferings of the rich as opposed to those of the poor, such as myself.

It came to pass one day that Ludwig held a pleasant masque in the great hall of his castle, inviting all of the best and most noteworthy members of local society. Included among this number was his cousin Johannes. They had known one another since boyhood, and Ludwig had always indulged a fond interest in his humble relation. Now that Johannes was wealthy and eminent in the city, the nobleman found his company both acceptable and desirable.

The masque itself was a grand affair, laden with gossip and alcohol, cards and tobacco, silk and carnival noses, and all manner of gentrified merrymaking. Consummated in candlelight with the sounding of violin bows, the dancing was concluded by the haunting airs borne of Ludwig's flute. All those present stood astonished at the overpowering beauty of the sound; many wept at the sheer grace and melancholy evoked by such ethereal notes. When he had drawn the instrument away from his lips, the room reverberated with the impassioned applause of his guests, and Johannes Schurke among them was the most moved by the playing. Thus enthralled, he begged Ludwig for instruction in the art, hoping that he too might acquire such majestic talent. "Return here tomorrow, cousin," said the noble, "and we shall see."

It need hardly be stated that Johannes returned the following day and was suitably entertained by Ludwig, who greeted him with true hospitality, offered him dinner, and allotted him a room for the duration of the week. The anxious financier, however, was most especially interested in learning more of the flute, and pressed his patient host for details.

Presently he was led into an elegant sitting room, and there made to listen as his cousin produced yet another captivating tune. That finished, he smiled benignly and asked whether Johannes recognized the author of the piece.

“That would be you,” the financier replied dryly.

“No, no, sir!” exclaimed the nobleman, wiggling smugly. “Not I, no, sir, not I, Lord, no. Nor is it by any other of this country.”

“Who has written it, then?”

“The thing, sir, is this: the flute itself is the author!”

Johannes quite understandably gave him a look askance at this remark.

“I swear to you, cousin,” continued Ludwig, “that I have not invented these tunes—but note, sir, that I take you into strictest confidence as regards the matter.”

“But how can this thing be?”

“I don’t rightly understand the matter myself, but I bought the instrument from a wizened old fellow of mystical sensibilities, who gave it me in exchange for—oh, what do you call those fiddly bits of metal we barter with?”

“Money, cousin Ludwig.”

Note that what I had said before on this matter was perfectly true.

“Yes, that is it—money. I gave him a large amount of money and he presented me with the flute, which he told me was enchanted by the soul of a dead gypsy minstrel king, who was once rich and powerful, but was brought low after being run down by his own royal caravan as it rode through a village somewhere in this principality. His dying animus fused with the flute and from that instant, sir, its application to any pair of lips has resulted in lovely articles of noise. I see you have misgivings—here, do try the thing yourself and tell me what you think.”

Johannes reluctantly brought the flute to his mouth and began to play. Imagine his surprise when he realized that Ludwig had spoken truthfully! At once, a strange and enchanting melody shafted down the pipe, filling the air with pleasurable, lilting music. The piece, it must be stressed, was wholly foreign to the financier’s ears and memory, and he was in no way responsible for its creation. It was all the work of the mysterious instrument in his hands. So was, he soon learned, absolutely everything Ludwig had ever played with skill, for he was, in truth, the world’s most wretched musician, unable to remember or distinguish even a single note. Indeed, he was wholly tune-deaf.

That night, Johannes found himself plagued by dark broodings, agonizing over the success of his cousin by such contemptible preternatural devices. He was particularly distressed by the knowledge that such beautiful music would be lost to the ages, as well as the growing suspicion that Ludwig was simply an unpardonable mountebank and colossal bore.

Desire was forming in his heart—desire to possess the instrument of Ludwig's fame and success, and desire to own that recognition of genius which he so eagerly sought.

"It is wrong that my cousin should be the sole owner of the flute," Johannes philosophized in his bed, "for he is ignorant of music theory and something of a dolt. Moreover, he cannot remember or write down any of these tunes, while I can. With so miraculous a device, I could establish the finest repertoire of music yet produced upon this continent—that would be marvelous, probably. Ludwig, being a booby of little or no intelligence, cannot be expected to shoulder alone the burden of greatness. Out of sympathy for him I must gain hold of the flute and use it as Providence desires—frequently and for the profit of the whole world. But how can I make him relinquish the damned thing?"

It is to be admitted that Johannes' admirable ambitions overpowered his scruples at the moment, for the following morning he was to be found consulting a ponderous volume on the subject of herbalism. He had, in fact, taken great means to extract this leaf from the forest that constituted Ludwig's vast and entirely unread library, laboring through collections of the works of Trismegistus and bestiaries describing such exoticisms as "the Homely RHINOCEROS" in search of the desired text. During his research, he developed a somewhat amoral scheme for the purpose of extracting the flute from Ludwig: it involved slipping into his food small amounts of an obscure poison, so as not to kill but render dangerously ill his unfortunate relation. He spent the afternoon in the city, rummaging through the backrooms of an apothecary's shop, therein locating the powdered root of his choice.

The paprika chicken upon which Ludwig nibbled in Johannes' presence at dinner that evening bent him double during the meditative process of digestion. With some exclamation and much vomit, Ludwig found it to his benefit to remain in bed for the whole of the following day—though, by some infernal agency, the same reaction bedeviled him there as he took his gruel in the afternoon. He quickly sent for a pair of surgeons, much to Johannes' well-concealed unease. These two estimable doctors of physic, Picksore and Dogtit by name, examined the bedridden nobleman for a quarter of an hour before deciding that the best possible remedy was the application of leeches.

By some mystery, these measures did not greatly relieve his sufferings.

"It is clear to me," said Doctor Picksore, wiping his nose back and forth along the length of his greasy sleeve, "that you are struck down with plague. I recognize the symptoms exactly—vomiting, disquiet of the bowels, pallid countenance, lumpish green tongue—all this suggests foul contagion. I will soon be forced to pronounce you dead of it." He slobbered gravely.

"I concur with your summation," murmured the corpulent Dogtit, who even now affixed the beaked mask of a plague doctor to his face. "Please do not infect me, as I have too many children, and the pestilence would rapidly consume the whole country—thousands would die in misery, lacking the warm touch of a physician." He then presented both Picksore and Johannes with health-preserving masks.

"Is there no hope?" whimpered Ludwig.

"Perhaps," nodded Doctor Dogtit.

"But probably not," concluded Picksore.

"You must commend yourself to your Maker," suggested Dogtit.

"Do you have a handkerchief?" asked Picksore, whose sleeves had been exhausted of their usefulness.

"Surely it would be infected, sir!" murmured Ludwig, his face pale as snow.

"This possibility must be risked—I do not wish to stain the inside of my plague mask. It is an expensive instrument, and very dear to me."

Thus satisfied, the doctors retired to the rooms with which they were to be provided until Ludwig either recovered or succumbed entirely to his sudden ailment. Once alone, the infected nobleman assumed a stoic state of mind, presenting as much to Johannes when he visited. Sitting up in his bed, his body deathly pale, he seemed a very wraith in the eyes of his relation.

"Cousin," murmured Johannes, his face contorted by the agonies of feigned grief, "if you were to die, what would become of your beautiful flute?"

"I would pass it on to someone worthy of it."

"A noble sentiment," nodded Johannes. "But whom would you choose?"

"I'm glad you ask, sir," began Ludwig, propping himself up feebly. "I was thinking of a once modest gentleman, now raised to a position of wealth and eminence in the town."

"You are far too kind, cousin!"

"Well, you know, he is my son, after all."

"It warms the soul to know—I beg your pardon?"

"Although I never confessed it to any man until now, sir, I feel it is right at this mortal hour to speak of the matter. I am, as you know, unwed, but the power of love has not been entirely alien to me. There was a young woman in the town—admittedly of the middle class. My exalted rank forbade formal union, though in secret I did marry her. Little Ludwig was the product of the subsequent connubial romping. Tragedy, however, separated her from me, and even now the boy lives in ignorance of his father with the family of my deceased wife.

This family, I dare say, has become steadily wealthier due in thanks to the brewery it owns and a few little services I've made on its behalf. I would leave the flute to him as a testament of my shamefully unspoken love, in hopes that through it he will make his fortune and become a man of quality like you. Indeed, sir, having given the matter some thought, it is to you that I should like to entrust his future; please take the flute and present it to him with my blessings."

Johannes, who painfully accepted this task, spent the rest of the night philosophizing further. "If I now allow Ludwig to live," he thought with a heavy heart, "I should someday grant this miraculous object to a family of brewers, who know nothing more than how to do whatever it is a brewer does to barley. I doubt this sorry lad would even have the capacity to understand how to play the flute, or even that it is an instrument. He might try and smoke with it, or use it to sift barley grains, or possibly wear it in his hair. Such a catastrophe must be avoided. I fear now it is time for me to bring a close to this unhappy nobleman's wasted life and dedicate his death on the altar of Beauty. Her ways cannot be so lightly spurned; the flute has been granted to the family in the hope that we might use it wisely, and I alone possess the intellectual capability to ensure that Her desires are followed out to the letter. Perhaps I can amend for the admitted liberty I take by lavishing Ludwig's bastard with monies undreamt of by so idle a youth. He would not so greatly benefit if his father remained among us, after all."

Having determined this course of action over a night's mulling and soul pondering, he administered to the unfortunate Ludwig such an amount of the crushed herb that recovery was now rendered entirely inconceivable. The doctors returned to the room, their bodies now thickly shrouded in protective garments, and they stumbled about gropingly until they located the sick bed. Thereupon they endeavored to bleed Ludwig, stab him with hot irons, scrape portions of his skin away, smear his body with weird aloes, and burn to nonexistence whatever they felt necessary to destroy upon his quivering frame. These measures, alas, did not have their desired effects, and the tragically stricken man soon languished and wasted away.

"We must impose a general quarantine," sneezed Dr. Dogtit through his mask.

"We ourselves must be subject to this curfew, for we have been poking about with his body for quite a long time, and we are sure to be crawling with hideous contagion," murmured Dr. Picksore.

"In fact, we may soon be forced to seal off the entire castle and territory, lest the whole of the realm be imperiled by the vile pox. Perhaps burning down

large sections of the state will prevent its spread.”

“By God, sirs, send for a priest and also my solicitor, Herr Waxnail,” begged Ludwig. “I must make pronouncement to the fellow.”

Soon it was that Herr Waxnail traveled down from the city, arriving in the late afternoon outside the gates of the grand castle. He was a decrepit, doddering old man, frail in body and yellow in skin. He had not a tooth in his head that was not first extracted from the mouth of a hippopotamus, and his mass of white hair amounted in truth only to a dozen exceptionally long strands, two of which fell out during the length of his interview with Johannes, upon whom he also dribbled considerably.

It was, you understand, Johannes and not the quarantined Ludwig who spoke to the venerable Waxnail, imparting to him the understanding that his client was well on the way to being thoroughly and irrevocably deceased, and also that he wished to leave his estate to his hitherto undeclared son. There was, he mentioned as an aside, promise of a not inconsiderable annuity to be left to the financier, along with one other personal object by way of remembrance.

“Oh yes?” gurgled Herr Waxnail, as he peered wearily at Johannes through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, mounted on the bridge of his exceptionally long and gnarled nose. “What would that be, then? More money? That is all a man can afford to remember, I declare. Once he has forgotten money, he forgets to afford anything, and then where is he? He is cast adrift in a sea of unaffordability, unannealed and unprotected. Such a man is no better than spittle—that is, mind you, God’s spittle, for he still wears the cloak of the Creator, but legally he is still about equal to spittle. In the eyes of the law, he might even be declared as spittle—it would take a younger and cleverer man than I, assuredly, fresh and ready for debate, but probably it could be done.” Herr Waxnail was indeed slipping into a state not unlike senility.

“It is not money,” issued Johannes.

“Your cousin thinks you spittle even now?” snorted Waxnail with dismay.

“No, but he is of a sentimental breed, and thinks it a beautiful gesture to leave behind him, by way of memorial, a flute.”

“A flute?” gasped Waxnail, choking on his mildewed tongue.

“It is indeed a flute—one of those which he played for enraptured audiences and thereby gained such love and admiration.”

“Very well,” muttered the solicitor, giving him a dubious glance.

“Come—we must seek out the young inheritor; then we shall speak of flutes and money and spittle and such weighty things as are in that vein.”

Urged on by the messages passed along from Ludwig's faint and withered hand by the now-thickly armored doctors, Johannes departed with Herr Waxnail in his private carriage, driving into the great city and seeking out the brewery named by the dying man as that which lodged his son. Therein they discovered the lad, a portly boy of fifteen, who promptly chortled with disbelief at the story they poured into his spotty ears. Finally they resorted to buying the lad from the unscrupulous brewer, who did not much like portly, spotty boys, and hauled him forcibly to the castle. Once the dullard realized that he would become upon Ludwig's demise a great and wealthy nobleman, he seemed to overcome his hesitation, crushing all thoughts of doubt and accepting as truth the words of the two earnest gentlemen who had come to fetch him. So it was, I am happy to report, that these honest endeavors of Johannes and Herr Waxnail were brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

Not so, I am sorry to impart, our tale. When the carriage returned to the castle early the following morning, those inside were met with the unpleasant scent of smoke and ash. Peering out of the side window, Johannes noted a billowing, black haze rising from the grounds of the noble estate, choking the very azure hue of the sky to a forbidding gray. Masked servants ran amid the trees and shrubs of the back garden, attending to the dying bonfire within.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Johannes.

"Our master perished shortly after you left," replied an old servant, bowing his head with a mixture of sorrow and sniveling obsequy. "His doctors advised us to cremate the body along with those personal effects that were feared contaminated. Then they ordered us all and ourselves as well to be shut up within the castle until sufficient time has passed so as they might put an end to the pestilence. This has been a sad day for all of us, sir. We would none of us disdain a coin from you in respect to our pains and mental torments. In fact, we would take it as a sign of the nobility of your soul and devotion to Reason if you did, in fact, reward us handsomely for these honest tears."

"What – what became of the flute?"

"The flute?"

"Your master's flute: his famous instrument!"

"It was contaminated."

"Well?"

"The doctors said it was crawling with plague."

"And?"

"We burned it as well."

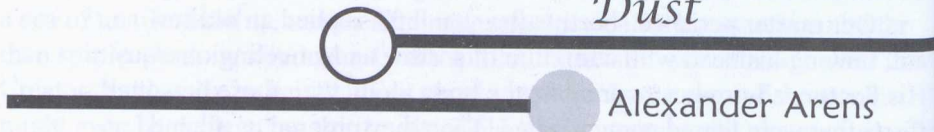
“You burned it?”

“We did, mein herr. We burned it to ash.”

What can I say? Johannes’ response is unprintable.

I am happy to relate to you that young Ludwig and the two doctors—who never decided to lift the quarantine—all prospered well for the remainder of their days in the castle, growing rich and affluent off the land and the residue of the legacy. Herr Waxnail would likewise have become a man of means had he not succumbed to the toll of his advancing years within weeks of the elder Ludwig’s demise. But Johannes, broken by the destruction of the magical flute, did little better with his riches than to squander them on drink, wenches, and such small dogs as were soon in vogue at court. I feel it my sad duty to relate to you now that he departed this world just one year ago, having choked to death on a handkerchief in the midst of his blackest miseries.

There remains but to say that in the months following Ludwig’s death, a curious and remarkable thing was whispered to have occurred, and even now it is related by the women of Mainz as a miracle and true sign of his piety and holiness. As the wind whipped up in the fires of that expurgating holocaust, his beautiful flute, crackling in the heat, began slowly to sing, playing as though held to the lips of its deceased master. There came flowing from the scarlet belly of the flames one last beautiful, anguished, haunting dirge, as at the recollection of the wilted flower of innocence.



Dust

Alexander Arens

Dust swirled into a cloak across the strongman’s back, but did nothing to cover blades of morning sun. Sweat dripped down his brow as he strung the wooden bow with a matching arrow. Apache-brown eyes staring on, the strongman aimed the ancient weapon at a barbed cactus a distance to the north that was nestled between two wigwams.

“That thing’s probably older than your grandmother, Scudder. Don’t break it,” Frank said, his scarlet hair obscured by brown gusts. Scudder nodded in response, moving his fingers to pull back the horsehair string of the bow. With a twang, the arrow was fired across the expanse, moving like a ligneous comet across the sky. Frank elevated his aviator sunglasses to his forehead and turned to the Apache behind him.

“That’s some shot, huh? He’s not 1-A for nothing, my feathered friend,” “Sorry, Frank.”

Frank scoffed at this apology and shifted toward the Apache once again, who was holding out his hand. "Here's what we owe you. Don't use it all at once." He fished out a small foil block and put it into the Apache's palm. In response, the Apache plucked a feather from his headdress and placed it in Frank's hand.

"For good luck," The Apache said; his empty mouth filled with shrill laughter. The howl of the El Camino's engine pierced the desert night. Don Henley's voice echoed from the radio, but the two men did not pay any attention. Frank removed a hand from the steering wheel to retrieve a cigarette from the dashboard.

"We had to give that Indian a quarter of our stash to stay the night." Frank picked up a lighter that sat on the edge of the passenger seat. "It's a goddamn tragedy," he added as he put the cigarette into his mouth and clicked the lighter on.

Scudder leaned his head back onto the passenger seat, breathing in slowly and closing his eyes. "It's been storming for so long."

Frank took a puff of his cigarette and exhaled a curl of smoke.

"Tell me about it. I can barely see a thing, and it's been nothing but this ever since I picked you up at that bus station in Mesa." He shifted his vision from the road for a second to look at Scudder, who was now watching the wisps in the passenger window.

"What were you doing there, anyway?"

"Just... getting away." Scudder's eyes did not leave the window.

Frank hacked out a laugh, turning up the radio to hear a guitar solo.

"From the draft? You and me both." The guitar solo faded, and the voice of a D.J. now blared.

"You just heard The Eagles, friends. You're tuned in to WMUT, Mute City's home for rock and roll," The D.J. said; his obnoxious tone enhanced by the car's stock speakers. Frank grunted and lowered the volume on the radio.

"I hate these guys, always interrupting the music with their garbage."

The D.J.'s voice was now merely a whisper. "We here at WMUT would also like to extend our sympathies for those involved in the Kent State tragedy, which took place this very day last year."

Turning his head, Scudder opened his eyes, staring at the radio. Frank rolled down the driver's side window, spit out the cigarette stub between his lips, and rolled it back up quickly.

"Those kids had it coming," Frank said.

Scudder suddenly twitched with pain, as if he had been hit with that arrow from hours ago. "What did you say?"

“I said they had it coming. I mean, they were taunting the cops for Christ’s sake. What was the fuzz going to do, turn the other cheek? Each one deserved their bullet, I know it.”

Scudder’s arm shot forward with the strength of a juggernaut and cracked his hand across Frank’s cheek. The force of the blow slammed Frank’s head into the driver’s side window, leaving an oval of grease where his unwashed hair had been.

“What the hell is your rag, Scudder?” Frank said, running a careful hand along the side of his head.

Scudder answered with a gaze and a few curt words. “You know nothing.”

Frank turned away from Scudder’s unnerving stare and focused back on the road, barely visible in the dust. He dug his hand into his jacket pocket and found the feather that the Apache had given him. Rolling down the grease-stained window, he threw it out into the winds. The feather circled gracefully in the storm before being spirited away.

“Good luck, my ass.” Frank said.

Penny’s Diner was abuzz with the cacophony of metal spoons clanking against coffee cups and sizzling steaks. No conversation amongst the patrons was made, even as Frank and Scudder entered, caked with brown splotches all over their clothes. A young girl at the register smiled at the pair and retrieved a matching duo of menus.

“Welcome to Penny’s. Just sit anywhere and I’ll be right with you.” The girl said, motioning toward the sets of padded booths. Frank took off his sunglasses and stared at the girl’s chest, also regarding the name tag. “Thank you, Mary. You best hurry, though, we’re hungry devils.” Frank flashed his yellow teeth in a grin and gave Mary a slight cuff on her behind. She smiled once again, this time anxiously, and moved toward the kitchen. Frank sat down at a booth perpendicular to the register. Scudder followed suit, removing his jacket. Mary approached their booth and set the menus down on the table.

“What can I get you gentlemen?” Her voice was small and cautious. An older man wearing a stained white shirt walked out of the kitchen. He stood next to Mary and whispered inaudibly into her ear.

“Don’t worry about it, Dad. I’ve got it taken care of.” Mary said, resting a delicate hand on the man’s broad shoulder. Mary’s father nodded, moving back toward the register. Mary ran a finger through her citrine hair, retrieving a pen.

“Give me a Frisco melt, extra cheese.” Frank said.

Scudder pushed his menu away, saying nothing.

The door to the diner swayed open. A thin man in an army jacket walked inside, his black boots scuffing up the polished floor. Frank noticed the small gleam of a medal on his jacket. It had a golden trim in the shape of a heart and a purple background. Walking past Frank and Scudder's booth, he sat down at a table with his head in his hands, occasionally trembling.

"Your order should be up in a few minutes." Mary scooped up the menus. Frank moved toward the inside of the booth and propped his legs on the seat. "So, did you want to explain why you smacked me in the car?" His voice was seeping with ire.

Scudder looked down at the table, diverting his eyes away from Frank's temper.

"How about you start explaining things, Mr. Mute, because I can't seem to crack open that dumpster you call a head."

The thin man got up from his seat. Other customers in the diner began to turn their heads in Frank's direction.

"Can you even understand what I'm saying? Am I speaking gook-a-nese or something?"

Reaching into his jacket pocket, the thin man began to twitch again, muttering incoherently.

"I don't even know your first name, man. All you told me was 'Scudder, Scudder, Scudder.' Do you even know it? Did someone fire a bullet into your brain?"

Since most of the customers were looking at Frank's outburst, they failed to notice the revolver the thin man was brandishing in his hand. The brown wind outside seemed to scream out a warning.

Slamming his fists into the table, Scudder began to sob. He dug a hand into his back pocket, retrieved a wallet, and threw it at Frank.

The thin man aimed the revolver at Mary's father, who was still behind the register. "Open up the box, or I start lighting up you and the customers."

Waves of panic washed over the customers. Frank ducked under the table of the booth in a fit of newfound fear.

The thin man ignored Scudder's continued sobbing and held the gun to the temple of Mary's father. "I've got enough ammo to bring down Hanoi. Open up the goddamn box!"

Mary ran to her father's side, moving her arms around her father in protective hug. "Please don't hurt my dad."

The cash box of the register opened with a sharp chime. Mary's father stared at the thin man, his forehead sunk in with horror. "Take what you need."

"Number one, number one," The thin man muttered.

He ran his other shaking hand through Mary's hair, causing a few cuts on her scalp due to his long fingernails.

"Don't worry, honey, I won't hurt your dad." The thin man spoke the truth. He lowered the gun from the head of Mary's father. The thin man, however, thrust his emblem of death forward into Mary's breast and let the air escape. Garnet blood splattered onto the money in the cash box. Whipping the handle of the weapon against the forehead of Mary's father, the thin man gathered up the cash and ran out of the diner, firing his revolver wildly toward the heavens. A crowd of customers quickly began to converge around the unconscious father and his wounded daughter. Frank continued to stay underneath the table, his body shaking and his eyes closed. Scudder stood up and shoved his way through the horde. Kneeling down, he lowered his arms underneath Mary, cradling her. Scudder began to carry Mary towards the door of the diner, and finally outside. The storm bellowed in a dirge.

With the speed of a forest fire, the El Camino sped down the weather-beaten road. The radio played no music as Frank edged his hand against the steering wheel. He ran a hand across the empty passenger seat looking for a cigarette. Looking out the window, Frank saw the reservation way off in the desert. But something was different. Something felt different. Pulling over, Frank jogged toward the tents to the north.

Panting, Frank approached the Apache, who was watching the azure sky. "You come back," The Apache said.

"Has the strongman been here?" Frank said.

The Apache lifted his rattan, pointing in the direction of the sun. "Your friend, he disappear with the black blizzard." In the direction the Apache pointed, however, there was one last message. It was the cactus, but this time the arrow had pierced right through the center. Frank looked down at the wallet Scudder had thrown at him in the diner and opened it. All that was inside was an Ohio driver's license labeled 'Jonathan Scudder' and a folded photograph of a brown-haired girl. There was a message written on the back, which read:

To Jonathan,

Wherever you go, let this remind you that I will always adore you.

With love,

A Lack of Color

Matt Albrecht

The journey home took 18 years, and though I had never met my home, it was the place of my ancestors, the place we all secretly longed for whenever the future's innovations failed to bring us solace. She had been named Earth. The Big Blue. A rebellious mural of color that dared to defy the void. The most beautiful and mysterious creature I had never laid eyes on.
No.

The second most.

Certain that I was no longer dreaming, I opened my eyes after a long slumber, a slumber that had carried me across the universe after an eternity of waiting. When I looked to the window and still did not see her, I took up a nearby magazine to distract myself, my anxiety mounting. The girls within were so incredibly vibrant, shining brighter than the twin suns of the world I left behind, their teeth white as heaven. The sight of them deflated me, reminded me of my absurd solitude.

But today was different. An outlandish smile appeared on my lips as I thought of the girl who had been waiting all of her life just to meet me, the boy of her dreams that she only knew from a mountain of letters. I carried a picture of her, always. I revealed it and gazed at it with such longing, her smile stubbornly imprinted into the photograph and into my mind's eye, she seemed to me a creature of such beautiful defiance. She loved me, although we had never met.

I flew through the stars at near-blinding speeds, whites and yellows and reds streaking past me. The view filled me, satiating my appetite and my lust for color. When earth crept into view, my senses were drunk with delight. No picture could do her justice, this splendid heaven of blues and greens with watercolor clouds. It was so much more marvelous than the planet I left behind, so barren, that desert world with its people so impossibly cold. I hardly considered myself a resident of that faraway planet anymore, because my mind and my hopes were on earth.

Finally, my body joined them.

She wrapped her arms around me with the passion of a mother embracing her son after he had returned safely, against all odds, from a war between

worlds. I breathed in her scent, intoxicated by her peach perfume. When she stepped back, my eyes filled with her cinnamon skin. On my planet we hid and covered ourselves from the sun. Her world clearly revered it. She had a foreign beauty like the earth itself, and I could even see the earth in her eyes with all its mystery.

She took my hand and we raced through a foreign land with smiling people around every corner, all willing to stop and greet each other just to see a smile. Great weather we're having, said a grinning man to me. It is, I said, a bit hesitant but smiling and smiling. The sky was as clear as could be. Such a lovely fountain, said a smiling woman to me with a nod. Yes, I said, my expression a mirror of hers. The fountain stood at the center of the town, an epicenter of bronze and concrete and water in harmonious interplay. The statue atop seemed alive with such unrelenting bliss, its admirers sharing in whatever secret that statue held, somehow always at peace no matter the weather.

We dined at a little place hidden in the winding streets, away from the never-ending crowd and the sunlight. When we sat, her smile relaxed and became dreamlike. She shed her light jacket and breathed a great big sigh. She was just out of reach at the opposite seat of the table, enough so that we could no longer hold hands. We locked eyes instead, and I saw in her a strange sort of weariness, one always absent in the pictures of her still burned into memory. You're beautiful, I said. She offered a fleeting grin. Let's eat, she said. I nodded in agreement, even though I hardly had an appetite.

You must try this, she said. She ordered for me from a menu I could not read containing the names of food I had never tasted. The first plate was delicious, and so too were the second and the third. You'll like this, she said. The dessert gave me pleasant chills. She was always right.

We lived together in a single bedroom apartment, our walls adorned with paintings of the world I left behind. She had bought these paintings for me, with these tiny oil-painted figures in an endless trek through uncharted deserts, so that I would not forget my home, and I pretended to be grateful. But despite the unwelcome memories that the desert brings, the orange hues of the landscape basking in the orange sunset filled the room with warmth, the sort of warmth that resonated when we lay naked in each other's embrace.

And when we made love, I drank her like Riesling, trying with such gentle earnest to hide my enthusiasm as my vision blurred, always drinking under the pretense that I was somehow more refined than the man who drank with unabashed vigor from a keg of cheap beer for all to see. Each damning drop fell from the bottle and drowned my spirits just like they did for the man

whose taste was less refined but whose thirst was shared by wine drinkers and beer drinkers and nondrinkers alike.

We returned to the world, the air warming and the smell of the sea all around us. Such lovely weather, said an elderly man to me. Yes, I said, grinning. There seemed fewer people out. When we passed the fountain in the town's center, we saw that a huge black tarp had been placed over it and a sign read CLOSED FOR RENOVATION. It's not unusual, she said, preempting my inquiry. But to me it was unusual, the sudden absence of a sight I had witnessed everyday for months. Nothing is beautiful forever, she said, but the words meant nothing to me. I'm hungry, I said, and we returned to our café hidden deep in the city.

We ate and we ate and we ate, the empty plates between us too many to count in passing. I looked at her across the gap. She looked wearier and ate with a sort of distrust for the food. The way she lowered her glass to the table slowly, regarding it with peculiar pensiveness, confused me, as if she saw something that I did not. When her eyes flicked to mine, I was startled by how much older she looked, but I laughed it off nervously. She smiled but seemed more distant. I hungered. Try some dessert, she said, pointing to a small plate near me. It was delicious; it was unfilling.

We returned to our bedroom, undressing the moment we stepped through the door, finding our way habitually to the bed even with our eyes closed as we kissed. The tiny figures in the paintings spoke to one another and sometimes crossed boundaries to one another. They watched me always with unblinking eyes, so I would give them an unforgettable performance. They would tell their children and their children would tell their children about how perfect our lovemaking had been, how real our passion. There would be no doubt for generations to come that we had made the right choice.

And when we made love, every action was another carefully crafted stanza in a flowery love song, crafted to near-perfection in a way that each pause created desire, and each belated breath, desperation. We were virgins every time we made love, somehow able to find ourselves forever fascinated with songs that we had played countless times together. But the acts were never a chore no matter how heavy the stanzas or how tired the chorus; we were like children at night being sung ad nauseam our favorite lullaby.

The cover had been removed from the fountain and its statue made brighter, but the water had been drained. I supposed this was due to the cold weather and the fact that so few people were around now to enjoy it, and though I tried to appear disinterested by the harmony lost, nothing escaped her earth-wearied eyes, made tired from something that I still could not see.

They drain it every year at this time, she said. The sight of the waterless fountain irritated me and left me starving. Let's eat, I said.

We dined one final time. You'll like this, she said, pushing a small plate towards me across the long table. I feel sick, I said. It was more than that, but I had no words to describe my true feelings. I had eaten so much and yet I had never been hungrier. It was this that made me uneasy, this bizarre emptiness combined with knowing that no matter how much I ate I would never be satisfied.

You just need some rest, she said, her smile so distant, so impossibly distant. My vision blurred. I could barely keep my eyes open. I felt so weak and thirsty and tired. My hands were cramping, my posture slouching. I stole one final look at the table before me, shocked at how many empty plates covered the distance. They seemed to stretch endlessly, a trail leading into an immeasurable distance. Let's get out of this place, I said, wanting urgently to make love again and forget about these barren plates.

We returned to our room and proceeded as always to the bed, never even speaking. After all, we had done plenty of that before we met. The eyes in the room watched us like cameras, demanding to know every detail of our nightly ritual, prying into our personal engagements without shame. The pictures made me self-conscious and hesitant of my every move. I had never before felt so uncertain, as if I had been asked to create a rainbow but I had forgotten all but the color orange.

And when we made love, I saw only this color, but to say I merely saw it is an understatement, an insult to that memory. The peach flavored lip gloss she applied liberally before our meetings would linger on my lips and it adorned my walls in all things orange. I saw her in every sunset and every falling leaf. The color consumed me. The slightest hint of it through scent or through taste brought me to the other side of universe, closer, but never quite reaching beyond the fringe where humanity resides. I could eat every peach, every fruit in the garden and still be hungry for a place unreachable in my lifetime.

The color had become too maddening for me; my walls were bare now. Fruit no longer satiated me. I turned to where the paintings had once been and saw only the shadows that the sun had cast permanently on the wall in perfectly empty squares. I could still vaguely remember the outlines of the tiny figures that existed in endless limbo. I had always tried to imagine the figures in the scene after, and there was a time when the power to imagine was in me. I had seen the figures leap from one picture to the next, sometimes meeting, always rejoicing, and never unmoving.

In my present state, however, I could only recall about the paintings how horribly they had clashed with my curtains and how I would never agree to have them up again.

I turned finally from the desert, turning towards what should have been a comforting bed, but it too was filled with memories of a distant unfamiliar world, a place no more attainable than the end of a desert frozen in time. My bed, too, was maddening. My head spun and my vision blurred and blurred. I turned back to the screen in front of me, my eyes slowly adjusting to the sight. I saw a dark canvas, colorless at first. Then, white dots streaked past me, rushing quickly to the edges of the window as I traveled through space.

But my brain knows better.

Through earth-wearied eyes, I turned and faced my empty bed, never again hoping to return home.

Winter

Samuel Samorian

Dry, fall the husks, silent with frozen veins
Below crows sitting on an aged fence –
The wood splitting from neglect.

Yields suffer from the seasons.
Mother's hands crack in the open air.
The children lie awake at night fearing snow,
As the small farm exhales desperation.

Father sits in his bare fields and
Imagines himself as a dry shell
Under the feet of soulless birds.

Winter's breath blows with great cruelty.
The man shudders.
Facing the light glowing from his home,
He stands, and the birds fly away.

New York #3 Ezra Pound, poet 1958

Daniel Cruz

going to the Met that October Saturday
Pound's photo from the Avedon show

Pound bared clean reduced to elements
a spent Odysseus after all the storms
hair flattened back
like a bombed village
his beard sprouting aimlessly like frightened birds
fleeing the cage in Italy Mussolini's faded voice the asylum
his neck like a turtle's
bared for the butcher preparing a stew
the wrinkles everywhere
a manuscript crumpled and tossed to the wire trash can
the rumpled shirt an unsealed envelope
the empty white sky
the tightly shut eyes as though waiting for impact
or, perhaps, a squeezing in of tears like a cracking dam

the chiselled black and white
sucking the color of the gallery away
the hugeness of the photo
swallowing me whole
in its matted perfection
like newly poured concrete
if the photo were a poem
the Imagists would have their platonic form

it struck me
the crushing screaming aching weight of poetry
the inevitable failure despite the devotion

and all the sacrificed bodies
the weight of misguided loves
the futility of it
like trying to decaramelize sugar
the photo reduced to a yellowing postcard

and yet
afterwards the Indian food
the breezy walk down to 19th Street
buses passing us by
as we munched chocolates from France
and talked of other things



Migration

Amanda Walsh

If I was your angel,
then you are a bird, spent,
going south for warmth,
instead of staying here, buried beneath blankets, the way
you should have.

When you breathe, when we sleep,
there are tiny, wind-up sounds from your heart,
like something is just beginning,
when it is really slowing down,
when it is impossible to tell the difference.

Omens

Sean R. Jensen

Eyelids pierce flame-shovel necklace lace, tied together with guitar strings strung like spider-webs across banisters and girders lining a yard beneath a ceiling in catwalks and dangerous paths for the adventurous.

Roller-skaters share their rhythms with the punctual ease of transfigured destiny-makers, reading circling logic texts, and writing down phone-numbers for potential sex victims.

A panacea could cure her fever—
grind flower-petals in a large stone bowl,
add drops of eagle-blood, and raptor talons,
cook in a sun-powered oven, and sift, sift,
transcend with the ingredients and their smell,
the aroma overtaking the punctuality and converting
the play into melody transfixed and ongoing.

Serve her and be done. Serve from a cylinder,
and carefully notice the flesh that perks with the
flavorful toxins coursing downwards. Notice her
veins and eyelids, and her returning color. Notice
her shoulders, as she moves for the first time in centuries,
and speak slowly, carefully, and tell her poems, and songs,
and soothe her, and soothe her from the coming blow of
noticing the window, and looking to the familiar moon
that is now . . .

“How long?” she asks.

“Sh, sh,” you must say, “rest.”

Delay the solution.

Your problem with cadavers

Emily Kingery

had nothing to do with the bodies.
You took the scalpel to the black cat
and peeled back each layer:

Here the stretch of tendon,
the fat of the thigh, the bright blue veins
deep beneath the matted fur.

The body was pink, preserved in acrid liquids,
yellow pools sloshing in a clear plastic bag,
stored in a box on the laboratory shelf.

You were an expert sharpening your tools,
clattering your tongs and knives, ready
to sculpt this cold thing,

this cat with no meow or rumbling purr,
lying on the tray like a turkey
pleased to be carved for supper.

Its intestine, as I mentioned,
may as well have been stuffed with chestnuts,
or mashed; a dash of salt, a pinch of rosemary.

Gravely, you dropped your tongs,
sick at the thought of our fleshy cat
on a dinner plate, flaps of slick fur for garnish.

You wanted every body kept in formaldehyde,
pinned, stiff and silent, incapable of leaping
from the tray to your imagination.

You were crouched in the bathroom
when the bell rang, an uneasy scientist
who left me to clean the tip of her blade.

Untitled

Robert M. Graff

this is my bloody nose
i go home, from siberia to suburbia
to put my two cents in the eyes
of a friend, so that he might
pay the toll
that the Irish inside me
says is due

this is the stain on my collar
soaked, blood blotched, my life
before i figured i could do
better. walked across the
backs of Friends, so that i might
make a Home
that my Mother says is
not my home

and i am a valve;
i come home to run dry of tears,
my Town an open casket with
one last look, so that i might
put these lives
Tradition-deep inside the ground
to erode, but never die.

Patrick's Bonfire

Samuel Samorian

I.
Flames begin slowly, unaware of their power
The birth of destruction –
Contained
Our eyes grow wide in awe of such beauty
The ocean of orange before us
Like tiny ships, small flecks of ash
Sail the voyage into oblivion.

II.
Back at home, I trace heavy
Swirls of burning wood through the rooms
To her clothes, her hair,
And I cannot help but
Think we are missing
Something great
Although, I find myself
Leaving it behind.

Other Beaches

Christina Gilleran

Photos of beaches swirl through our minds
like so many blue and amber postcards.
Thonged young women, handsome men
patrol the soft fine sands.
The matronly and large and unattractive
have the good sense to cover up with flounced skirts,
shawls and smartly designed wraps,
sensing that this is not really their paradise.

Belonging on the other beaches of America,
places where stepping gingerly
over patches of crabgrass and intermittent beer tabs,
half buried in dirt will bring you to rough brown
sand meeting black coffee water.
Sturdy women buzz in contented clusters
merging and receding like kaleidoscope patterns.
Children with plastic shovels and baggy
swimsuits shriek and fling runny globs
of sand with chubby sunburned arms.
They wear a crooked path in the sand,
panting and lugging sloshing
pails of water to and fro.
Serious child eyes intently
filling the murky moat
surrounding a crumbling sand castle.
Pungent wet dogs plunge
after sticks and balls,
elated to be an essential ingredient
in this chunky human-animal soup.
Up the rolling hill, at battered rough picnic tables,
a gaggle of well padded moms

are preparing to feed the masses.
Like noisy floral Botticellis,
floating about in their finest Wal-Mart,
strong dimpled arms pulling
dish after dish from icy plastic coolers
Blue stranded varicose veins,

silvery flashes of stretch marks,
vestiges of long ago pregnancies,
worn like mottled badges of courage.
Piles of Polish ham, mounds of creamy
potato salad, rainbows of wiggly jiggly Jellos
Invite a mad rush from the water to the feast.

Up the hillside they labor,
thin legged hairy-bellied men,
small drippy children with sand-
encrusted feet scamper past as if weightless.
Soft bottoms meet the hard plank seats,
flies buzz heavily, annoyingly near.
All verbalization has ceased, only slurping,
gulping and munching remain.
Cold green grapes burst like water
balloons between the teeth.
Beer cans pop open, Kool-aid gurgles
forth like a red waterfall.
Time pauses while bellies begin to strain
against their confines. A clumpy-haired dog sits
patiently with pleading eyes, emitting his wet dog smell.
Satiated men pat their own swollen
stomachs affectionately.
Some return to the lake to walk clumsily
through sea weeded depths, small water-cold
children clinging to their sun warmed backs.
Other men, like elephant seals, lay prone
upon grass and picnic tables, peering

from lazy half-closed eyes, feigning selfish sleep,
while Mothers clamp between their knees
squirming children, rubbing warm sun block onto sandy skin
Women quickly dispatch the strewn remnants of lunch.
The patient dog makes short work of his reward
The human herd now back the beach,
sleepy and sunglassed they lay
in twos, in couples, in partnerships
They share beach towels much too small.
muscular work-a-day arms
drape over feminine necks with comfortable ease.
Raspy, strong, fatherly fingers grasp

wifely, soft, motherly hands, knowing familiar bodies
lean, like fallen timbers against one another.
They watch their own creations at play,
lions and lionesses, eyes in sets of four
guard over splashing, yowling cubs.
Minds wander in time to childhoods and dreams

Suddenly strangeness appears upon the sand,
tanned, fit, firm and thonged.
The alert is sent out through the air.
Quietly, the women drift into a flock.
Nonchalantly they smooth windblown hair,
shuck sand briskly from their feet, adjust pinching elastic.
Gathering along the children's bumpy water route,
like voluptuous church bells, skirts brushing the sand,
several crouch low, gathering strewn toys,
Others stand regally, silhouetted against the sun.
Suspicion studded chatter bubbles overhead.
The lithe alien tosses her silky lemon hair
and dryly inspects the indigenous tribe.
She drags in a deep sigh, slings
her sleek designer bag over one sculpted
shoulder, then stumbles away up the weed tufted hill.

On the beach rounded arms
uncross and jaws unclench.
Lanky, freckled boys excitedly whoop
through gap-toothed grins,
trying to capture minnows in a broken Styrofoam cup.
Slapping noises announce the arrival of dusk's
swarming mosquitoes. A tired dog circles stiffly
searching for a space to sprawl. Eyes squint across the
glowing water, watching the sun escape the day.

Liquid Highway

Sean R. Jensen

diagonal conversations at electric speeds
jumping synapse-gaps intuitively
fleeing from gazes and
resolutions drafted hastily.
wind lines and jewels embossed at the forehead-point of helmets:
the manufactured third eye
stolen from a million-year bed
to reveal short-cuts and ease
answers of 'how are you,'
and 'goodbye,' leaving out
the cosmic love, assuming
cryptic cues of gesture will
be more than enough
to reveal heart-truths
even though rock-walls jaggedly
restrict old exits—
the looser paths of childhood
now lie eons from the destination,
backtracking to bifurcations and finding
earthquake damage: altered altitudes,
spikes, forests, blinking demonic lights,

beckoning whispers,
it was more simple and I
don't remember these trees casting
such elderly shadows—
maybe—

I could almost recall
a pre-history, and an
evening in Autumn,
and opening a towering screen door,
and breaking off
into a run.

Winter

Elena Haliczr

Spent breath, spent heart
built up, a rhythm for sighing.

A column of smoke is making its way to heaven.

In the interim between conversations I wonder what you're
doing this afternoon. Are you thinking about the blizzard
the year I was born?

It is my house you think of, sending a curling beacon to your attic that fills
with a lattice to shake at my entry, at what I destroy with my
clumsy touch.

There I know you have hidden a mild history of window gardening
tending to the leaves that unfurl, with a cloth to clear the dust, and a bottle of
water with which to spray a mist that came from your faucet, saying "now my
children will breathe again" thinking none but they will hear an anxious eye
turned towards the yards of strangers you are afraid to encounter without your
shoes on.

Your feet are bare and so white, as though you had spent hours watching them
in ice water, thinking of the sled dogs that might save your pulse

might prolong your life for those who need you living, thinking about the future
and a slow death by freezing,
or is it exhaustion?

“What does your own body look like in that mind of yours”
you ask me this, as though it weren't apparent, as I crawl
up the stairs rolling my eyes—twenty-five and still pretending I am a dog.

It is always held in the arms of my mother, where I am both stone still
and wan with sudden exhalation, the shock of my connection
to you, the woman who gave birth to me, leading to an instantaneous vision
of a field covered in snow, spread out for three cross-country skiers
one slightly ahead and attempting to maintain that distance.

The third skier is unidentified, ahead of the other two, she
slumps forward heavily on the cloud-forming air.

Of Jesus and his mother, there is always the question
of why she lets him go, and even in those countless paintings of him
as a lusty infant, why she didn't let go sooner, why she let
the body become a man at all?

I am thinking most about war, how it shapes my Joseph into a warrior
who believes in, most of all, his own body and the cutting of it into
a spartan column. How that line sits as a sharp light in his mind as he runs
eight miles alone every morning, becoming the solution
rather than an answer to his own questioning. How he ceases
to ask me what I think about when we both fall silent, and
how I am left to think of my mother cultivating her hush Araceae.

Loneliness is leaving minutes behind and not minding
seeing the future as lightning climbing the wall
without a single child in its clamor and crash
without a single ambition towards heaven.

She had to be an architect, to thus
 Measure all sides and angles, reduce it
To its lowest terms, breaking it down to
 Numbers. "Which stone from which quarry came?" I
Never asked, but was told it anyway.
 The definites she understood, constants,
Obscure letters substituted for work,
 For statements. The cold structure of stonework.

Arch and buttress and quieted chancel,
 The empty cinquefoils, and quickly through the
Tymanum – the Gothic principles she
 Saw, marching ahead outside, unimpressed,
While inside, beneath crimson glass, slowly
 I burned in fevered reds that pierced my chest.

Aunt Said

Roy Alame

Divorce was expensive,
Even back then.

The bill marked a date.

5/23/76

Even though the divorce began at

5/23/75

An ironic climax.

He took me away.
Flying toward the Golden Gate.
Plane pointing opposite,
The Lebanese bays.

I left

An impoverished Middle Eastern village.

Hand laid brick plains.

Where grapevines baked in the Arabic sun's rays.

I left from an open home,
To a makeshift apartment,
In the backroom of a laundry mat.
The only thing that separated us,
From the rented washers and dryers,
Was a bed sheet.

One twin bed

Was for our love to share.

One stove-top

For me to create my mother's dinners.

One back door...

One blacked-out window...

One of so many,

And two of nothing.

Words circulated around our village.
Of a man that had golden land.

Walked only to a golden well.
Nothing like ours.
Ate like Americans.
And drank like the novels.
Words passed through my thirteen-year-old hands.

Going on to fourteen.
He was fifty.
At fifteen I found myself.
Sleeping next to him.
Married.
Not allowed to scream,
Drive,
Speak,
Understand,
Or dream,
Just to work,
And rest a little too close.
Never daring to fall asleep.

He found that one stove,
Was inefficient to feed,
The both of us.
One sheet,
Couldn't possibly hold me in,
From running.
So we moved.

Moved into a one-bedroom apartment.
The same week
A grocery store went out of business.
Our home had one set of
Bedroom furniture with one couch.
He bought and fit
A grocery store worth of shelves.
That's how we slept for one year.

Later that year he opened a store.
Got rid of the metal stock
From the one-bedroom warehouse.
I preferred the tight feeling of importance.
Than visual emptiness
To mirror the way I existed.

Civil disobedience,
Broke to unrest,
Turned itself to war.
The Lebanese civil war.
Where beheading
Kidnapping
And dying, plagued the streets.
Too close to my family.
Their security.

I forced patience.
He didn't care.
There was no way
My three brothers
And eight sisters
And their kids
Were coming to this warless home
Under him.
So I gave him a divorce.

Didn't want the two homes.
I was going to move to Chicago.
And I hated New York.
Didn't need the five cars.
I didn't know how to drive.
And didn't care for traffic.

The lawyers we hired.
Seemed to hate each other,
More than we hated each other.
The judge couldn't stand their bickering.
I just thought it was embarrassing.

My lawyer got me nothing.
Just enough to pay for him.

Because he couldn't give me any kids,
I didn't feel any guilt.
Not when I left,
Nor when he died in '81.
Six years he survived,
Without me.
I lived.

My family passed all the eastern landmarks.
Passed New York.
Passed the mountains.
No more conflict.
No more East.
Nor more West.
We settled gently.
And for them, painlessly.
Somewhere in the middle.

I wake up. I sit up in my bed and remember this same scene of waking up and letting nature greet me from those same windows. My eyes struggle to open as I look above; blues and greens are blurred in the moving frame as the sun's light, bright yellow, pierces through the middle of the canvas and imprints itself on the wood-paneled floor. Dust particles float lazily, and the blinds flutter as the warm summer breeze welcomes me. It is always comforting to wake up this way, hearing the house noises of spatulas clanging on skillets, the low frequency hum of the washing machine, hearing the neighbors outside gossiping about the latest news and scandals, a dog barking—the smell of the bed I've slept in since I was six years old, seeing the fourth grade class picture still hanging on the wall in front of the bed, hearing a plane flying overhead, police and fire truck sirens outside. I am safe.

I enter the bathroom, rubbing my eyes with my knuckles, and flip the light switch. My feet touch coldness and feel the tiny tile squares underneath; I step onto the bathroom rug, a refugee camp for my soldiers, toes tracking across the bathroom floor, a white Siberian landscape. I twist and pull up the sink thing, resistance from a build up of calcium underneath its twisty handle. The water defrosts all the joints in my hands, steam rises to my face, the warmth soothing my bones. I reach for the bottle and prepare the daily ritual. You know, 30 seconds, just like in the commercial. Funny face and everything. I pour the mint colored liquid into the cap, throw it back and swish it around my mouth. It hits the tongue first:

Active ingredients:

Eucalyptol 0.092%
Menthol 0.042%
Methyl Salicylate 0.060%
Thymol 0.064

Inactive ingredients:

Water

Alcohol 21.6%
Sorbitol solution
Flavoring
Poloxamer 407,
Benzoic acid
Sodium Saccharin
Sodium Benzoate
FD& Green no.3

Something is funny. The little needles that perforate the inside of my cheeks and tongue, the victory of bacteria killed after their well rested night of incubation, the hint of alcohol escaping through my nose is absent. It tastes weak, watered down. The Listerine must have gone bad. Does Listerine even go bad? There's no expiration date.

I hear my dad in the hallway. After living with the same people for my whole life, I've acquired an ear to recognize who is in the hallway by their footsteps. My dad has loud, halfway abrasive, footsteps: thump thump thump. My mom has more delicate steps, light feathery touches, as if respectful to the floor. My sister's are hurried, nervous (well of course, she's a teenager at this time). My grandmother's are slow and planned, accompanied by the rubber stoppers stuttering across the floor from her walker, her back hunched over from osteoporosis. I am not sure about my Uncle's, he just moved in.

"Dad! Come here!" I call out with my face slightly turned towards the door and into the hallway, the taste of defeat in my mouth.

"What?" My dad walks up the doorway and takes a step in the bathroom.

"Does Listerine go bad?"

"Haha. No." I don't know if he laughed, but I would like to think he did.

"Well, this Listerine tastes, watered down or somethin'."

I look at my dad in the mirror off to the side; he hesitates, the moment unguarded, the seconds thrown off, a skip off of a scratched CD.

I hadn't seen my uncle since I was eight or so. I remembered him having jetblack hair, loving music (especially Led Zeppelin and Santana) and art, and being a gentle person. We talked over the phone a couple of times before he arrived.

"So Hide-chan, how is your guitar playing? Are you getting good? Have you met a girl yet? You haven't?

Oh, well I am sure when you do, Hide-chan, that girl will be lucky.”

The tone of his voice is a caring one, but with a protective invisible reserve surrounding it. I always liked talking to him, especially about music because he is the only one in my family who listens to rock; we were on the same wavelength. We talked about his paintings, what songs he’s been into recently, and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. I was reading it at the time for English class and we both fantasized about living in the woods, escaping society to live in an abandoned bus, hunting animals. So primitive! We would make sure not to eat those bad seeds though.

We greeted Mas at O’Hare Airport. We waited for him at the Seattle, Washington terminal. I saw my uncle in the distance, his figure grew as he walked up to us. I was surprised; his hair was now salt and pepper, he was shorter than I remembered, had wrinkles on his face, and he was now about 50 years old. After we all said hi, we started walking towards the baggage claim. With my family behind me, my uncle said,

“I’m sorry, Hide-chan.”

“Oh,” I got startled, “that’s okay,” glancing at his face and looking quickly back down at the floor. I knew why he came back, but I didn’t exactly know how to respond.

Before this second visit he’d lived with us because he had trouble drinking; and when he thought he could handle it, he called my mom again asking for money. My mom, being the supportive younger sister she is, offered him another chance to sober up, to get his life in order, I suppose.

I couldn’t fathom what my dad had just said. I pictured my uncle Mas carrying a martini glass filled with half water and half Listerine, taking it into his room, starting off the morning with a little kick, the only alcoholic drink that is approved by the American Dental Association.

My mom and dad made sure to get rid of all the alcohol in the house, but we never thought he would do anything like this. When my uncle first used that mouthwash, he must have struggled not to let some of the gurgle trickle down his throat, his tongue very aware of what it was tasting, awakening a past hobgoblin to wriggle its way up the bloodstream from the stomach up, taking a round trip on all the highways of his body as his heart pumps faster, his face now glowing, the little monster enlarging, getting a sufficient amount of nutrition from that one inactive ingredient.

Mas’s rehabilitation at my house lasted only a year.

During his stay, he occupied his time reading books, listening to music, taking walks, and painting. He even painted five works for me. The paintings were very vibrant, youthful—full of colors I would like to see everyday. I felt awkward around him; it was different then. The first two months, he was clean and began working at Costco's food court. It was nice having him around; he was like an older brother who we just adopted and took in. One of my family members would drive him to work since he didn't have a car. My mom suggested that he should go to Alcoholics Anonymous, but Mas said he could do without them (I don't think he and God were close.) We all monitored Mas and he seemed to be on his way to recovery, until he started to carelessly leave clues behind: the Listerine bottle, a Mike's Hard Lemonade paper coaster on the closet floor, his bicycle spotted by my mom at the local bar.

My grandma, sitting hunched over in the kitchen, responded, "What is he doing? What's wrong with that son?"

Mas would say in defense, "I'm sorry you think that, but I only drank a little. It's fine! I am doing much better than before. I promise I won't drink again. You can kick me out if I do! You can kick me out!" My mom told me that he was a liar.

Eventually his alcoholism intensified. I would hear muffled arguments from below my room, my mom and grandma yelling at him for drinking again. I can't remember a specific argument, but the same angry conversations would seem to last for months. I wanted to talk to Mas about his problems, but I was waiting for the right time. Knowing that a monster resided in the room next to mine became a burden in my mind. His habitual stink seeped under the crack of the door, and every time I passed his room, I would stop and look at the light underneath his door for what seemed like hours, hearing Pink Floyd's "The Wall" or Bob Dylan, and hesitantly continue into my room, closing the door behind. My mom started going to meetings for people with alcoholic family members. I tried talking to my mom, too. I don't know if I even talked to her either. She soon started losing hope for her brother, and eventually let him go.

My 17-year-old cousin, Dylan, came to visit my family and Mas during winter break. He hadn't seen his dad in a while since his parents were divorced, so it was a nice reunion for the both of them. We were sitting on the couch:

Mas and Dylan were sitting next to each other while I was on the other side. Mas reminisced while Dylan played video games.

“Remember when we were high? Oh man, that was fun, man,” said Mas to Dylan.

“Yeah,” Dylan replied, “I was cold in the room so I said, ‘Mucho frio! Mucho! Mucho! Mucho frio!’” They both laughed hysterically, Mas drinking, a beer in his hand, me silent.

Mas then said to me, “Remember, Hide-chan, when we talked about living in the woods? I would still do it man. Man, that would be the life, being with nature and away from everything, man.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” I made sure to sound excited still, as if this dream might come true, to fit in with their joy. If he wasn’t drunk, he might have caught the veracity of my tone, he might have seen me making a fist, my eyes never connected a punch into his eyes, or anyone’s for that matter.

It is seldom that my dad is angry; he is a very quiet man who enjoys solitude and walks in the woods. Emerson would have liked him. The last event that sent Mas home was when he got drunk, bought a car, drove it home while he was still drunk, and both my parents happened to be home. My mom told me, “Dad yelled at Mas, I mean really yelled. Dad’s had enough of it. I’ve had enough. Grandma’s had enough. Mas is lucky that your father was nice, letting him stay here and recover. But now I don’t know what to do with him anymore...He doesn’t want help.”

I don’t remember Mas leaving at all, but he has called our house many times after returning to Seattle, asking for money. I listened to my mom talking on the phone.

“Sorry, I gave you a second chance. I can’t help you, you can only help yourself now. Goodbye. I am going to hang up now...Goodbye.” click

She places the phone on the receiver, looks at me with a tired expression, “He has to learn to be independent. I can’t have him back or he’ll never learn. He’ll just depend on me again. Huh. I can’t believe I sent him money all those years when he said he was getting better. I fell for it. Always lied, always will.”

I wanted to say something back to my mom, but I couldn’t think of anything. A shiver abruptly grabbed hold of my hands, its cold fingers intertwining with mine. I went up stairs and went past the vacant room, sat on my bed, and I gazed out the open window, hearing the noises outside, everyone still moving. I closed the window in frustration. I was nineteen at the time.

The last time Mas called, my mom didn’t want to pick up; she was done.

He called a second time soon after, I let it ring three times, I told my mom that I'd answer it:

"Hello?"

"Oh, Hide-chan? Is that you? How are you? I am calling from my friend's phone, my cell phone service was cut off. How are you?" He was slurring a little, the last syllables of each word tripping over the ones in front.

I said, "I'm fine. What are you doing now?" I didn't want to sound happy.

"Oh you know, man...how's guitar? Are you still playing?"

"Yeah, I'm still playing," I wanted to sound straightforward.

"Do you have a girlfriend yet?"

"Nope, not yet."

"Oh, well that's alright, you'll find someone soon. But don't get the troubled ones," he laughs. I tried to laugh back. Resist.

I get to the point, "Yeah, so do you have job now? What's going on?"

"Oh yeah, I have a job as a bartender."

I pause. I try to comprehend what he just said.

I let out a little laugh (I think I really did, but not for his benefit) and asked him, "Isn't that...wh...why are you a bartender?"

"Oh. Well, it's great. I get to meet new people and, uh, have conversations with them. It's great, man, meeting new people."

I then told him before I hung up, "Well I want to say that I still have hope for you. You can still get your shit together, Mas." With urgency I said, "You know that right?"

"Thank you, Hide-chan." We ended our conversation. My comment felt out of place. I didn't believe it, but I felt like I needed to say it, as if that glimmer of hope would reach into the depths of Mas, my hand pulling him up towards salvation, the only confrontation I had with him.

I now look at the paintings he gave me. I hold the black charcoal picture filled with images and messages, against the background of abstract shapes and white space, spelling "Loop Chicago" with the "O" and "P" suggesting a woman's breasts. The messages said:

To Hideaki

I hope you meet, not hope, you will meet a nice one.

I mean that you'll meet someone to really love forever

4/26/03 Mas

Did he think that love was the answer? He must have been listening to the Beatles.

My mom has told me that he is homeless now and on the streets somewhere. She said, "Supposedly he's homeless. But who knows, with him." In fact, he just called. We didn't pick up. I always wonder what he thought after being fired (it's safe to say) from his bartender job, not being able to pay his rent. I can see him now in this brisk fall weather, on a street corner painting after what he had, chasing the colors he used to see, yearning to be awake, now inactive in his new life.

On the Loathsome Manifestation of Books

Addison Hart

I am a bookish kind of person by nature—a bibliophile, you might say, or even an antiquary. Stepping into an expansive library filled with an abundance of volumes (particularly old ones) is the truest delight I can imagine, and certainly the only one I am able to achieve with anything like ease. You might often find me surrounded by shelves, cloaked in them, as though by a forest, obscured in the dim of the countless million leaves of a thousand-thousand trees. I am drawn especially to dead writers, and they are easy to find. What is the world, I sometimes muse, but a garden for dead men? Well, decent people should not concern themselves with that, and generally I do not. I am concerned rather by the vastness of small books.

I think I once saw a collection of the poems of Thomas Gray that greatly exceeded one volume in size—perhaps there were even three or four in all. I mention this peculiarity because earlier in that same week I had been given an attractive, thin green book entitled *Elegy* written in a country churchyard and the complete poems of Thomas Gray, sparsely illustrated with selected engravings by the hand of Thomas Bewick—evidently those few such images which had been discovered not to contain the dreary visage of a pastoral suicide, a starving blind man, or a poacher caught in his own trap. All in all, this collection contained some 33 poems and this in only sixty-eight pages. His verse translations likewise were by no means large in number. To what strange agency, then, could the multiple volumes of the other Gray be attributed? I knew not. In my haste to find the works of Sir Thomas Browne on a nearby shelf, I neglected to look.

I wondered later if maybe I had dreamed that larger Gray or that perhaps this was another Thomas Gray altogether, and one who had written many more poems, and was only remembered in old books.

I had not noticed on the spine any such title as *The Gratuitously Annotated Poems of Thomas Gray, or even The Engravings of Thomas Bewick, with poetry by Thomas Gray*. I merely saw *Gray: the Poetry*. Why this simple incident came later to haunt me even to my waking hours, I cannot say, though one thing is certain. Numbers terrify me; the higher a digit's value, the more abominable and obscene it seems. Numbers have no direct significance in reality itself—they exist only as an abstract concept. But as that abstract, they represent such powerful immensity as to cowl my very thoughts, like the Great Pyramids of Giza reduced to a drone of mathematical symmetry. I have awoken sweating from nightmares about the number one billion. That is a number I just do not want to deal with in any context.

But what could have been done to Thomas Gray that would so greatly enhance his poetic oeuvre? What arcane perversion of the natural order had resulted in this mystical bloating effect, this numerical horror? Who could have loved him to such an extent as to have expanded beyond all of the devices of rational human comprehension his admittedly somewhat mediocre output? (Was it Walpole?) Surely this was the work of some madman, or a bookseller deeply embedded in his own avarice.

This was not the first such instance I had observed of posthumous literary multiplication. In former days, the market was quite overpopulated by thin volumes, stretching out for every possible groat the very thinnest of texts. You can still find to this day old editions of Dickens with *David Copperfield* in a set of three volumes, and although my own copy of Fielding's *Jonathan Wild* has only about 150 pages, I have seen some printings with three times that number. Sometimes this expansion was for the sake of portability, I will allow. Other times, I fear, it was simply for the enterprise of material gain. Even today, book publishers are just as vindictively evil, although they seldom need to split one large volume into six smaller ones in order to turn the same profit. It is merely the case that they print the large volume with the best quality paper in a fat glossy hardcover edition, sold for a price higher than that which you might ask for in exchange for your soul.

Dr. Johnson's essay on *The Multiplication of Books* tells us only of worthless writers who devour the words of other men, spewing them out in a gasp as did the vast beastly fish of Jonah, and placing them thus upon the barren lap of the unsuspecting reader. Washington Irving, in *The Art of Book-Making*, warned of the same atrocity, and dreamed of thieves wearing books, their garments shining with the radiance of medieval illuminations, and, pasted upon their foreheads, dictionary definitions, and for trousers, I suppose, Leigh-Hunt and Cowley, and on their heads hats made of Xenophon and Trismegistus.

But what can be more appalling than this ever-flowing overabundance of the same books, repeated in form countless times, drawn out and magnified to degrees unspeakable? It is of the cruelest nightmares, this thing of Gray, this book spiraling down the rungs of its own appointed shelf, splitting like an atom from one volume to a second and on to a third, as Bewick's hapless children claw vainly at the pages in their anxiousness to escape a world populated by monochrome cathedrals and cattle. In my own dream, what did I see but a compendium of Gray's works in thirty-three volumes, one for each of his poems, and an edition of the Bible broken down into 31,174 books, containing within each a solitary verse? This sea of words is immense and multiplied thousands of times over, only to be recopied and reset and resold and re-shelved in perpetuity. The nightmare books of 70 times 7,000 volumes strangle my rest, and I awake only with a cold sweat and the desire to sell my tiny, pusillanimous Gray to someone untainted by the awful shadow of a single word.

The Near Miss, Over My Shoulder

Danielle Wheeler

We are talking about car crashes.

Last summer, the near miss- metal on metal, sick screeching, me at the wheel and the three girls in the back would spin, our hands against the dashboard or just a sudden compression of windshield and faces, blank in less than a second of shatter. But no, it didn't happen, it was a near miss, and it's hysteria- the girls can do nothing but giggle in my backseat, moments before sure of our death, the swoop of a fast black jeep coming from nowhere. I did nothing to prevent the crash, consciously, it was only seconds and a subconscious rotation of the wheel, reflex, and we jerk and miss, black gleams away. I laugh too; it wasn't real.

Now, last night: I am alone in the apartment, and it is late and quiet in our building. The key turns and rattles. I jump, splay on the edge of the bed, my knees bent under me; my face trying to look disjointed. I am going to play dead- dead from a mysterious poison, maybe. I roll my eyes back; stick my tongue out; gruesome. It is quiet for a few minutes, rustling, lights turn on, the sink runs.

TJ comes out and I wait, eyes closed. Silence. But my sides shake; I can't contain my smiles and the gig is over. A pillow hits the back of my head.

This is how the conversation began: I am sitting with the only girlfriend I see regularly, Katie. We are comfortable companions and have walked several blocks, at night, shivering, laughing, glancing over our shoulders at nothing and shadows, to eat before a movie at the cheapo theatre.

I am at one end of the booth; we stare out the window, picking at our food, oddly silent. Two girls our age come in, laughing. We both turn from the dark window for a second, and Katie smiles.

"Well, we have been really quiet for awhile!"

I smile too, my face caught in the reflection on the glass. She stretches her arms, her reflection comes into focus, she yawns.

"I'm sitting here, and I'm having weird thoughts."

"Ha." I slurp from my huge Styrofoam cup. "What do you mean?"

"Like, what if someone came inside, right behind you, with a gun?" Food in my mouth. "Yah."

"If someone was shot. You are in First Aid, right? You would know what to do?"

"Ha."

She looks over my shoulder at the door, and stares.

"I think about this stuff a lot, lately."

The newspaper is on the table, open next to our sandwiches, and inside somewhere there are two shootings, and last week a robbery at 8 o'clock at night on a Wednesday right in my building. A revolver and three men, and three men down the street, and I would have been coming home right then if I hadn't skipped class that night.

"I don't know" how I would act in that situation.

"Yeah, I have never been in one, at all, before."

"Well, you might be one of those people...it just clicks into place, and it is instinct. It's all instinct. You know? I think I would be."

"Yeah."

Five kids, years ago, in the summer, the tracks next to flat short fields behind our Grandparents back yard in Davis Junction:

This was our favorite place to play. The rhythm, thunder was how we feel asleep at night, the whistles part of dreams in the spare room full of cousins.

We were warned constantly of the trains, appearing out of nowhere; what if our shoelace was stuck in the spikes? Was it possible to be trapped, frozen, under the barreling metal?

I was always looking behind me, as if we couldn't see the train coming from far in the flat distance. I rehearsed the scene: steam and brakes, I would pull my brother seconds before he was flattened, I would be the heroine.

I don't tell Katie the memory.

We keep looking at the parking lot lights, the cars. She has had several near-death experiences, one involving a runaway horse and trees that flashed by her head, blurring; she was small on its back, racing through a forest, out-of-control. And she remembers feeling rational and still, completely at the mercy of Hurricane the horse, gripping his back and silent, and finally he stopped and finally she slumped off the back of the big horse, tiny quiet Asian girl falling to the grass, jumped up, and was fine.

"Scary, and you weren't...screaming the whole time, or something?"

Shakes her head. I bet she had big eyes, though. That is a look of hers I have often seen.

"I just knew I had to hold on."

Two guys, also our age, come in; I only hear the bell of the door and see their blurred reflection.

Katie watches them, picks at her veggie sandwich. I watch her.

“Or are we just numb to these things? Maybe because nothing big has ever happened to us. Though almost dying is somewhat big... it isn't really the same as being shot at, or something.”

“I don't know.” She looks up. “I have fallen to pieces over small things.”

I nod. “It is the big things that are motionless, unreal...you know, detached.”

“Yeah. I don't want to be tested, but I know that awful things will happen, we can't be lucky forever. God ...I wonder how it will be.”

The near miss: We are reminded of that time; she was in the back seat. though it is insignificant in that it will happen again and has happened to anyone in that multitude of traffic; that metal-on-metal, or worse collisions, are often much worse and terrible than it was for us.

A day later: It smells like exhaust; I am as far back as the passenger seat can go. Only midsections and shopping bags are visible, opening the passenger sides, the lot constantly emptying and filling. Bored. The old game: playing dead in the parking lot. I cock my head unnaturally, bend the neck, stick my tongue out; gruesome. My eyes roll back into my head. Maybe a minute passes; I break the pose to peek out the right window and then quickly back down, reassume; even more gruesome. I hear the key, a break in the exhaust smell, cold air blasts, then silence. I am still holding my breath. A moment, then Diane Rehms voice and we are pulling out of the parking lot. A candy bar hits my lap. I un-pose, and stretch.

We drove “home” to my parent's house. No near misses, the way is almost deserted always and long, flat, so easy country-road that neither of us thinks about driving; no tense knuckles on the wheel. An hour or so, relaxed, and we are in my kitchen.

It is a Sunday morning; there is a grey cardinal on top of the pine tree outside the kitchen window. Inside I am drinking coffee, it feels early, at the counter with my mom and watching gossip shows while I try to get my laptop to work; my father comes in and talks about computers, trying to help me, always.

“I am looking...for a cord, (some more computer language)...Okay, be right back, I think it should work.” He huffs and marches through the house, opening drawers; always energy.

My brothers come upstairs for muffins, Jacob looks for bacon, nodding good morning, tall and quiet, always.

Josh comes up slowly, smiling though I can't really see his eyes behind his dyed hair; the youngest brother, always charming. He offers to make eggs or bacon, newly domestic since Jacob and I moved away. He and mom are special friends; he makes fun of her bed hair and she giggles, swats at him. Her lungs.

Small breathing alien tissues, or black hungry cells, or whatever a tumor is made of, began to quietly grow in my mother's lungs years ago. I was 17 when she told me about them the first time, and I only remember driving to my retail job all summer, a long drive to the nearest town through flat land, and imagining them the same type of tar that I drove on, black and thick, but growing. Obsidian, black hole, reaching for breath, our futures. I wondered and waited and was silent, and we all stayed calm.

Later named, soothingly, "benign," I stopped thinking about them. Did they shrivel away, no more sticky tendrils? I believe she smokes much less now, though it is impossible for anyone to judge, as she never ever smoked in the house and I never, even as a child when she had a pack a day, smelled the sweet Marlboro smoke on her unless we hugged.

I am 22 the second time they have been found, during what secret excavations and quiet routine X-rays I have never known about, maybe monthly she lay on a cold metal table and submitted to the wonder of unnatural (is cancer really unnatural?) possibilities and rays searching for a void, a thickness. Or maybe they are white, the cells, translucent bright pulsing.

How could I not know? I felt the air at home when I visited last, the waves like electronic feedback, pulsing through our kitchen the way the TV, ever present, and microwave, our blood the silent airwaves of understanding. Also, my dad cannot keep any news from me. We all confide like whispering school-girls. Again, benign. Thank God. Luck.

Dad comes upstairs and we fuss about the computer, he runs up and down the stairs several more times while my mother and I pick at our nails.

I drink some more coffee and the TV is louder, there is no bacon so Josh takes the muffin to his room; the cardinal flew away.

Seven years ago: Eighth grade, age 15. Standing at the mirror with Jen, who was tall and bony and perfectly Irish looking, which all the boys I liked found amazing and enthralling.

We were the only two girls left in the locker room; it felt cozy and quiet, after volleyball practice. It took us longer to leave and go to the high school football game down the street, both of us being incredibly self-conscious and also both having long hair that needed a lot of brushing post-shower,

re-brushing, and pony-tail holders before it could be revealed to the 9th grade boys upstairs at basketball practice, in front of whom we had to make the long walk down the gym post-primping while they, we knew and hoped, stared and fell in love with how cute we looked after practice.

This love was more likely to be in Jen's favor. She was good at volleyball, and this made her even more popular. I was very, very bad at volleyball, and essentially frightened of any type of sport, but I kept on playing because that is what you (if you were a junior high girl with any hope of boyfriends) had to do, and I knew it.

We showered and began the routine, the locker room quiet and empty, both of us nervous, puckering our lips in the mirror for the boys at the basketball court and the boys we hoped to see later at the football game. We were really complex. My hair was long and dark, near to my waist, and thickly wavy. I hated it; out of control.

I decided, smartly, to speed up the hair ordeal by flipping my wet head under the hand-dryer. I bent over for about five minutes, then, satisfied with what I hoped would be beautiful soft waves, flipped my head up and forcefully into the metal hand dryer.

I heard a metallic gong in my ears, and a blast of absolute stunned quiet shock. The instant realization, you feel submerged; I was aware in that weird perception of accident almost before it even happened. In seconds I was nearly covered in blood and Jen was so impossibly white, staring at me with the brush in her hand, I thought I must have hallucinated. I sat down on a bench and told her to get the school nurse upstairs, It was okay., just a cut, I felt the opening at the same spot I usually fixed my ponytail, it was only about 2 inches, relax, I'm okay!

I can remember that oddly still feeling, like swimming, and I felt a calm that I have only experienced a few times since. Head wounds bleed a lot, though, and I know the nurse must have been horrified to find a student quietly sitting on the locker room bench, holding the back of her head, covered in blood.

I felt very dumb, got a few staples in the back of my head, blushed at the handsome ER nurse who called my hair "luxurious" and didn't shave any of it out of respect for its wildness. Jen walked to the football game, her skinny legs shook the whole way.

April, half a year ago: At the final bend, my mom and TJ and I stand where we have been waiting for nearly an hour. We are five feet from the finish line. Jacob really wants to make it to State; he hasn't been able to eat the entire weekend I have been home visiting.

I cannot judge if he is quieter than usual; he is a silent boy, all grins, quietly fixing something, in my perennial memory.

Never any chatter or whining; one of the many ways we are opposite.

Jacob is three years younger than I am. He dwarfs me now, nearly 6'3", though much thinner, jauntier, than is healthy. In track and field, his friends holler from the stands "Auschwitz" when he rounds the long track, his legs like his hair bouncing like a runner from the 70s.

I like the way he looks running; I am proud of his long, cool hair and his leaps over hurdles.

We can finally see Jacob round the track. There are huge hurdles right before the finish line, maybe five in a row. My father is at the top of the stands with his camera.

I can see Jacob's shaggy hair bouncing towards us.

He is in the lead at the hurdles, neck in neck with one other, and we are screaming. At the final hurdle, his hair is up and flying, his knees almost to his chin, face almost furious, and his arms rise like brown wings. He is in the air, perfection.

And then the hurdle is flat.

On the ground with heavy force. We hear his chin hit the black.

It is over and quiet. It lasted one second, maybe no seconds.

This is quick and vivid; my mother's knuckles in mine are the only sensation, I hold her hand but I feel inhumanly calm and wise. Cold. He is fine, I tell her. Jacob pulls his knees and muscles under brown skin up like an animal; slow and unfolding he moves across the finish line.

My mother breaks and runs from us to the tent at the end of the field to convince him that he is concussed or broken, neither of which turn out to be the case, and we ride home silent in the family van, the country roads dark through the window.

Back to the restaurant, with Katie: the suspended present. I am still staring out the window, changing focus from my reflection to the shadows under the streetlight.

"I didn't feel anything when Jacob fell."

She nods.

"Is that calm inhuman?"

Someone else comes in, behind me. She glances up.

"How could it be?"

I take another drink, play with the straw. "My mom always told me to be a nurse. She says the calm is inherited, from her and her mother."

I take the plastic knife and slice imaginary skin on the table top; Maybe a

surgeon?

“You have to be calm when you are making incisions.”

“Watching a heart beat...”

Slice.

“Saving a baby! Like from a speeding train.”

Stitch up the incision.

“Pulling a Lego out of my brother’s mouth, under the piano, when he was two. His face turned back into a normal color and he coughed.”

The girls behind us get up to throw their trash away, linger to sip their soda. I use the knife to cut my sandwich in half.

“Trying to help your Dad when he has chest pains” Suddenly bending over the countertop after dinner, alone with his face.

They leave and it is quiet.

“Yeah.”

The window is no longer hypnotizing; the movie is almost ready to start and we need to leave, and the lights seem brighter and safer outside.

And we feel silly; the conversation feels silly; I feel silly.

“What about the people in Sudan, or the people that lose their children...”

“People that have real bad things happen? I guess they know better than us, and we are just lucky.”

“And we have no idea what we are talking about.”

We shut up and eat.

Our reflections still dance but we watch our hands; roll straws between our fingers, food and voices around us.

I fix my hair in the reflection of the glass, smile, and she looks over my shoulder.

Arms

Katie Tegtmeier



black and white portrait
8" x 10"
silver gelatin print

Doll Triptych

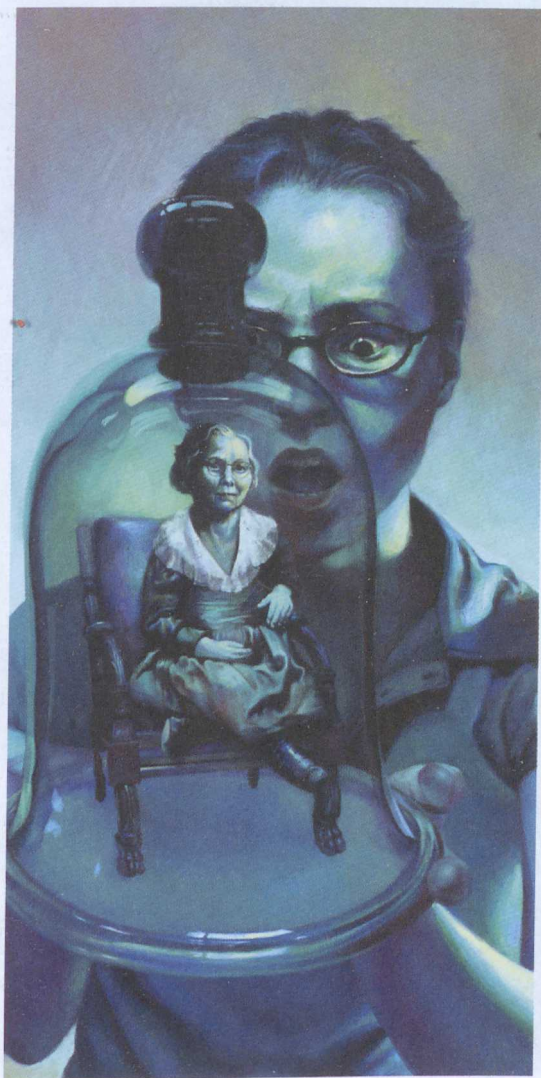
Audrey Lopata



pen and ink with accents of acrylic

Fortune Cookie

Kerry Barnett



digital painting
2' x 4'

Doll 3

Yen-hua Lee



Bridge the Void

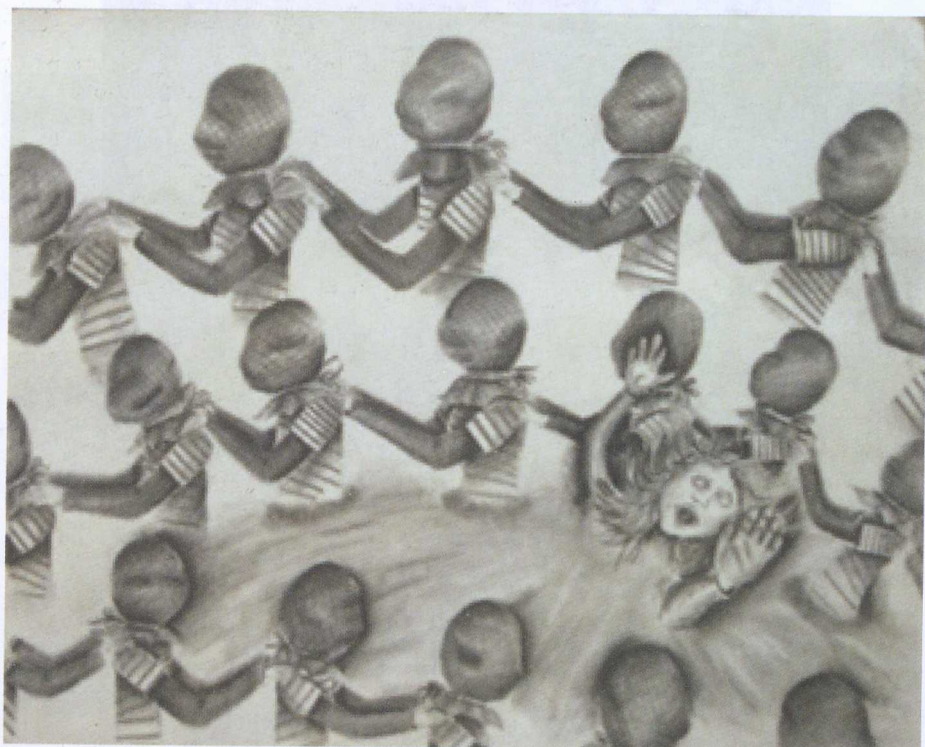
Lenny Gilmore



digital photography
4.5" x 6.75"

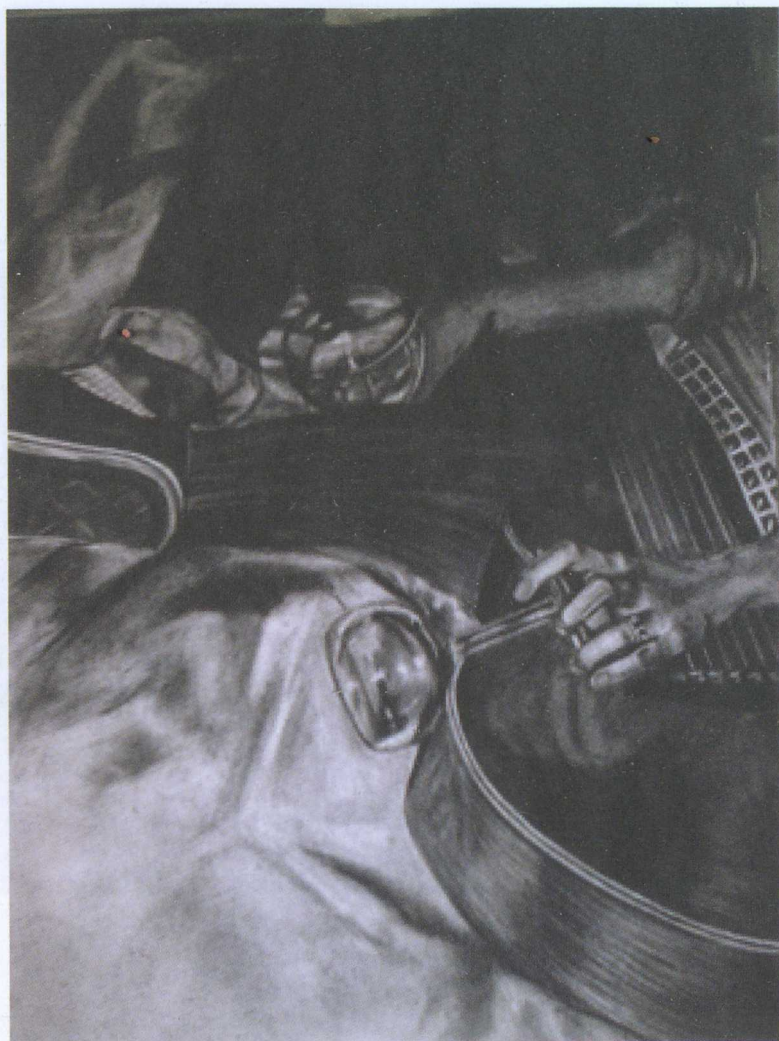
Lost

Kristin Olsen



Dismissing the puerile epoch

Hillary Kowalski



charcoal drawing
30" X 40"

Beauty has Passed

Lenny Gilmore



digital photography
6" x 4.5"

Kissing Coal

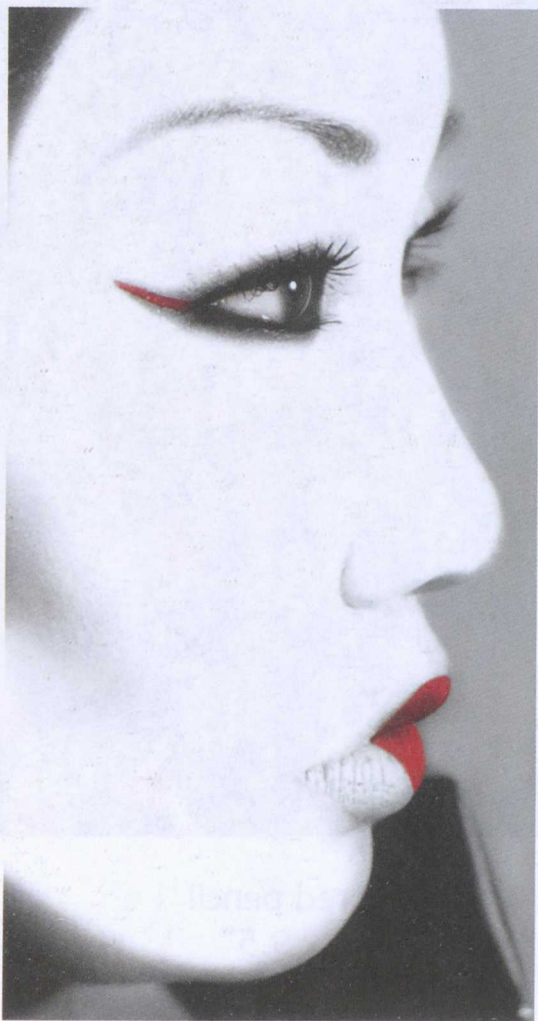
Melissa Rasor



colored pencil
10" x 9.5"

Tana

Todd Weber



An Uncertain Disposition

Thomas Graff



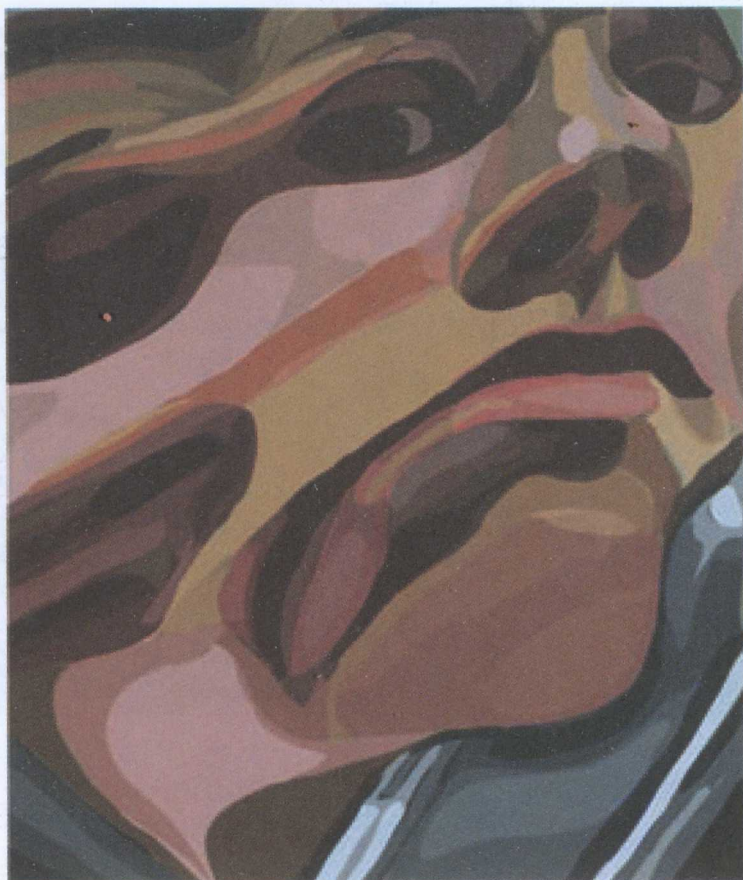
Untitled

Todd Weber



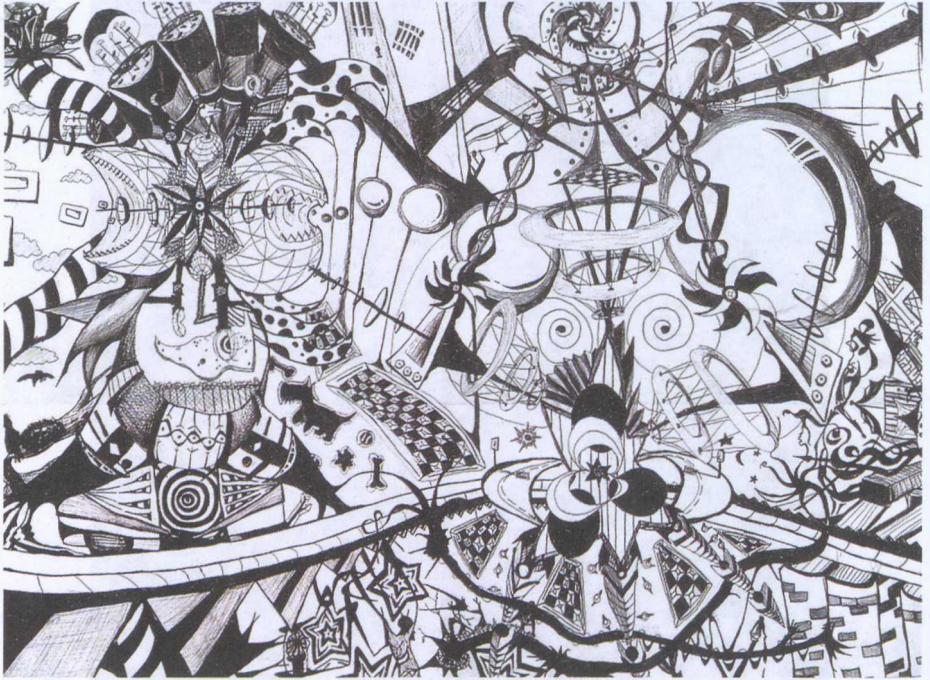
Perception

Christa Baker



Three Monsters

Kenny Lentine



pen and ink
24" x 32"

Museum Art

Thomas John Lemanski



intaglio print on chine collé paper
27" x 19"

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