



**LYRICIST**

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### **Student Poetry Winners:**

*First Place-* “Lifeforce” by Victoria Berger

*Second Place-* “(In)organic” by Arthur Berger

*Honorable Mention-* “McDonald’s Man Somewhere in America” by Will Griggs

### **Student Artwork Winners:**

*First Place-* Arthur Berger, pg. 26

*Second Place-* Rebecca Sliney, pg. 18

*Honorable Mention-* Maggie Hopf, pg. 16

### **Student Short Story Winners:**

*First Place-* “War Games” by Kathryn Lindquist

*Second Place-* “The Rain Got Harder” by Joshua Pittman

*Honorable Mention-* “Repose” by Victoria Berger

### **Statewide Poetry Winners:**

*First Place-* “The Center of the Universe” by David Riddle III

*Second Place-* “Bumblebee” by Lenard Moore

*Honorable Mention-* “Now You Are Going to Sleep” by Justin Evans



*Jessica Bradway*

## Ode to the New Coffee Machine

Bold black big  
cup of Campbell coffee  
specially strong for strivers.  
Tall tormenting torture.  
caffeine calling college  
students studying steadfastly.  
Drip drop drip  
bold bombs brew.  
Squeal shout squeal  
grinding great grades.  
Silent students stare  
infernal interference engages  
attentive attuned attentions.  
Rooms rudely required  
to take time  
long-suffering listeners labour  
regaining reticent recognition.  
Boldly back to books  
additional attention added  
by a bold black big  
cup of Campbell coffee.

*Robert Gibson*

# The Center of the Universe

Our kitchen table, wooden and worn  
Is the center of the universe.  
I was told this by Stephen Hawking  
As I read A Brief History of Time  
He did mention black holes, but  
The table loomed large  
Even in this book of galaxies

Thanksgiving  
Our table groans  
Under the weight of turkey and taters  
And every uncles' favorite dish  
The men and boys in a TV trance  
Bears and Packers mesmerize.  
Mother, aunts, grandmothers  
Teenage girls giggling  
Crowd around the table  
Placing food upon that alter  
Making the annual sacrifice to gluttony

After the game  
Before the oven is cold  
We all gather  
Reverent and hungry  
Giving thanks for the plenty  
Belt buckles are loosened a notch  
Or two  
The turkey is praised  
The mentioning of dryness is taboo  
Smiling, today, I  
Love our table  
For everyone that is part of my universe  
Is here

This old table  
Scratched and scarred  
Has heard Shakespeare's soliloquies

Algebra damned  
Jumbles understood  
Words searched for and found  
Crossword puzzles solved  
With two X's in Nixon

Our table has been the United Nations  
Negotiating bedtimes  
When it was proper  
For my sister to return from the prom  
And  
How many times the belt would fly

Our table, worldly but never weary  
Was the venue of my brother's first real kiss  
Pam Krissy  
Of brutal arguments by my parents  
Facing, on either side of this span of wood  
It is a silent referee  
Keeping them apart, until  
Hands reaching across  
Grasping  
Holding, caressing  
Forgiving

Our table dented and dinged  
Dominates the kitchen  
Our family solar system  
Kids and parents, planets  
Revolving  
Some fast, others slower  
Filled with memories and events  
It is a great-grandmother  
Of accumulated history and tales  
But, just a bit jumbled at times  
Forgetful

Our table is the battered battlefield  
Filled with craters  
Made by verbal artillery



Squabbles over nothing  
Or life and death decisions  
We placed granny in a home there  
Pregnancies announced here with joy  
Marriages ended with bitterness  
Jane told us her secret  
And we met Diane  
Who was more than a roommate  
Mom cried  
Dad made more coffee

After all it has seen and heard  
More than any priest  
And a better listener  
What opinions it has, it keeps to itself  
Better than a best friend  
Even with four legs  
It never walked out on us  
Even when others did

I suppose that our table  
Is not really a table.  
Who knew that you could eat mac & cheese  
On a metaphor  
I know it was always there  
For meals and deals,  
Playing cards, reading the Bard  
Stealing a kiss, making a wish  
Praying for grace, saving face  
Spilling coke, and making a joke

Looking at our kitchen table  
Even when the room is empty  
I can see the figure of my mother  
Knitting  
Balls of yarn scattered about the table  
With some pattern and purpose  
Only she knows  
There are dozens of loose ends

Reaching out from the table  
A string of yellow connecting me  
Blue for my brother  
My sister and Diane share a string  
Grandfather, long dead still has a thread  
But it's shorter than most  
There are so many  
Running out the doors, up stairs  
Out of the windows  
Reaching across the wide country  
Gathering us all in.  
Thank you Mr. Hawking  
For showing me how the universe really works.

*David Riddle III*



*Rebecca Wells*

## **In Leaf of Ancient Blessings**

How happy would we be  
to witness our daughter's face  
in the cloud of understanding

How happy would we be  
to hear our daughter's voice  
in the rain of knowledge

How happy would we be  
to feel our daughter's brilliant smile  
in the sun of glory

How happy would we be  
to wake up to our daughter's faithful eyes  
in the wind of four generations

How happy would we be  
to embrace our daughter's presence  
in the leaf of ancient blessings

*Lenard D. Moore*



*Melissa Lewand*

## Symbolism at the Retreat

Crisp white  
curtains  
with dark blue  
bottom trim  
cover  
the windows here.  
Refreshing  
celestial light  
interrupts  
terrestrial sky.  
I seek relief  
from stress.

A white life  
preserver  
hangs  
on the wall  
over my dresser.  
At first, I miss  
the mirror  
tacked in the middle.  
I catch a glimpse  
of my tired face.

The ceiling fan  
waits  
to be activated,  
ready to stir  
stagnant air.  
White blades  
resemble  
angel wings  
as they whirl  
in mid-air.

*Sandra Adams*



*Morgan Moore*

## Seasons of Identity

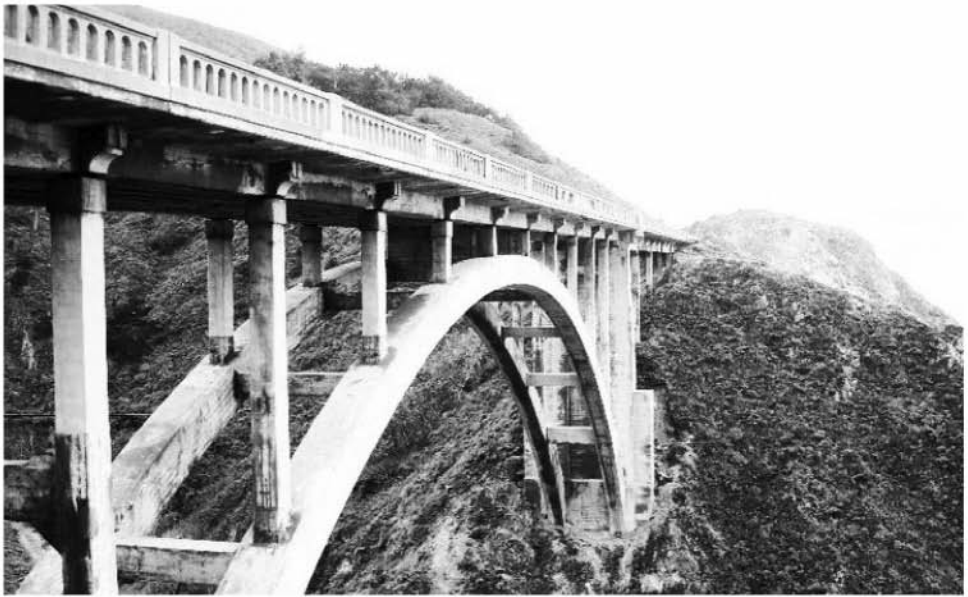
Spring tender, childlike, trusting  
Searching to borrow and share a dream  
Not knowing individual dreams  
were allowed

Summer dried, cracked, longing spirit  
crying out for the healing rain  
of understanding  
The flow of perception within unrecognized

Autumn brilliance, first frost  
Unbidden days of accountability  
Urgently seeking the peaceful hymn  
of winter knowledge

*Barbara Smith*





*Maggie Hopf*

## Healers

Healers carry no banners --  
They heal with their eyes.  
Reaching across rooms that transcend the innocence,  
They peer into wounds  
Of nights that cracked  
And left roots shattered.  
And they wait...  
Until we have rested in rain long enough.

For they know, they know...  
It is the stillness that heals us all.

*Helen Chasson*



## In Memory of Peter Dying



Tenaciously, the golden leaf clings,  
Reluctant to begin the final journey  
into eternity.

*Ann K Belmont*

## **Someday**

The moon grazes over every roof  
Like a ray of unforgettable dreams  
You, you are a unforgettable dream-  
In a world of six billion people  
You are the one  
Someday, someday I'll tell you I loved you  
And someday  
I'll send this message in a bottle  
And pray you get it  
And I'll keep believing  
In clouds with a silver lining

*Maria Politis*

## Orbital Revolution

Two orbs floating through space  
both lost, both alone  
Till, at last, they find each other

Slowly, cautiously,  
both fearing the other's intention,  
they embrace

Revolving round and round,  
spending hundreds of revolutions intertwined,  
both loving the other's presence

But alas, it wasn't too last

Before long they drifted apart,  
gravity too weak to hold them together,  
reality too strong

Each continuing on down their original path,  
briefly, faintly,  
remembering those few precious moments,  
never again to feel the other's spark

And how, you may ask, do I know this to be true?  
Easily, for she was one and I the other

*Kurt Tluavoc*



## Taken by Flames

Ignited by a light  
set the sparks, to fly  
How long could it stand the breeze?  
Never for long, must be quick!  
Of many woods, one is close.  
Stick of spark, thrown down now!  
Spark into sparks, sparks into flames  
engulf the woods, crimson, gold, and orange.  
Intense heat to grow, nowhere to flee.  
Whatever it grabs on to, gone in a flash.  
Crackling the melody of my own tune,  
I sit, mind is silent and calm.  
Let the flames guide my soul.  
To not care if it charred the skin  
is what I want.  
To not care if it eats me whole  
is what I want.  
To not care about being saved  
is what I want.  
Deep into the night, a soul takes sight,  
seeing the bursts of glimmering heat  
Put out, no hesitation.  
My soul flown away to a brighter side.  
Ashes from which it came to be left  
It's over now, taken by flames I was.

*MiAngela Frazier*





# Lonely Palm of Folly

Standing solitary  
A beacon greeting the eternal line of those  
Praying to while their day away  
Inhaling briny smells  
    Listening to sea gull petitions,  
        Pounding surf,  
    And the delighted gasps of  
        Children as they are pummeled by icy  
            waves.  
How many howling winds  
    Have you withstood?  
How many flashes of God's wrath  
    Have you treated with blatant disregard?  
Standing lithe and ever graceful in  
    The salty breezes of our Folly  
You welcome us with a frondly wave  
    And bid us adieu  
    With a wistful salute.

*Melissa Hager*



*Arthur Berger*

## True Art

Along my nature trail walk,  
I pause to admire a tree to my left.  
Hollowed out, missing inner  
parts, top, limbs, outer bark.  
Lightning struck?  
Once green with life, now a shell  
of its former self, transformed  
into nature's art,  
it contains many shapes.  
Some observe, find figures within:  
two horses racing in the same  
direction; a woman, drying her  
long, flowing hair in the wind.  
Through the years, this wooded area  
has become a self-made gallery  
that welcomes.

*Sandra Adams*



*Maggie Hopf*

## Roots

To be a root and hold fast to the ugliness of the earth  
to exclude myself from the beauty of the land  
and suckle at the teet of harsh ground  
to consume not but the bitterness of decay and rot  
and to drink the rain of heavens defiled by the dirt  
Yet still to grow,  
--this was the charge of the breeze as it whispered through  
the reeds  
to create from the vile hatred of trampled lands a stem or a  
stalk  
to protrude from the captivity of darkness and claim a place  
in the sun  
to smile in the light, laugh in the wind and to cry in the rain  
but to never lose my grasp upon the earth which feeds me  
to bear my fruit to the hungry or show my blossoms to the  
dejected  
let them forget at heart I'm a root for my soul resides in the  
bosom of the earth  
I shall consume bitterness and create bliss  
This was the charge of the breeze as it whispered through  
the reeds

*Christopher Stewart*



*Jennifer Godwin*

## Haiku

Crinkled leaves cascade;  
Aged lovers snuggle close  
As twilight deepens

## Haiku

Raindrops hold moments;  
Doe-eyed lovers clasp heaven;  
Sun's warmth, unseen fall

## A Poet from Elm City

Tried to script something witty.  
Try as he might, his pen wouldn't indite;  
"No prize!" said the judge  
As the poet sighed, "Ah, what a pity!"

*Bill O'Boyle*



## **Purple Haze**

Wisteria takes over in a choke hold.  
Defenseless, the fence bears her fate  
As the conqueror displays his victory flag as a purple haze.  
Never has war been so beautiful.

*Melissa Hager*

## To A Familiar Constellation

Let us compose another verse trumpeting the multitude of  
stars

Those heavenly bodies, esteemed in song immortal.

Liken them to diamonds,

Softly whisper nursery rhymes of old or

Mimic clichés rubbed to the raw bone.

Spout your obscure allusions to Greek myths

And we shall prop our feet upon the dusty tables,

Delighting in the status quo mold into which

We have crammed the heavenly bodies.

But tonight, my neck craned to see

The white specks framed against

Obsidian of the deepest kind.

The veil of cloudy haze was torn away,

Light pollution driven from heaven's door.

"Twinkle, Twinkle" fell to ash

When I saw the Eden sky.

*Stacy Marshburn*

*We sat next to each other once again. Mad because I was so unprepared, unpracticed, and yet I loved it. I wanted to blanket the awkward silence with good conversation, but all I could get out was "Uhh...You like poetry?" Ugh! Could I not get a better line?! But I thought about this poem I wrote for you... here goes..*

## **Shy Girl...Scared Poet**

I dream about making poetry out of each prose of you.

Taking your silent awkwardness and take your worst enemies and make standing ovations to it.

I love you.

Shy girl,

With the Akademik Jeans I'm so jealous of,  
because it does the perfect job of  
hiding your gentle, sweet, well you know....

Shy scars!!! As this scared poet,  
I'd love to be a balm.

Sing to you in December and snuggle up to the warmth  
in your nervous palms. Just because it's cold and I don't want your  
heart to match the temperature of the weather

Teach you how to let me in with my rhyme.  
How to be spontaneous and free verse you?  
Teach you how to kiss my poem.

See what it's like to taste my metaphor.

I simile about you.

Shy girl, and me this scared poet!!

If only I could poetry you,  
Kiss you in the shadows of stanzas,

Trace the rhythms of your breath  
On my temple, sacrifice alphabets for you,

Without the fear of you phrasing me,  
Renaming me, make nothing but sweet fiction with you...I would.

But shy girl and I as this scared poet  
Don't connect too well In person, so...

I thought I'd show you how we'd look on paper...  
You like poetry...cause it flows so good together, just like we  
Shy Girl and the Scared Poet

*Tavion Powell*

## Colors

red is the color of blood  
of lacerations of the flesh  
self-inflicted  
the color of amusement parks  
and tricycles  
red is the color of my heart which beats life  
of fire which destroys the same

blue is the color of tears  
of asphyxiation  
with a smile  
the color of cotton candy  
and collared polos  
blue is the color of the river which runs  
and the ocean which sinks

yellow is the color of a newborn child  
of jaundiced old men  
drowning in home-brew  
the color of fireworks  
and Easter gowns  
yellow is the color of the sun which shines  
and the moon which mocks it

white is the color of carnations  
of a child's smile  
fading in time  
the color of wedding dresses  
and vanilla ice cream  
white is the color of all colors, of light  
and the color of pale skin when all light fades

black, black is not a color  
it is the absence I am writing with  
shedding darkness of this bright leaf  
black is all that I love  
all that I wish to see  
so I scribble and write  
to cover this leaf with a new color  
the color of a poem unwritten  
the color of an infant song  
the color of undying belief  
of ignorance knowing its wrong  
give me the color forth

*Christopher Stewart*



*Melissa Lewand*

## **The McDonald's Man Somewhere in America**

In line she patiently waits  
But cannot read the menu very well  
Who puts menus up on the wall?  
The cooking food is a hungry smell.

She did a lot of cooking herself  
Back in the day, when there were fresh  
Biscuits, people to sit down with and speak  
To, but now she sees only a throng and mesh.

It is her turn to order now  
She doesn't know the protocol of the cashier  
She doesn't want anything particular  
Just something warm and something sincere.

She gets her ticket and waits some more  
She ambles backward down the line  
To the end, others are piling in  
No one polite but all eager to dine

Sometime in the near future she will  
Get her food, she will sit down near the window  
To get some sun, she will chew her food slowly and well  
She will get up and leave after throwing away her trash  
Thanking a mentally retarded man  
Who doesn't speak her language.

*Will Griggs*





*Rebecca Wells*

## End Of Summer

On the second floor of a wooden  
beach house, my quiet room  
is oceanfront, but  
thick, scraggly scrubs block  
my view of the sea.  
At night, while other residents  
sleep,  
I toss and turn  
in the dark  
in pain.  
Time  
passes  
slowly.  
Every hour I check the clock.  
I listen for distant sounds,  
lose myself in waves  
that beat against the shore.

*Sandra Adams*



## (In)Organic

Inorganic are my thoughts  
City blocks clashed and fought  
In falling heights, lost and caught.  
Filthy gutters,  
Traffic sputters,  
Inorganic prisons wrought.

An organic army fleet  
Teaming in the jungle heat  
Charging forth about to meet—  
Stingers stabbing,  
Leaves are grabbing—  
Folding Death in Nature's sheet.

*Arthur Berger*



*Kyla Galen Edwards*

## **A Soul Is Alone**

A soul is alone,  
Looking down on the world.  
It yearns, yet it scorns  
To be looked upon.  
Whatever it sees,  
It smiles and sobs,  
Oblivious of all it truly seeks.  
Souls and souls combined,  
But it continues to wander.  
It is left to meander  
For what seems to be an eternity.  
Its shimmering glow fails,  
Only to be a sparkle in darkness.  
The lonesome soul is pained by time,  
Spending it only half as well.  
It lacks in knowledge,  
Knowing not where to be, what to accomplish.  
It is complete, but incomplete.  
It is confident, but afraid.  
It looks behind...  
And cannot look forward.  
Of everything seen,  
It is content.  
A soul, still alone,  
Looks down at the world, hopefully.

*MiAngela Frazier*



*Peter Newby*

**“the sky seems filled with dragons...”**

The sky seems filled with dragons  
wispy white clouds with hungry mouths  
moving hurriedly across a sky of deep,  
rich, velvet softness  
Reaching the round moon shining  
with such splendor and promise  
The dragons reach the perfect moon  
and slide across its face so gently  
that in return the moon lends light  
to the dragons making them ever so soft, and beautiful  
With new hope the dragons race away  
filled with the hope only a full moon gives  
Thank You, God, for full moons  
and gentle dragons

*Barbara Smith*



## Dreams of the City

Awake.

...

A sound.

Dog? Or cat?

Too similar

At 2 am.

Sleep.

...

A word.

What?

Too far—but coming closer—outside my window—

High-pitched. A woman?

Too young.

...

A child.

Again a word.

Repeating?

Yes, the same word. Calling. Clearer now.

Wait—what is he saying?

...

'Dad!'  
Why?  
'Dad!'  
No answer.  
'Dad!'  
...  
A long pause.  
2:15 am.  
Where is Dad?  
Quiet, but then again. Distant.  
'Dad!'  
...  
A lasting silence.  
Dog? Or cat?  
Perhaps  
Just a dream  
At 2 am.  
...  
Awake.

*Samantha Lisk*

## **Lifeforce**

Pulsing, beating, burning down  
Such fierce orb of high renown  
Seen by all and felt throughout  
Distant north and loving south  
Star most deified, devout

Cosmos' center, there you're bound  
Sending forth harmonic sound  
To what end do we amount  
Compared to all thy mighty clout?  
Pity Earth when you burn out

*Victoria Berger*

# Marriage

I do not see him in my future.

I see him in my present,

Sitting up tonight while I decipher Jaques Lacan  
And his Gulf oil spill of font and incoherency.

I see him over the top of the top of my overpriced literary theory book  
Shifting my eyes over his face like a typewriter stuck on backspace.

My husband sits up with me

Filling in bubbles on his VA questionnaire  
So he can be paid for the wounds  
Uncle Sugar Daddy can't fix with 800 milligram Motrin.

My machete irises hack haphazardly

from my book to the wrinkles in his forehead  
Where I'm surgically removing the worries he keeps between the folds,  
But he detours me by a small smile when he catches me looking.

He is my mirror stage,

A fellow infant sucking dry a back-shelf breast of love,  
A duplicate carrier of a 50% divorce statistic  
in our collaborating chests.

We are missing some kind of mark,  
But it's not on the end of a dissolution document,  
So for now,  
we're okay..

My fingerprints litter his shell of solitude

Like first grade finger-painting on the living room wall.  
He loves me enough to leave them as proof  
That although we are brain deep and hell bent

On backing away from our possible catastrophe,  
Tonight we are stable and silent,  
Bending over separate lives,  
Studying as a distraction,

Holding hands under the dining room table.



The lion young starving grumble a moan  
The lamb so satiate, slack at jaw  
Mumbles foaming  
A glint reveals the resurrecting maiden of life  
The throat trembles in choking, innocent  
Man blinks, violent as a spark

Awake! Awake! Rise lush and bleeding white maiden of men  
The blood of flush, surge blooming latent life!  
Spring booming in a rush, triumphant over death  
No more hallowed sleep, no more sigh, not one more  
breath.

*Will Griggs*



## Acceptance

Now my hope is at an end;  
Myself I cannot raise.  
For when I try  
Instead I lie  
Inert for many days.

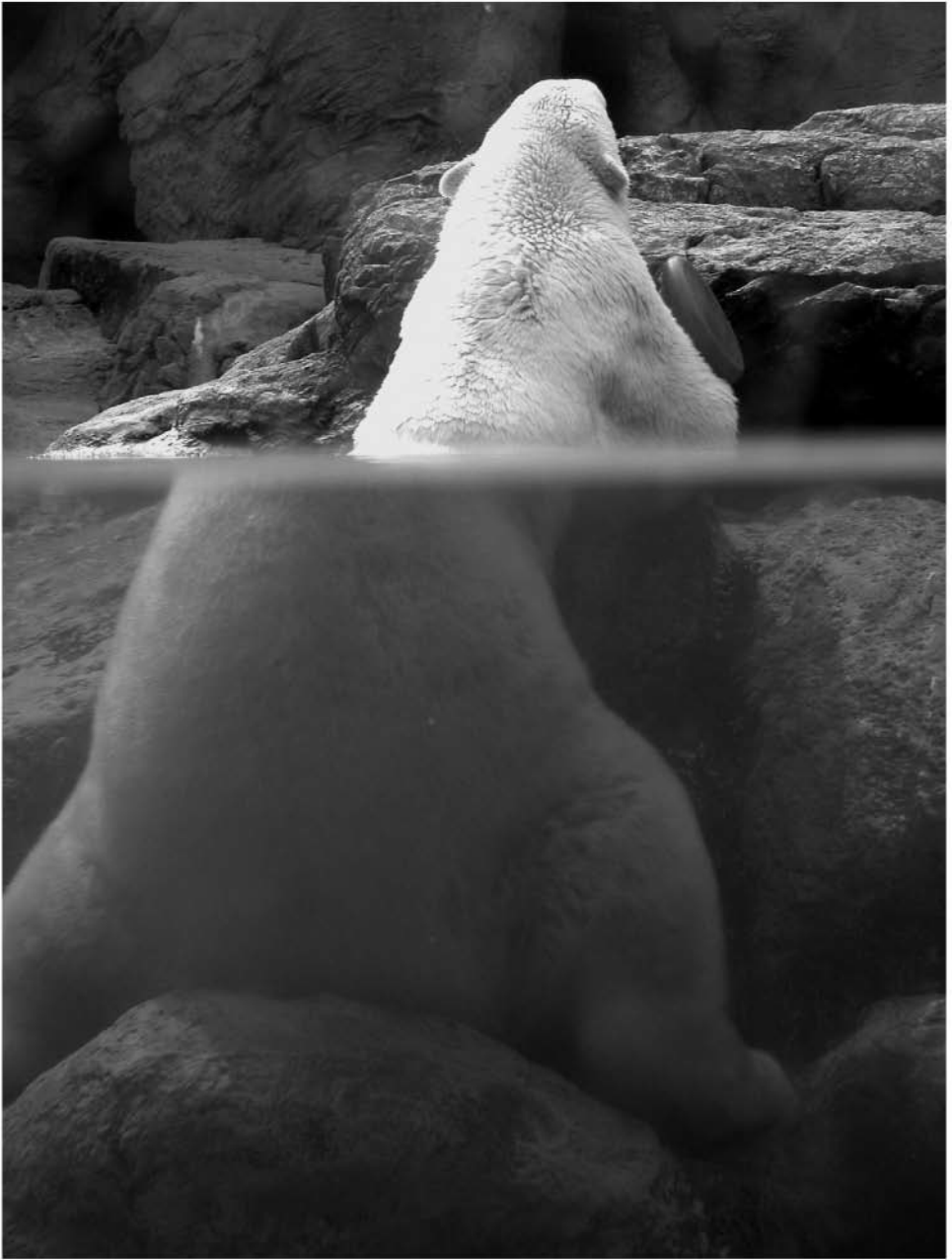
With my hope now goes my fear  
Of failing in this craze—  
For I am mad,  
Depressed, and bad—  
This is no passing phase.

Pride too may lay down its head,  
Once puzzling to amaze  
And solve it all—  
Great care and small—  
Now toppled in a daze.

New hope, new fear, new pride will  
Transfigured be, each prays.  
No source of mine,  
But fount divine:  
My sorrows turned to praise.

*Arthur Berger*





## Recommended

A doctor said, "I recommend a drug for this pain in your side.

And this drug for the pain in your neck.

This drug for the pain in your ass, only take that one on Tuesdays.

Here is a drug that will help you relax, take it ever hour on the hour so long as you are awake...

This green pill is for the pain in your heart, take it once a day Monday through Saturday and twice on Sunday.

Oh and let's not forget this fancy blue one, I don't know what it does just yet."

and I said "I recommend that you don't, it's true.

For the pain in my side will go away with you,  
the pain my in neck will go away when my work is done,  
the pain in my ass is just for fun.

For the drug to relax  
people can lie on their backs  
and stare at the sky  
pretending to fly.  
And the pain in my heart,  
though it was torn apart  
will be fixed with a hug and a kiss  
from a beautiful girl that I miss  
I don't need a fancy blue pill  
So please doctor just chill."

*Kurtys Haumann*



*Peter Newby*

## **Now You Are Going to Sleep**

It's the weight of the water that holds you up  
the weight of the wind that holds the rain.  
Were the air to condense  
or find itself thick  
we might rise,  
slow,  
then float at its surface-  
dead mayflies on the calm of a lake.

Now,  
let out your breath and sink to the bottom  
where its cool and  
the trees are all nightmares.  
the light there is drunken, lonely,  
the mud feels like the inside of your cheek.

It's better down there  
where rocks are fat feathers  
and rain makes you warm.  
the water holds you tight  
the way water used to.

*Justin Evans*

## Lost and Found

Look to the sky,  
Look to the sea,  
Look at the canyons wide and deep;  
Look at the fly,  
Look at the flea,  
Lost in the vastness like a sheep.

Taken by You,  
Taken a hold,  
Taken captive into the fold;  
Taken anew,  
Taken from cold,  
Found by richness purer than gold.

Lost like an ear without a sound,  
Found like precious, buried treasure;  
First lost, then found--now lost and found  
Within You I'll stay forever.

*Lilly Wells*

# Dream

Hearts pounding	1
Blood pumping	2
Hands sweating	3
Breathe.	4
Arms reaching	5
Fingers lacing	6
Lips searching	7
One.	8
Words whispered	9
Slow dancing	10
It's raining	11
Run.	12
Heart racing	13
Body shaking	14
Eyes lying	15
Leave.	16
Tears welling	17
Words lacking	18
Each searching	19
Undo.	20
Love gambled	21
No speaking	22
Now parting	23
Two.	

*April Wilson*



*Kurt Tluavoc*

## Gardenia Girl vs. The Dolphins

The girl with the gardenia in her hair sings on Latin American Idol. There's this fake river that floats around the stage. And in that river are real dolphins. And when the girl opens her throat and pushes out vowels from her stomach, the dolphins jump to hear her. They just want to be near her. Sometimes she's so taken with the heartache she sings. Throws herself into the water. Like some sort of martyr in a passion display. When she comes out, you can't tell if she's crying or if it's just water dripping down her face.

Scumming up her mascara. That's always your favorite part. The sticky black clumps slugging down her plump lips like leeches.

You ask me if she's crying or if it's just water. This is your favorite part.

My favorite part is the dolphins. Flickering up like sparkles. Shining for something they feel like fire. It's a want. It's a need. But dolphins have no need for fire and they'll never be able to understand Spanish or any other language.

Well I can tell you, it's not the girl that cries. Those are dolphin tears.

I am the jumper, the sparkler, the crier, the dolphins that go round and round.

You are the sun, the lover, the liar, the girl with the gardenia in her hair.

*Ashleigh Phillips*





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*Rebecca Sliney*

## **A Tear**

A lovely, beautiful, stunning flower  
with petals of royal purple, held by a strong sturdy stem.  
In the crack of a sidewalk, surrounded by  
the gray, the dull, the weak.  
But look closer-  
and see the tear on the petal.

*Maria Politis*



*Kyla Galen Edwards*

## The Story Of Love

Lovers intertwined  
Her head buried in my chest  
The beating of my heart  
Lays her soul to rest  
Rays of gold  
Fall onto satin  
Inflating the mind  
Never to flatten  
A star is setting  
As more come to be  
The Moon brightens  
As her lips come to me  
Fields of passion  
And gardens of love  
Shower our bodies  
Flood our minds above  
Falling into lust  
In harmony with bliss  
We unify our souls  
With love's first kiss

*Bryant Dobson*

# Why I Keep Cats

My neighbor loves birds  
In the morning he makes toast and coffee  
As the sun, on cue, peeks through the pines  
He perches himself at the kitchen table that faces the window  
Where he has placed, with precision, the bird feeder.  
On the box it proclaims to persuade only the most beautiful of  
birds  
To visit and eat, to stay and display, for you to view their fabulous  
plumage.  
It works and works well  
Each day without fail  
He is visited by Yellow-Rumped Warblers  
Carolina Wrens, and the odd White-Throated Sparrow  
Who is jealous of the Song Sparrow's wonderful singing voice  
Every day he will see a Hermit Thrush  
Who seems not to take too seriously his name  
The Lark is hardly noticed  
As it is outdone by the majesty of the Eastern Bluebird  
Then, of course, there is the Common Grackle, who, between  
friends  
Is nothing but trouble.  
The Red-winged Blackbird can't seem to make up his mind  
about who he is  
And the Greater Antillean Grackle, a snob and keeping the  
best bits for himself.  
The Boat-tailed Grackle will only sneer and make rude re  
marks about the others.  
Some of which are perfectly true.  
Toast gone and on his second cup of coffee  
My neighbor, the John Audubon of the street  
Watches with delight until-

My cats love birds  
I think of them as assassins all dressed in black  
With cat-sized swords and throwing stars.  
In the morning they wake early, before the sun warms the  
pine  
Before bread is toast and while coffee is still beans

They have the patience of Job  
As they linger and lounge  
Out of the sight of the windows and Warblers  
If my neighbor is John Audubon,  
Snowball and Mittens are lions of the Serengeti.  
As the party arrives and the first course is served  
The winds of the African plains blow through my cats'  
minds  
And they are wild as a river and strong as Samson  
The first leap is something out of National Geographic  
Snowball is a single-minded predator; she seems as if she is in  
slow motion  
Auditioning for a part in a TV show  
She is flashy, sleek and without mercy.  
The Greater Antillean Grackle, is not such a snob now.  
Mittens is a show-off, she grabs the poor Lark in mid flight.  
I think she wants to win The Golden Glove  
Now cats and birds are both grounded.  
The fresh cup of coffee is thrown out an open door at the  
predators of the Serengeti  
Words that Mr. Audubon never uttered in public leap across the  
drive  
As the victors make off into the woods to dine.  
They don't need a reservation  
They are regulars.  
I am awakened by the phone call that has come before.  
In my 6 a.m. voice  
I try to lament the loss of the Lark and the other one.  
Yes I will scold them  
I told him  
A leash  
Sure  
I roll over and laugh at the thought of putting a leash  
On a lion.  
In our backyards a small piece of Africa lives on and I love  
That Mr. Audubon would laugh with me.

*David Riddle III*

## Ode to a Forsaken Cat

Daily I gaze upon the corpse of thee,  
abandoned by all except for me.  
No one there to help you dead or alive,  
your last breath taken on the road beside.  
No proper burial: frozen in time  
While your fragile body rots in sunshine.  
Who once loved thee, my poor little cat?  
Fed you until your belly turned fat?  
Perhaps you never once felt a kind touch:  
Your unfortunate state suggests as much.  
Not lost, for there was none to even look;  
No one to care when the road your soul took.  
So I will mourn thee, my sad little friend  
And never forget how you met your end.

*Sarah Cibik*

## Bumblebee

When I pushed the lawn mower  
its teeth gnawed blades of grass  
while the black-pouch belly swelled.  
A bumblebee emerged,  
circled me  
like a planet,  
puncturing me like a nail.  
I swirled  
in my front yard,  
yelling, "It got me!"  
Three girls walked past,  
laughed and laughed.  
In the stinging sun,  
they became small  
as that bee.  
The sun shone red and swollen—  
how its eye beamed  
while the bee darted  
wherever bees go.

*Lenard Moore*



## A Tarot Witch Explains

This spread of cards insults the orange stars  
that suck the long night up and burn across  
the long lightyears. Your fortune says:

*The vacuum silence swallows every life  
and every point of nuclear fire. In time,  
Death softly takes out all your teeth. Blows out  
all those suns like they're just birthday candles.*

*Julia Page*

## Seven Ways of Looking at a Line

- I:      Here, on this page, are lines  
         waiting to be filled.
- II:     Lines continue forever,  
         on the plane that does not exist.
- II:     I see lines across your face, worry wrinkles.  
         Soon, I will have them too.
- IV:    Stand in line, all of you!  
         Not one schoolchild out of place.
- V:     Lines will draw  
         shapes around you,  
         box you in,  
         and define you.
- VI:    Aligning planets pass between  
         the earth, the sun, and me.
- VII:   The rest of this poem is a line,  
         never pointing, always reaching,  
         waiting to be manipulated and multiplied  
         into many lines,  
         by you and me.

*Arthur Berger*

## The 13 Phases of the Moon

I

Sitting alone in the dark,  
my only companion  
the cold distant moon.

II

A sky full of stars,  
but not one can outshine  
the pale lamp of the moon.

III

The stillness of a nighttime forest  
broken only by the sound  
of the wolves howling to their beloved.

IV

A child stares out of his window  
endlessly searching  
for the man in the moon.

V

A secret message  
written upon a map of destiny,  
revealed by the light of the moon.

VI

A poet sits and ponders  
Inspiration is found in the darkness  
illuminated by moonbeams.

VII

A tiny mouse shudders  
hiding in its shelter and watching  
the moon in an owl's unblinking eye.

VIII

The innocent fawn sips  
from the lake of moonwater,  
while the hunter sits very still.

IX

Lovers embrace in the park  
as the moonlight sparkles  
in the facets of a diamond.

X

Delicate wings flutter  
as the luna moth  
revels in the light of its moon-God.

XI

The tide goes back out,  
helpless against the force  
of the moon pulling its strings.

XII

A red rose rests on a grave;  
the dew on its velvet petals  
pearlescent with moonlight.

XIII

The sun begins to rise  
casually pushing aside  
the infinitely jealous moon.

*Sarah Cibik*



*Rebecca Sliney*

## The Canvas

The once pure  
Canvas is covered.  
Old pale lines  
Are everywhere.  
Pinks and purples,  
Dots and lines,  
Raised and sunken,  
They cover the canvas.  
Up and down  
In all directions,  
Lines everywhere,  
Make strange artwork,  
That never seems quite complete.  
Add some more  
Bubbly crimson lines  
On the once pure canvas:  
Up, down, straight, crooked.  
Messages lie hidden  
Deep in the masterpiece.  
Some speak louder  
Than others do.  
When will this  
Be finished?  
It never seems  
To be enough.  
When will the  
Message be heard?  
When will this end?  
Bloody lines  
On a pale white body.

*Jessica Bradway*

# I Can Spell Liar

Crib-kept but creaming,  
    You gleaned me pristine  
With your white watered lies and that girl's company  
That you sought out the day I fled home, ran away  
From you as witch doctor in our candy shelled house.

You should've been pushed back into that oven,  
And I should have refused your promotional coven  
That left me lopsided and shrieking out prayers,  
To not die in the bathrooms, passed out on the stairs -  
Were you there, were you there?

    As the barley backed up from the you in my  
stomach?

    As I asked for a charcoal dose of your love?

You blamed my retreating, my requisite leaving  
With a bare back still bleeding  
    from freighting your confections,  
    aborted affections.

And you, ever anxious to calculate my debt  
Split my spine for your abacus.  
You're scraping up skeletons I left in plain sight,  
    Not like yours behind doors,

But I'm carving a warning to reach your wide-eyed  
Oblivious worshipper sewn to your side  
    With our leftover glue -  
That last bit of bed that kept me with you.  
So while she stands and swears by your compost pile  
I'll show her your bed that we shared for a while.  
    I'll pass on your glass,  
    And I'll giver her my blade  
And let you use lines to map out her cage.

As vixen, I'm vacant -  
You're just a masked rapist,  
So I'm better at bitterness aimed at her breast.  
She can sublet her lease  
    And suck up your mess.  
Our life now divided is alight on your pyre.  
The truth may be reticent,  
    But never retires.  
She may spell victory,  
But I can spell liar.

*Catherine Entrocaso*



I lost control of my desire;  
I fell in love with a vampire  
With a devilish grin, and fangs you hate;  
All he wanted to do was exsanguinate.

*Jacob Berger*

## Clichéd

I hurry to conclusions  
I anger easily  
It really can go “right over my head”  
I can be quickly mislead

I find it too hard to forgive  
It seems almost impossible to forget  
I laugh too loudly  
I cry for the wrong reasons

I scream when I’m frustrated  
I only dance in the car  
My music is sappy sweet  
Sometimes I don’t hold my tongue

I sweat the small stuff  
I don’t sleep well at night  
I wish on the stars, the moon  
I spend too much time in my own mind

I wish for forever  
I think of today  
I’m always looking for love  
I am beautifully clichéd

*Sara Beaster*

## War Games

My feet swam through the summer warmth in the arid sunlight. Not a sound but the humming of cicadas stimulated the hills of emerald meadow. Beneath my exposed, dirt showered feet, I could feel each and every pebble, branch, crevice and nook. My body was incased by naught but golden sun streamers and a pair of tatty shorts.

My lungs filled with the sultry air. I swallowed the decadent warmth and sighed. In my hands, I gripped a rusty B.B. gun; hunting an unseen enemy. My father had given it to me as a present on the eve of my twelfth birthday. Mother told him "no," but he reassured her that I was a young man now, no longer a boy.

I darted past dozens of skyscraper trees and up the groaning stairs of my front porch. My feet clattered toward Mother, who arrived promptly at the door. Her indigo dress and pallid apron fluttered like a fading butterfly on the blistering July breeze. Her smile hastily faded into a grimace as she wagged her nagging index finger at me.

"David Isaac James! I told you to not roll around in the dirt!" She halted me at the door and stood there, picking burs out of my chestnut hair and sweeping her hands across my exposed chest.

"I'm sorry mom, but," I started, watching her delicate hands remove the grime.

"There are no 'buts' David!" She looked at me softly. "I know," she huffed, cracking a smile, "it's summer vacation. Now go on," she said, gently pushing me, "Alfred is waiting for you out back!"

I sprinted through the house, with its creaking walls and shadowy hallways. Mother watched me dash and slip out the back door where Alfred stood waiting. His brilliant blue eyes lit up when he caught sight of me and in his usual fashion, he tore down the steps.

"What took you so long?" he cried against the wind. I did not answer him. "Alright," he said with a pause, "fine. Give me the silent treatment."

"I'm not giving you the silent treatment," I said, coming to a winded halt. "But why did you come so early?"

"I finished a shooting with my Dad a little soon. You wanna see?" asked Alfred, spinning his tiny B.B. gun in his hand. "Did your Dad take you out to practice like he promised?"

"No. He says he doesn't want to teach me how to shoot. I don't know why, but he just never wants to," I murmured glumly. "He just hasn't been the same since he came back. He's never home."

"From where?" Alfred asked softly. "Where was he?"

"The War you dummy! He got back, let's see," I thought on it, counting on my fingers, "in nineteen eighteen. Don't they teach you anything at that school you go to?" I laughed, watching Alfred load his gun and glare up at me. I felt harsh about Father never being home, worse for Mother, but when I was with Alfred everything fell away. "Go on! Shoot!" I cried dropping my arm like a starter at the races.

Alfred was taking his time; he was not crouched, just standing up. Then he began to run. He paced the air and trotted like a great striding Thoroughbred. He rushed past me through the grass and I studied his form. Then in a flash, he slipped. His foot clipped a hidden stone in the tall grass and he fell. With a great snap, his gun fired and I felt a sweltering sensation in my left arm.

Alfred was lying on the ground, uninjured. He was holding his head but was laughing as he rose. "I'm such an idiot!" he joked and gazed up at me as I wrapped him in a hug. When I withdrew, Alfred stared at me in shock. "Your arm is bleeding," he stated plainly.

"What?" I asked, as my eyes caught sight of Alfred's khaki jacket. There was blood smeared on the sleeve where I had gripped him. Though I felt no pain, I remembered how my arm had stung just moments earlier. I looked down only to see my shirt torn and blood showing from an open wound. I was not worried, but I knew Mother would be.

"Both of you boys need to be more careful," she warned, donning my arm with gauze once we returned. "I knew your Father should have never gotten you that damn gun in the first place." She tore the gauze angrily and put it aside before striding away.

I admired my battle wound and looked up proudly at Alfred. "Thanks for the scar! I'm gonna have this one for the rest of my life!" With a chuckle, I added, "You got me good!"

We laughed and went back to playing war.

Sometimes I dream of such things, of the good old times, of childhood in particular, with Alfred by my side. Those were the days when we hurled pinecones instead of hand grenades and played war games with no real sense of danger. Much has changed since then. I lost contact with Alfred upon joining the United States Army in the winter of 1941 and mislaid my touch with reality in the process.

My feet swam through silver puddles in the moonlight. Not a sound stirred among the mounds of shattered concrete that had stood as gallant spires just forty eight hours earlier. Beneath the thin soles of my cold boots, I felt each and every pebble, every crevice and bullet casing. Only my face was exposed to the brutal winter wind. Small pinpoints

of snow crested and settled upon my shoulders.

My lungs choked on the vile air. They heaved and sputtered with each step I took. In my hands, warm in comparison and wrapped in gauze, I gripped my trusty rifle. It had already gotten me through Normandy, Caen and Arnhem.

I darted past heaved soil and metal wire groaning under the pressure of concrete and wood. My torn boots clattered across the street in a permanent stoop. Suddenly something stirred. I halted with an abrupt stop and spun to the right. My fingers slid up the barrel of my gun and I felt for the trigger. There, whispering alongside a great mass of concrete crouched my men, my team, my unit.

Walters was sitting closest to the road, with Jackson and Westie behind him. Their jackets and pants fluttered in the biting wind. Walters was frowning, his lips were cracked and bleeding, he was waving his hand at me.

"David! What the hell are you doing out there in the street?" He guided me behind the concrete and straightened my helmet. "Don't you know there's Krauts out there?"

"Yes, Sir. I'm sorry, Sir. But," I started.

"There are no 'buts' soldier," he replied sharply. "Now listen here. There's a Kraut battalion about two hundred meters in front of us." He waved his hand toward the open road. "Jackson, Wesite, you move further back behind this position," he commanded and the pair slowly made their way into the dark. "Son," he started, turning to me, "your objective is to get within a hundred meters of the enemy and get a good look at their numbers so we can either make an offensive or radio back to headquarters for reinforcements, you hear?"

"Yes, Sir," I replied firmly. "But, Sir, if I may, why am I the only one going back there to spy on a whole Kraut battalion?"

"Because you were the only one who was late," he replied with a smirk.

I nodded and slipped onto the road. Making sure I was concealed among the ruins was my roughest task. Keeping calm was a battle as well. I marched slowly, peering through the deep gloom of the oncoming twilight. Snow glided to the earth.

Then, there was movement again, this time to my left. I gripped my gun and stooped. My heart throbbed in my chest and up into my throat. A shot was fired and I hit the ground hard, focused my eyes in the dark and scanned the perimeter. There was not a man in sight. Lying flat on my stomach, I began to crawl. Dirt shimmied under my fingernails

as I dragged myself to an outcrop of concrete. I sighed and rested for a moment. Bent upon returning to my unit, I stared in their direction.

A bullet abruptly slashed at my hiding spot, sending dozens of rock fragments into the air like shrapnel. Another bullet bit at my opposite flank. I prayed. One whizzed over my head, one on my left, my right, back to my left. I felt a sting in my arm and the warm sensation of trickling blood. Out of sudden fear and panic, I raised my bloodstained hands in the air and stood – defeated. I expected the bullets to fly and cried, “Go on! If you wanna kill me, shoot!”

A single soldier, a German soldier, a Kraut, wandered across the abyss of the road. His gun was raised. He was taking his time; he was not crouched, just standing up. Then he began to run. He ran like a pacing steed of some ancient medieval time. He rushed toward me through the rubble, the smoke and the smog. For some reason, watching his graceful stride took me back to the carefree days at my childhood home, to playing army in the fields and riding bikes down dirt roads.

Lamenting, praying, with my eyes shut tight, I refused to watch my assassin’s expression as he rushed for the kill. I began weeping. The sound of metal hitting concrete rattled my mind and I felt the heat of a human body against my frozen skin. The German’s arms were flung around my neck; he had dropped his gun and was sobbing profusely.

He slipped to the ground, holding his head in his hands then rose. “I’m such an idiot!” he said in lucid English. He gazed up and wrapped me in another embrace. I remained perplexed until I caught sight of his eyes, his crystal blue eyes. I was taken aback.

“Alfred?” I questioned, gripping his arms. “Alfred Schmidt?” He nodded. In shock, I slipped to the ground, shaking all over. My heart labored, my head throbbed. “You, you were trying to kill me.” I resisted the thought and wrung his hands in my own. “What are you doing in a Kraut uniform?”

Alfred did not answer, just stared at me with tears in his eyes. He tried desperately to grin, but it almost seemed too bitter for him. “I haven’t smiled in years.” He touched my shoulders with his strong hands. He ran his fingers down my arms in disbelief and when he withdrew them, realized they were covered in blood.

“You shot me in the arm,” I replied bluntly for his actions.

I pulled down my sleeve to show him and in return, he tore a piece of his own shirt and wrapped it firmly around the wound. “That’s funny,” he began with a hoarse chuckle, “that’s the same place I shot you with that B.B. when we was kids.”

"Alfred, look at me." I shook him harshly. "We aren't playing war anymore! This is real. You could have murdered me back there!"

"I would have too, but I was too scared. My unit left me. They fled. I was ordered to hold my position and will do so until the end."

"What kind of talk is that? You've got to get yourself out of here! I've got men back there bent upon destroying any German they run across. We're enemies now." I stepped back in strained loathing. Alfred shook his head in disagreement and began moving away from me and into the darkness. I am not sure why, but I involuntarily followed him, devoid of any second thoughts.

We moved slowly, surely. Our footsteps mimicked one another's, our breaths rose in similar patterns, our gaits matched. No words were spoken for a long moment. In my mind, the ideas and realizations were only beginning to sink in. The night swallowed us both.

"Are you hungry?" Alfred asked me, bending down to trawl around in his backpack. "I've got plenty of rations."

"Alfred," I started again, striding up to him, "I cannot accept charities from you. We're at war!"

"Not tonight we aren't."

I was immediately silenced as we arrived where his unit had been stationed. It was a decent place and was well concealed. Alfred had decent amounts of food, but no water, so I spared him some of mine. He drank it greedily, before handing back the canteen. He smiled and started flicking his lighter over a pile of dried wood but his hands were shaking too much.

"What have we gotten ourselves into?" I asked with a sigh.

Taking Alfred's hands in my own I felt a sudden chill. They were raw with frostbite. Pulling the lighter out of his grip, I flicked it with one attempt and lit the heaping pile of broken lumber. The wood shot up in flames and we both relaxed in the instant warmth.

The barrier between our uniforms fell at once. We laughed and joked just as we had in our youth. Alfred had become a bold, strapping young man, while I remained scrawny and squat. He was loud and rambunctious, much different from my quiet calm.

"So," I began, shifting next to him, "you wanna tell me what made you go over to the Kraut's side?"

"Volksdeutscher," he replied softly, rubbing his hands near the fire. "There was a call, even in America, for any German youth to return to the Fatherland to serve. America was not yet at war, so I came back to Germany, trained for three months and then was dispatched to my unit, the 12th S.S. Panzer division."

I eyed him curiously. "Why? How could you do that?"

"I just wanted to help my people, my family. But I really had no other choice, Dad pressured me to join. But," he said, placing his hand on my back, "that's enough about me, what's going on with you?"

"Well, not much. Mother is still happily married to Father. He runs a shooting range. He said, since he did not have the chance to teach me to shoot, he should give that opportunity to others. I enlisted after Pearl Harbor and was shipped out here for the Invasion and then to this damned scrap of land."

"You made it through Normandy?" he asked and I nodded in return. "Good thing you weren't charging the beach in front of my unit," he laughed, "we slaughtered anyone that came in our range!"

"Alfred, those were men out there struggling over those dunes. You can't joke about such things! You have no idea. I was there. I struggled against the tide, against the bullets and my own fear," I stated sharply. "Anyways, all you're hearing is a bunch of Nazi propaganda, that's all. Would I be here and would your unit flee, if the Allies weren't winning?" He pondered the question. "You never will understand what those men, what I, went through."

"Yes, I do, I do understand," he replied with anguish, running his fingers through the snow. "I spoke foolishly. I too was there. I saw the pain, the death, the suffering. I just try to cover that up with false hopes of victory. I just want to forget all that pain, but I just can't. I'm sick of this war. It's different, you know? Different than what we thought war would be like back home. When we were kids, we just liked pretending we were battling the enemy. I never expected the enemy would turn out to be my own best friend."

I stared into the flames as they licked higher into the shadows. Snow continued to fall and blanketed the road. I looked down at my feet and saw a small drift of the white powder. Dipping my hands in it for a moment, I rolled it into a ball, turned and fired it at Alfred.

"What was that for?" he cried, jumping up and grabbing his own handful of snow.

"That was for nearly killing me!" I laughed, seizing another and tossing it at him.

Our footprints drifted in dizzying loops until the wood fire was nothing more than a crackle, and the icy air had grown so bitter that it hurt our lungs to breath. I looked once again into the night and sighed.

"Well, duty calls, I've got to get back." I stood up with a cough and reached out my hand. "Good luck, Alfred." He did not take my hand, 87



but wrapped me in an embrace instead.

"Back at you, friend. Ally," he said with a wink, gripping my hands feverishly, refusing to let go. "Wish we could have been on the same side David. It's a real shame."

"Well, maybe one day, we will. You never know," I replied while pulling away from his grasp.

I disappeared into the wreckage without returning another word to my dear friend. There was a horrid guilt that built up inside of me as my feet swept across the felled earth and returned to Walters' side. I checked to make sure that the wound on my arm was well concealed, and eyed it nervously. The last thing I wanted to deal with was Walters' constant questioning.

Walters was sitting propped up against the concrete with his gun tilted in his hands and a grenade sitting tentatively at his hip. He looked up with swollen red eyes as I approached. "Been waiting for you for a long while. What's the news from the enemy? How many Krauts are up there, son?"

"There's one," I started uneasily, "just one, Sir. The whole battalion's moved out." I looked sadly down at my feet and coughed, shifting restlessly.

"I know that expression," he said with a scrutinizing stare, standing up. "He's an American boy isn't he? A traitor, a filthy traitor, 'called to the Fatherland', right?" He spit at the ground near my feet.

"No, Sir. He's my best friend from back home. We've known each other for years, decades! You just can't, Sir! I'm begging you." I kneeled at his feet, with my hands folded up. "I'm begging you."

"No, David. There are lives being lost every day out there. Every Kraut I kill is one closer to victory, especially if he's a deserter."

He passed me my gun in an instant, and took off from behind the embankment. With trembling hands, I raised my weapon and looked through the sight. Instead of swinging my view toward the German camp, I found myself staring directly at the back of Walters' head. I watched him raise his gun toward Jacob as if he were out hunting game.

"You coming David?" he asked me, staring forward. "David?" He turned to look at me.

With my weapon fixed directly upon him, he gaped in disbelief. "Put down your weapon or I will shoot," I commanded. Walters craned his neck to stare off into the distance where Wesite and Jackson were already dozing by now.

"If you shoot me David, you'll be charged with treason, and you'll be hung," he hissed. He stepped closer. "Is that really something you want to be labeled with? Your family, friends and town will never forget how you supported the Krauts. That's not something you want is it?" he questioned, pointing his gun downward. "Just lower the weapon David, it's all right."

My heart labored, I did not want such a fate. What would my poor Father think of me? And my Mother? I could almost see their faces.

I lowered my weapon in submission. Tears streamed down my face and I slid onto my knees. Walters walked toward me, picked up my weapon, and I heard the click of a trigger. The muzzle of his rifle was aimed right between my eyes. I cared not.

"You call me a traitor for refusing to betray my one and only true friend!" I cried. "Well then, go ahead! Shoot!" I threw my arms in the air. "Shoot!"

A sudden gunshot ricocheted through the city of concrete. My mind was swimming and I flashed open my eyes. Walters was kneeled, dead, before me. His finger was still on his gun's trigger and my own weapon lay under him.

I looked up from the body to see Alfred standing among the fragmented concrete. He was still gripping his rifle. With tears in our eyes, we saluted each other.

We were both done playing war.

*Kathryn Lindquist*

## Repose

Safe and warm, I exhilarate softly. Every nerve reaching, tingling, relaxing. Daft and dreamy, I am distant; yet there is nowhere I'd rather be. My particles are enveloped and caressed—a response rare and sweet. More myself than any other moment, though I'm blissfully unaware of self-consciousness. Thoughts nonexistent, pleasure indistinct, body unchained. Half-in, half-out of the stark world, I am in the state of innocence that is incomprehension. Untainted by knowledge, I know nothing. Feeling fleeting, far oftener a land of loopy thought, this instance I have entered that fortress of forgiving cushions, inviting pillows, and billowy blankets: morn awakening.

*Victoria Berger*

## The Rain Got Harder

The rain got harder, little water BBs peppering the windshield. The rhythmic assault on the roof of the car intensified. I extracted my chilled hand from my pocket and turned the heat up a notch. The rush of air intensified in proportion with the drone of the rain. I looked at my wife in the passenger seat and pretended not to notice as she quickly wiped a tear from her eye.

My wife never cried. Even the day we sent our daughter to college, I was the one whose eyes were watering and she was the one who made fun of me. Now, however, at 11:00 a.m., on the way to the Memphis bus station, her hair hastily brushed and her perfume overlooked, her eyes misted. She was still smiling bravely, though, as the woman in the back seat spoke.

I peeked into the rearview mirror at the gray-haired, rotund woman wearing an altogether proper smile. "Remember that time when we were supposed to walk that couple to the next station, and we came up on a rockslide? And that guy with us decides the rocks look sturdy enough to climb over, so he gets about two feet up, the rock he's holding onto comes out, and he falls down and sprains his ankle."

My wife laughed. "Right, right. So we ended up having to walk all the way around the mountain anyway, but we had to help him limp all the way to the station and back." The tears that were in her eyes now were tears of laughter, not sorrow. I smiled, glad of the change. My wife took it as a sign that I wanted to be included in the conversation. "You should have met this guy, babe. He was tall, muscular, and young, and he thought he could do anything. One time—I think it was right after he got into the country, right, Barb?"

Barbara nodded her sphere of gray hair. "It was his first day there," she stated, her seventy-year-old voice thin but full.

"Right, his first day. He walks out of his hut and sees some Indonesian boys climbing a coconut tree. So he goes up and asks if he can try. He takes his shoes off and starts shimmying up the tree, just like the boys. But he gets to a bend in the tree, and he's already really tired because it's taken him, like, twice as long as anybody else to get there, and he can't stay on top of the bend. So he swings around the tree and he's hanging upside-down..." She was laughing so hard she had to stop talking. "But...but he can't keep a hold on the tree with his feet..." Another fit of giggles. "So, he's just hanging there with his feet kicking around like—"

This time she had no breath left with which to describe the unfortunate young man's fate, so she just demonstrated with her own feet, kicking them around as if she were ten years old.

Barbara's ringing laugh joined my wife's breathless choking. I chuckled at my wife's antics, pretending I was amused by the story. I watched out of the corner of my eye as my wife's laughing slowed, then stopped. A large smile formed the remnants of her laugh. The smile took shape, then froze, and finally dropped. She sighed, and I could hear it—this love for the woman behind me, and this reluctance for their time together to end. I marveled at this bond that tied them together, even after so many years. I just couldn't understand it.

The speed limit went down from fifty-five to thirty-five. The windshield-wipers started making a screeching noise across the glass, so I turned down the frequency of their wipes. The methodical beat of their arcs pulled all of our attentions away from the silence that grew deeper and more sorrowful with every minute that took us closer to the bus station. When I finally made the left turn and pulled into the station parking lot, the rain had not slackened at all. I turned the car off so that there was no sound but the rain sweeping over the roof.

"I guess I'm the one that has to get the bags?" I asked, looking at my wife. She smiled faintly. I made a show of feeling imposed-upon as I pulled the lever to open the trunk and stepped out into the rain. "I'll bet if you had to do this, you would have remembered to put the umbrella back in the car," I said before shutting the car door with a metallic boom.

The rain chilled my skin and I could feel my hair rising in goose-bumps. Water bombarded my face and made me close my eyes. I hurried to the trunk and dragged Barbara's suitcases out, letting them to the pavement with a heavy clack. When I had both of them out, I slammed the trunk, locked the car doors, and started off to the station, where Nancy and Barbara were already waiting. Barbara thanked me for my help as I hurried up the four steps to the cover of the bus station's ceiling. I smiled to let her know I didn't really begrudge her the effort.

The three of us headed for the sales counter to buy Barbara's ticket. Nancy and I stood in the background as Barbara handled the purchase. When she had concluded her transaction, she returned to us with a defeated look. "The next bus to Louisiana is in two hours," she said.

I raised my eyebrows. "That doesn't make sense. I looked at their website, and it said there was one at 12."

"Yeah, he said that one was cancelled. The bus ran into transmission problems, so they have to wait for the next bus." I grimaced. "But you don't have to stay. I can stay here by myself," the stocky woman insisted.

"Nonsense," my wife responded. "We'll stay with you." I nodded my assent.

We walked to the waiting area and sat down. Even in the enclosed, overpopulated waiting room, the cold was numbing. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, feeling some of the warmth from my legs. Barbara smartly drew a bottle of hand lotion out of her purse and began spreading it over her cracked knuckles. "The cold makes my skin crack," she explained, offering the bottle to my wife. Nancy took it, but I, conscious of my maleness, refused the offer when it was presented to me.

The women were telling yet another story about their communal past when Barbara's cell phone rang. She kept her pleasant smile as she reached into her purse, but her attention had clearly shifted to the device she produced from her bag.

"Hello?" she began, now completely ignoring my wife. Nancy turned to me and asked if I had brought her gloves from the car. I considered telling her that was a ridiculous question based on the assumption I was thinking about her gloves and Barbara's bags at the same time, but I decided this was not the right situation for sarcasm. Instead, I offered her my outer coat.

As Nancy sat up in her seat and shrugged into my coat, Barbara's ringing, quite proper laugh sounded two seats to my left. Her focus was still not back from wherever it had gone—Louisiana, probably.

The man in front of me lit a cigarette, alerting me for the first time to the bluish haze in the air and my shortened breaths. My wife coughed in an attempt to communicate her lack of enthusiasm for the man's habits. She heaved her shoulders to emphasize the point, but my coat was so big the movement was largely unnoticeable. To be polite, the man moved a few seats to my right. I smiled. Nancy would never get used to people smoking.

Barbara was saying her good-byes to her contact at the other end of the phone conversation. She replaced the phone in her purse and turned to my wife. As she turned, I could see the light in her smiling eyes change, becoming softer as her gaze steadied on Nancy.

"That was Cliff in Baton Rouge," Barbara explained. "He's trying to get his children into a special school, and he wants me to give them a reference." Thus the conversation resumed, moving quickly from Baton Rouge to Indonesia.

I turned my attention away from the conversation to the smoke in the air. It was an interesting suspension, this concentration of burnt tobacco. It looked as though it would have no substance—as though it could be blown away with ease. But it would return. In a way, it was never really gone. No matter how hard I blew, I had to inhale sometime, and I would inevitably inhale smoke.

“You know, I still remember when your little brother was baptized,” Barbara was saying.

“Of course you do,” my wife replied, her voice still whole-hearted and joyous, but misted with the tone of memory. “You baptized him.”

I gave no visible sign of it, but I started listening more closely now.

“Do you remember what I told you that day?” asked Barbara.

“Yes, I do.” Another change in Nancy’s voice signaled a more serious level of conversation. “You told me I had taught you something.” Barbara smiled a pensive, proper smile. “I thought that was strange, you know,” continued Nancy. “I always thought of you as the teacher.”

Barbara’s smile broadened and became slightly playful. “I’m not quite so old I can’t learn from you,” she said. My wife smiled. “You taught me how valuable a friend can be. Did you know I had never prayed with another person before we started that study?”

“I didn’t know that,” Nancy said, her voice not quite wondering but not quite disinterested, either. The two were silent for a moment before Nancy said, “I think I learned more with you than I have ever learned since.”

“Me, too,” Barbara replied.

The door to the waiting area slammed open, greeted by a whistling sound made by the wind and a symphony of sharp rain drops hitting the floor. Everyone in the waiting area looked to the door and saw the bus driver standing in the frame.

“Bus to Baton Rouge leaving in ten minutes,” the pot-bellied man announced, entering the room and closing the door. His work shoes clicked on the floor as he hurried toward the restroom signs.

I stood up and offered to put Barbara’s bags on the bus. She thanked me, and I left the two women sitting as I walked to the door. I opened the portal, lowered my head, and surged into the storm outside. The rain in my ears drowned out all other sound and seemed to isolate me as I marched to the bus. The assistant waiting there took the bags from me without question, and I returned to the waiting room.

Just inside the door stood my wife and her old friend. Barbara gave me a hug and said she'd miss me and invited us to come visit her in Louisiana. I smiled politely and made all the proper responses. She wanted no more from me. As soon as my part in the ritual was over, Nancy offered to walk the older woman to the bus. The two started off into the rain.

I will never know what they said to each other beside the bus, but I don't need to. I saw enough. They exchanged a few loving words. They probably prayed. Then they hugged. And I saw a transcendent moment now forever burned into my memory. As the two friends turned away from each other, just before they were each isolated by the rain, I saw the past and the present in one place. Tennessee and Louisiana, the United States and Indonesia—all were right there for just one second, splitting apart.

My wife came back into the dry waiting area. "You wish she would stay, don't you?" I asked gently, thinking I finally understood.

"Not really," she replied, taking a deep breath. "Cliff's waiting for her."

*Joshua Pittman*





*Arthur Berger*

## **Wander**

Glittering pavement leads to sparkling water. Wind pressing against my ears, clothes billowing. Shadow before, heading towards nowhere. Aimless beneath the endless sky. Shooting streaks of white puff behind planes. Pine trees rise full of branches and empty places. Nature attuned with my thoughtless way. Houses fade as I envelop the scene.

*Victoria Berger*

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