INKLING

Volume 15  Spring 2005  Number 1

The Inkling is the Creative Arts magazine of Tomball College of the North Harris Montgomery Community College District. Students of Tomball College are invited to submit poetry, essays, short stories, or artwork for this annual publication. All copyrights revert to the authors and artists. No portion of the Inkling may be reproduced without consent of the individual contributors.

Advisors:  
Dr. Rebecca L. Tate  
Dr. Greg Oaks  
Melissa Studdard, Willow Chase  
Earl Staley, Art  
Steffani Frideres, Photography  

Advisory Board:  
Doug Boyd  
Katherine M. Reynolds  
Dr. Bill Simcik  
Pat Stone  
Cami Davey  

Senior Editor:  
Tina Richardson  

Assistant Editors:  
Pam Kubicek  
Linda Leschak  
Andrew LeRoy  

Staff:  
Patricia Clay  
Patrick Connolly  
Sousan Hammad  
Sheryl Herold  
Maryam Kazerouni  
Angela King  
Nick Klawetter  
Mary Lavender  
Mark Meitzler  
Ashley Murphy  
Trycia Nguyen  
Jacob Nielson  
Amy Sirois  
Aislinn Strang  
Elizabeth Tashakori  
Jonathan Wing  

Cover Art – "Tears of Pain"  
Edwin J. McCaddon
INKLING

Table of Contents

Wee Beasties by Anastasia Voight .................................................. 1
Keys by Heather Stilwell ................................................................. 3
Morphed Pretzel by Lisa Veltman .................................................... 6
Writer's Cramp by Linda Leschak ................................................... 7
Storm's Passing by Tina Richardson .............................................. 8
Crescent City Crisis by Julia L. Taylor ........................................... 9
Girl with Figure by Lauren Wagner .............................................. 14
A Personal Fable by Sadie Truax .................................................... 15
Seeing the Elephant by Emily Jones .............................................. 16
Lost Returns by Rhett Hewitt ....................................................... 17
Let Go by Gina M. Ramos ............................................................. 24
Garden of Life and Death by Christine O'Rourke ......................... 25
Turn Me On by Patricia Clay ......................................................... 27
Raw Material by Sousan Hammad .................................................. 28
Magnetism by James Badia ............................................................ 34
Self Portrait by Kristin Thomas ..................................................... 35
Where Things Went Wrong by James Moran ............................... 36
Infectious Laughter by Anastasia Voight ..................................... 39
Thirst by Kacy Breanne Reed ....................................................... 41
Gravy by Jacob Nielsen ............................................................... 42
Once in a Lifetime by James Badia ................................................................. 43
Wendy Madonna by Andrew LeRoy ............................................................... 48
I Felt Like A Child by Lalae Azodi ................................................................. 49
Frustration of an Artist by Melissa Flores .................................................... 50
Addiction by Amy Roll .................................................................................. 51
Untitled by Christy Addison ....................................................................... 55
And I Feel Just Like Jesus’ Son by Mark Meitzler ...................................... 56
The Bounty Hunter’s Mark by Jeff Conklin ................................................ 57
Urban Lullaby by Tina Richardson ............................................................... 64
To Fly by Patrick D. Connolly ..................................................................... 65
Curves by Colleen Acquarola ..................................................................... 67
Promises by Patricia Clay ........................................................................... 68
The Continuum by Melissa Flores ............................................................... 73
Two Sides to Every Story by Neil Cross ...................................................... 74
On His Own by Scott Buss .......................................................................... 75
Elegy to the Heart’s Companion by Jacob Nielson ..................................... 79
Shades of Red by Linda Leschak .................................................................. 80
The Sundowner by Heather Stilwell ............................................................. 81
Henry and the Old Tree by Scott Campbell ................................................ 82
Last Minute Shopper by Patrick D. Connolly .............................................. 85
Pine Cone by Noah W. Greer .................................................................... 87
Brothers and Sisters by Sadie Truax ............................................................ 88
First Place Poetry Winner

Wee Beasties
Anastasia Voight

“No more pleasant sight...” said Anton von.
Though we might argue, pro and con,
The beauty of his beasties lively
Disporting in water droplets. While we
Now with better scopes, do see
Clearly their diversity.
To assuage curiosity
We measure the velocity
Of these variegated lifeforms small.
Some whip by, while others crawl
Along on pseudopods. Some have eggs to haul.
Some are colored green or red, some not at all.
Sometimes an innocent seeming ball
Rows by with mouth enough to fall
Ferociously
Upon larger prey,
Then in instant swallow all.

Don’t believe old Anton von
Had clue of what he looked upon.
His homemade microscopes with single
Lens, could but dimly show what did mingle
In droplets small. Though truth be told
His drawings showed
Remarkable veracity. So recent tests have verified,
Despite the homemade tools he plied.

We have better eyes
These days to visualize
This lively crop, to marvel complexity.
We overcome perplexity
By illuminating slug ameba,
Spotlighting primordial euglena,
Analyzing ciliated paramecia,
Taxing that taxonomy protista.

What taxes me I must confess
Is not the critters. I digress
From these beasties small,
By a question that’s perplexing.
What’s vexing
Me is how to say the final
Polysyllable?
As von Leeuwenhoek’s exceeding vowelish
Please correct confusion callowish
Before my tongue is broke.
Do you say it hock?
Or hook?
Or heck?
Or hoke?
Keys
Heather Stilwell

I snatched the car keys and held them behind my back. She squared her diminutive frame, and I braced myself for that Irish temper I knew so well.

"Give me those keys! You've no right to disrespect your grandmother! Give them over now!" Grandmother railed.

I could see the frustration and anger in her face, still beautiful and delicate at eighty, and right now it was directed squarely at me. While I chose my next words, I looked around the little house, military clean and yet warm and cozy – her private sanctuary. For the first time in my life, I felt like an intruder in my grandmother's home.

"Now, Grandmother, you're just being stubborn. Why don't you let me drop you off at the beauty parlor? I need to borrow your car anyway."

My words cast a strange echo in my ears, and I caught a brief breath of a long ago conversation in that same room. "Heather, you're being as stubborn as your father. I'll not have you staying up half the night watching that trash on TV!"

As I digested that unwanted irony, she just stared at me, tight-lipped, and I could see those blue eyes start to glisten with temper and, yes, fear. Oh, she was definitely lucid now.

I suddenly felt a twinge of guilt, not because I took her keys but because I was secretly glad that I had gotten her good and mad. Oh, yes, there it was: that famous spunk. My grandmother was the most loving person that I'd ever known, but she was also the brassiest, sassiest, take-no-flap-from-nobodys-No-How-No-Way little spitfire to ever pitch a fit. Here was the woman who went into modeling and turned the heads of every man in the county, including my granddaddy. Here was the woman who gave it all up to raise four children alone while her husband served
in World War II and Korea. Here was the woman who sent her four children to college and when it was all said and done, said, “Now it’s my turn.” Here was the woman who earned a Bachelor’s degree and began a career at the age of 60. Here was the woman who said, “Why not?” instead of “It can’t be done.” Here was the woman who had inspired me my whole life and who was gradually becoming more and more elusive.

Grandmother’s greatest battle had begun about a year or so before our little skirmish over the car keys. “Just a little old-age forgetfulness,” was the standard reply as questions and statements were repeated first once, then two or three times over. The checkbook and bills were not attended to, and unscrupulous repairmen/salesmen easily found a mark in her. Things began to come up missing quite frequently, and frustration soon turned to aggravation. The family gradually took over her affairs, and at about this time, the fear kicked into high gear. Grandmother’s greatest fear was to be sentenced to a nursing home. “I know what you’re all doing. You just want to lock me up in a home,” she would lash out. “I’d rather be dead first. I take care of myself and don’t need any of you.” After this stage, the disorientation and confusion began. There were the midnight wanderings in the front yard, the attempted phone calls to deceased family and friends, the hit-or-miss recognition of loved ones.

The culmination of these events had happened just a few days before and was the reason behind this tug-of-war with the car keys. My aunt had received a call from a gas serviceman in Eden, a town about 40 miles away. He had found an elderly woman disoriented and crying beside her car in his parking lot. The man had managed to get my aunt’s phone number out of Grandmother, but she had no idea of where she was, why she was there, or how to get home. My aunt and
cousin then drove out there to fetch her and the car back home. They confiscated her keys at the time. Apparently they overlooked the spare set.

As I looked at Grandmother once again, I could see that she was mentally preparing to make a final stand. I didn't doubt her chosen tactic for a moment: emotional guilt. She glanced at the keys once more and then stared me directly in the eye. My grandmother had the saddest eyes I've ever seen, and I felt a fist clench around my heart. In that moment, I looked into those watery-blue pools and saw the exhausted weariness of a once-vibrant and hopeful being. I saw the young woman behind the old face and shared her sorrow in what had been lost. I saw the mother and backbone of our family and shared her regret and anger over our family's pain. I saw those blue eyes and was shaken by how much they favored mine.

"Heather, give me my keys. I've been driving myself to the beauty parlor since before you were born, and I'll keep doing so until I die. I used to change your diapers, missy, and I don't need you to drive me around." Now I could share her fear. Would I walk this same path someday?

"No, Grandmother," I said softly. Please, please, no more. Why the hell didn't they think to get her spare keys last week! I repeated myself. "No, Grandmother. I know you took care of me when I was little. Now let me help you. Please." Solemnly, Grandmother lowered her hands, bowed her head and slumped her shoulders, and turned away. Somewhere, a little white flag waved in the breeze.
Writer's Cramp
Linda Leschak

My English teacher said,
"Write a poem right now, right here."
I said, "What!
And confront my lifelong fear?
Face the intricacy,
the complexity
called poetry?
Where each word taunts me to the
nth degree?
Where lean as I may toward symmetry,
I find it leaning away from me?

Oft times creation eluding,
No voice, no muse, no metaphor—
like a simile trapped behind locked door.
And I've yet to master that perfect rhyme.
But say!
If I tame free verse,
can I claim that as mine?
Or juxtapose
I might conquer prose,
would it be a violation of form?
A deviation from personal norm?
Or perhaps my calm in the face
of poetic storm?"

OK, I'm writing a poem. Yes—here I am,
I'll call it my own—my own epigram!
Storm's Passing
Tina Richardson

Standing in the gloaming
after a day of rain-drenched,
loud, and raucous storming,
and the clouds are passing
like a spool of raw cotton
that's come unwound.

The sun sets differently,
fitfully, poetically pink
saturating the air and inked
against my skin is this diffusion,
the color of a stretched
balloon as if the passing
storm has strained the sun
and stained the world
and all who ride it.
"What in the world took you so long?" my husband Don asked when I returned from the bathroom. "I have been sitting alone at this table for thirty minutes, and the waiter has refilled my water glass four times. He has circled our table like a hawk and finally inquired what happened to the 'Madame.'"

"Oh, well," I uttered unable to think of a legitimate excuse. "There was soggy toilet paper in all of the stalls." I put my head down and concentrated on unfolding my starched white napkin. He was not convinced, nor did I blame him. How could I ever tell him the truth?

We were celebrating our tenth year of marriage and had come to New Orleans for a romantic weekend. My husband had made reservations at Smith's Louis XVI Restaurant which was situated in the heart of the French Quarter. Nestled in the famous St. Louis Hotel, the restaurant was lovely indeed with its elegant ambience and romantic atmosphere. We had just begun to sip our first glass of Chardonnay and nibble on the crusty French bread when I thought of my friend, Cindy.

My friend Cindy was a preschool teacher by day and a sex goddess by night. She was the essence of sexuality and always livened up the usually dull teachers' lunchroom each day by bragging about her late night sexual escapades with her husband in their Jacuzzi. "Bathing suits are optional," she would always say. Holiday staff parties were always well attended when our husbands knew Cindy would be there. Standing at the kitchen bar with a Scotch in her hand, she would hypnotize our husbands with her spirited conversation. She wore with confidence the tight leather skirt and sweater that plunged to her navel. When in her company, I felt my outfits more befitting a convent rather than a Christmas party.
“Katherine, this is your chance,” she said when told of my upcoming trip to New Orleans. “Here’s what you do,” she said with unbridled enthusiasm, “if you want to give your husband a thrill. The next time the two of you are alone for dinner, you excuse yourself from the table, walk into the bathroom, remove your underwear, and when you return, throw it on the table in front of him.”

“Cindy,” I said, as my mouth dropped open. “Are you kidding me? I could never do that. Everyone knows I’m a prude. I’ve never even worn a two-piece bathing suit—much less do something as risky as that.”

“Sure you can, you just need to have a couple of glasses of wine, and you’ll be totally relaxed. Come on, why are you always so uptight? Do this, and your husband will have a night he won’t forget. Besides if you are ever going to do it, New Orleans is the place. It’s not called the ‘Big Easy’ for nothing!”

She had a point—this would be my opportunity to prove to myself that I could be as uninhibited as she was. Besides, I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. I could just picture the look of pleasure on my husband’s face if I went through with this act of ecstasy. If Cindy could buy her husband a lap dance from the Hustler Club for Valentine’s Day, surely I could go shed my conservative skin for just one night.

Don and I were seated at a small, round table in the corner of the restaurant. The restaurant was romantic, indeed, with its crimson and faux-marbled walls. My husband had requested a table with a view of the Mississippi River. The courtyard fountain was gently serenading us. The waiter brought the wine menu and after a respectable time, returned to the table to take our order. He returned shortly with two glasses of Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay. We slowly sipped our wine while looking out at the river. My husband reached across the candlelit table to touch my hand. The wine was lessening his inhibitions as well.
"I'll be right back," I said abruptly, as I jumped up from the table. I had to act now before I ran out of momentum. There was nothing that would distract me as I made my way across the glossy wooden floor to the restroom at the rear of the restaurant next to the kitchen. I slipped through the ornate French doors marked "Madame" and walked into the nearest stall, locking the door safely behind me. I waited a few minutes to make sure I was alone, took a deep breath, and slowly removed my underwear. I slid my fingers with the underwear into the side pocket of my mossy-colored silk skirt. Before walking out of the bathroom, I peeked through the crack in the stall door to be sure the bathroom was still uninhabited. Looking rather sheepish and feeling rather foolish, I walked out of the bathroom.

Walking with my head down and my arms crossed in front of me, I quickly made my way back to my table. The restaurant was bustling and loud—it was Saturday night in New Orleans, and the waiters were rushing to and from the kitchen with their heavily laden trays. One of them brushed by me on his way to a table. I was just a few feet from my table ready to give my husband the thrill of a lifetime. I placed my hand in my pocket to pull out the cool satin and lace. Nothing. I dug deeper, but the underwear was nowhere to be found. Panic was beginning to take over my thoughts. I thrust my hand into my second pocket but still nothing. I knelt down where the waiter had brushed against me but saw nothing on the floor but breadcrumbs.

Oh, no, I thought to myself—this can't be happening. I had to do something fast. Standing up quickly, I looked through the subdued lighting and saw my husband studying the menu. I turned around and made my way back through the restaurant to an exit in the back of the kitchen. I ran out into the frenzied streets of New Orleans with my heels clicking along the cobblestone streets.
Bourbon Street was as raucous as ever. Jazz music filled the air as well as the yells of drunken conventioneers clamoring at beautiful women on balconies. The girls dangled cheap plastic beads from their hands, all the while teasing the men below. Looking past the balcony, I suddenly noticed a flashing pink neon sign on the opposite side of Bourbon Street. Pushing my way though the drunken crowd, I made my way to “Cindie’s Exotic Lingerie” and walked into the door hoping to remain anonymous. The bored salesclerk barely looked up—she was too busy reading a magazine and talking on her cell phone.

“Can I help you?” she said in flat voice without energy or excitement.

“Uh, no,” I mumbled making my way to the underwear display table. I was doing my best to avoid eye contact with the man rifling through the see-through nighties with his girlfriend. I hurriedly rummaged through the outlandish styles and exotic colors. Finding only one pair with the crotch intact, I picked them up to look for the price tag. I looked up too see the reflection of the sign “Cindie’s” flashing in the mirror above the underwear display. My friends face suddenly flashed through my mind—her message to me to let go was pressing against my brain. A sudden stab of disappointment pierced through me. What was my problem—why couldn’t I just let go of my outdated inhibitions and be careless and wild? As the old battlecry exclaimed, “It’s now or never.” Without a conscious thought, I dropped the pair in my hand and instead picked up a leopard print with garter snaps. I made my way to the register this time with determination.

The young salesclerk glanced up long enough from her magazine to look at me. She pushed her streaked red hair from her brown eyes. I gazed at her with an air of cool self-possession.

Her expression changed, and she suddenly smiled. Her pierced eyebrows arched into a look of confirmation.
"Cool," she said, handing me the leopard print panties. "Have fun."

"No bag," I said, and once again thrust the underwear into my pocket.

With renewed confidence, I walked back out into the cool New Orleans evening. Feeling much lighter this time, I practically skipped back to the restaurant and made my way back through the kitchen door. I could barely see my husband through the dim restaurant lights. I casually walked back to the table and sat down. I wiped the perspiration from my forehead with my napkin, then put it once again into my lap. My husband looked up from the menu and looked at me as if for the first time—it was as if he could see the look of pleased achievement on my face.

I picked up the menu and began to study it with interest. My right hand felt in my pocket to feel the smooth satin and lace. I looked around the restaurant and held up my other hand to signal to our waiter—he appeared as if on cue.

"Yes," he said, opening his book and ready to write.

I smiled demurely at my husband across the candlelit table and simply said, "Another glass of Chardonnay, please."
Girl with Figure

Lauren Wagner
A Personal Fable
Sadie Truax

My past
Is a lost, locked briefcase
Of El Dorado's gold
And Broadway playbills,
Wedged underneath the folded front seat
Of an abandoned car wreck.
Thick spots spackle the dusty dashboard,
Blackberry-red, still burning
With sweaty fever, still smoking and singeing
The upholstery.
The driver's nails scratched trails
Down and around and across the leather,
Popping muscles with long leans into blackness,
Clawing and gripping for the lost life
That movie star momentum crammed out of reach.
Mythology on wilted pages of
Ivory pulp and mustard edges mark
Treasures of tragedy written in the tears
Of survivors to disbelievers.
My fable of fame has a brass lock and single handle,
The finest leather in mahogany finish
Somewhere in a heap of strangled sin.
Seeing the Elephant
Emily Jones

Milk in willing waves quells the elephant,
leering serenely between threads and beams.
Quiet size treads slowly on the deadwood rocks.
Every cordial view glares back
gulping down mugs of intact implications.
I squeeze my fists tight, like white-knuckled oysters
as experience settles into your
grey wrinkles that take up
slack for a quivering synapse.
Wisdom knocks me green on the jungle floor.
Lost Returns
Rhett Hewitt

The sun was pelting down in sheets of intolerable warmth, as it had been for the entire day. It had done this for the last week, the last two weeks, the last year, and every year since men decided to drill for oil off-shore.

Pete Robertson was on his hands and knees, the hot red steel deck burning through his grease-stained, paint-covered Carhartt work overalls. The sweat was showersing off of his forehead, evaporating within seconds of falling on the steel. Only his orange hard hat was stopping the sun from turning his head into jerky. One monotonous stroke after the other, he liberally brushed paint onto the steel, dipping his brush back into the coffee can, where the paint was hardening before he could get it all out. His knees were hurting beyond the point of toleration. His back was arched backwards, like an old doe that had carried one too many fawns, and it hurt.

He spit some of the tobacco juice that was welling up in his lip into a paper cup he had nearby and gazed out past the confines of the platform for a moment as he stood up to stretch. In a world of water that stretched as far as the eye could see, this was a thirty-six thousand square foot desert. He looked at his Timex. The crystal was scratched and dotted with paint and grease. The band was dried and stiff. "Three o'clock, time for a coffee break."

Stepping into the smoke/coffee/break room, rolling his hat off his head, and peeling his safety glasses from his face, Pete felt refreshed as the coldness of the air conditioner swept over him, turning his sweat into an icy cold bath. He had earned this break, and he knew it. He stomped through proudly. "If only I had a Miller Light," he thought. He said his hello's and hi's to all the rest of the crew that were on duty, drew a cup of coffee, grabbed a can of potted meat and some Saltine crackers, and eased his aching body into a vacant chair. It felt so good to straighten
his back. He spit out the remaining Copenhagen from his lip into the trash can nearby, cracked open the can of potted meat carefully so not to get the juice on himself, fought with the cracker package, and began savoring every bite, thinking how much he was reminded of home. He finished up what he thought to be his delectable treat with the cup of coffee, which, even though hot, seemed to cool his insides.

Pete took another look at his Timex, pried his snuff can from his back pocket, took a pinch and inserted it into his well-developed pocket in his lip, making sure not to drop a single grain along the way. "Well, boys, it's time to get back to work."

"Whatever, cowboy. You ain't worked a day in your life until you get on that rig floor. We'll let you come make a round trip with us some time up there and see how the roughnecks do it," remarked Chuck in his very best condescending tone.

Pete smiled, said, "I'll see ya there," and slipped on his hat and glasses, now cool to the touch, and at 3:15, stumbled back out onto the deck to hear and feel diesel engines and hear Gulf air once again.

Applying a couple more strokes of paint to the steel, Pete awoke to hear a scratching in the leaves below his deer stand, the sun fading into the background, finding himself sitting in an upright position, with his chin sunken into his chest, both hands still fastened to his Remington Model 700, .0308 caliber rifle. The warm, balmy air was covering his face like a piece of Saran Wrap, making it seemingly impossible for his skin to breathe.

Slowly, Pete rubbed his eyes and regained his vision, looking out the window at his feeder to see a couple of raccoons rummaging for corn. "Figures," he said to himself. "I've had it with them dadgum varmints, man," he hoarsely rattled on, as he raised his rifle through the thick air and up through the window of the stand. Taking aim, making sure to wait for both of the scavenging vermin to be lined up one behind the other, Pete flicked off the safety switch with a twitch of his thumb,
squeezed the trigger down, and heard a deafening thunder, combined with a shock-wave that must have been felt for at least a mile around, seeing a shower of vibrant red blood storm to the ground, followed by a settling cloud of gray fur. The smell of burnt gunpowder lingered, suspended in the damp air.

"Whoo-Man! That got em good! Maybe I can keep some corn under that dang feeder now." Noticing it was now dusk, looking at his Timex, he read, "8:12 PM." Pete began packing his gear into his backpack, unloaded his rifle, secured all the windows closed, and carefully climbed down the loose ladder that led down to the ground, making sure to skip the third rung, which had a broken weld. On the ground, he dusted the rust and dirt from his hands that was collected from the ladder, and fumbled in his pocket for his keys, as he journeyed toward his International Scout, lease-beater truck.

Thoughts of what wild animals might come out into the sinder from the mesquite bushes scrambled through Pete's mind as he walked along, the moonlight guiding his way as it peeked through the thick cheesecake clouds. He had heard stories from West Texas ever since he was a young'un, remembering about the mountain lions and the wild hogs and how they would kill a man just for the sport of it. Of course, Pete had never seen a mountain lion before in his entire life, except at the zoo and on the Discovery Channel, and he had killed countless hogs before, knowing how skittish they were.

Pete told himself that he was going to be fine, and all he needed to do was get back to the truck and go back to meet up with the others at the camp, but just when he was self-assured, having a full view of the gleaming headlights on the Scout, he saw a set of green eyes in the middle of the road. Sliding on the dirt from stopping so quickly, his steel toe boots planted on the ground, Pete had a staring contest that must have lasted for a half an hour, so he thought, as his skin began to
feel icy cold, and the feeling of thousands of mesquite thorns was aerating his arms, neck, and back. In what was really about thirty seconds later, he said to himself, "See, man, I told you it was just a deer," as he carefully and quickly ran to the truck, opened the door, and fired it up. The diesel engine ground away, the fumes one of the most comforting smells he ever recognized.

He was safe. Within the confines of his truck, nothing could hurt Pete. It was his security blanket, his ultimate freedom. The engine now warm, he pushed the clutch in, engaged the transmission into first gear, and giving it some gas, relieved the pressure from his leg, releasing the clutch, and motored on back to the deer camp, going just fast enough to get there but slow enough to not tear anything up or flatten a tire. The roads on the lease were so well traveled from decades of use that Pete could almost just let the Scout do the work as it trailed through the perfectly cut ruts, chugging down back to camp, the headlights' beam dancing from the ground to the now black and clouded-over sky, which seemed to make a blanket that kept the rabid heat close to the ground, so it could attack and infect anything it pleased.

As he rolled back into camp, Pete's two cousins, Stephen and Drake, were slouched in tattered oxidized lawn chairs and must have been expecting him for a while now. Pete noticed when he drove up that Drake had a hog strung up on the cleaning rack, and over the highly viscous odor of guts that never seemed to leave the camp, he could smell his venison chili cooking on the stove, now ready from when he left it simmering three and a half hours earlier. It was almost complete.

The chili was Pete's prized award-winning recipe, seven years running now in Sonora. Every year, he entered the wild game charity dinner cook-off at the end of deer season, just like his father, who had helped get it started back in 1972. Nobody knew what was in Pete's chili that gave it that extra kick, not even his wife, and nobody else would probably ever find out. While no one was around, he always
cracked open a can of Miller Light toward the end of the cooking of every pot, took a long swig off the top, and dumped the other three-fourths of the can into the chili. A whole can was just too much, and he could never let a good beer go to waste.

After going inside to stow his gear and drink one quarter of a beer, Pete came back outside to examine Drake’s hog, which was now two sides of meat, still joined, ready to be quartered up and tossed into an ice chest. It would later be brought into town for processing. "Nice pig you got there, man," Pete said.

Drake started up, "Boy, I tell you what. He wuddent but 'bout twenty yards off when I smelled him comin' round. Man, I put them crosshairs on his butt, man, and boom! Took him DOWN!"

Stephen motioned between Pete and the ice chest with his eyes, under the 100 watt light bulb in the utility light, strung out with an extension cord, hanging from the cleaning rack, and threw him a Miller Light.

"Dang, man," Pete said, "we gone uptown tonight, huh? We got glass bottles. Tell you what, this is ‘bout like being at the bar right now."

"They was on special down at Franks Super S," Stephen replied, his teeth glowing like a fluorescent shoplight when he smiled. He then went on to say, "Man, you shoulda seen the one Bobby an’ me trapped..." Pete tuned him out, quartering up the hog carcass with a hacksaw and hunting knife and laying it on ice.

After they all cleaned up, the trio headed inside the trailer which served as their bunkhouse. It was only two years old and hadn’t seen much action at all to speak of. It was certainly a welcome addition to the lease for this season. Pete and his cousins had managed to get it for next to nothing from a repo auction back in Magnolia during the summer.

"Man, that smells good, Pete. I’ll bet it’ll set red ants on fire," Stephen said.

Drake followed up by his usual remark, "When we gonna eat?"
Pete replied, "All I'm waitin' on is you two. That chili's been ready since you been back. It's only your fault if you're hungry," cleaning the last bit of snuff out of his lip. Of course, Pete knew he was lying, and so did the others, every time he had ever told them that line. Everyone grabbed a bowl of chili, some crackers, and another Miller Light, tearing away at the pot until there wasn't much left. It always made Pete happy when there were no leftovers.

Twenty minutes later, the table was cleared, the dishes were clean, and the guys were full. They each grabbed yet another icy cold beer so as not to lose their buzz, and made their way outside to refuel the fire, which was now a glowing hot bed of coals that would be a raging blaze again in no time. Growing more and more drunken by each blurry moment, they told fish, hunting, and off-road stories, each one being bigger and better than the last one. When the three ran out of memories, they began talking about work and the people they knew. Looking at his Timex, illuminated by the Indiglo night-light, distorted by dried paint speckles and grease in the crevices, Pete made out that it was now past 1:00 AM. "Well, boys, it's time for me to knock off," he murmured as he pulled himself out of the lawn chair and took a leak in a nearby patch of tall grass.

Stumbling back inside the cool, dry air of the trailer and making his way down the hall, he kicked his boots off, fell down on top of the bed, and drifted off as his head began to spin, no longer noticing the booming voices still coming from outside around the fire. He had to be up in four hours. The big one was out there somewhere.

Standing up again to straighten his back out, the sweat soaking his shirt, Pete placed his hands on his hips, admiring his work. The flame-red steel deck looked as new as the day the rig was launched. The smell of paint fumes overpowered the balmy salt air and the grinding of the diesel motors running around the rig.
After a hot shower, a change of clean clothes, and some time to cool down, Pete found himself in the mess hall, drinking a Dr. Pepper and shoveling a bowl of chili into his mouth. He thought about deer season again and could almost taste a trace of Miller Light.
Let Go

Gina M. Ramos
Garden of Life and Death
Christine O'Rourke

I scrub viciously at filthy hands and watch the water
   marbled with splotchy brown dirt
Swirl around the low side of the tub until it is sucked away
   into the gaping black hole at the foot
   of the porcelain basin.
Elongated orbs of saline pool in sagging lids
   And roll down my face
Cutting canyons through layers of grime and sparkling
   Like diamond gems
   In the last rays of light.
A sandpaper sponge rakes across my face
Threatening to remove freckles and blemishes alike
   from oil-saturated skin.
Watching flakes of mud, like onionskin, peel away
   Grateful for the stinging pain
   That brings momentary relief.
Where are you when I need you?
I waited in the garden for you.
   You did not come.
I threw dirt into the wind and cursed you in a thousand tongues.
   You did not answer me.
I cried out for you to embrace me, to touch me,
   to let me feel your presence.
   There was nothing.
I took them,
Every violet pansy and lavender azalea you loved and nurtured,
Every blood-red, thorny rose and perfumed honey suckle.
I took them and wrung the very juice of life from them.
Still, you would not come back to me.
I threw myself prostrate in the soil you so tenderly cultivated
    And wept until heaven wept with me,
    Until the ground was nought more than a soup of earth,
    Broken stems, and pulverized petals.
I washed my hands, scrubbed my face,
Then I went to visit you today
    And brought with me the very last rose from the garden.
I spoke to you
    But silence was my only response.
Your cold, granite gravestone mocked me,
    Taunted me, knowing what it was my heart longed for.
Come back to me.
I beg of you,
    Return to your garden.
Return to your garden here with me...
Second Place Poetry Winner

Turn Me On
Patricia Clay

The throaty, melancholy voice of Nina Simone
brings memories of hot, sultry summer nights
of fireflies flickering in the distance and the ghost-like
eerie glow of the full moon shining through clouds
onto the windshield of your candy-apple red
'56 Chevy.

Glasses of ice and bourbon dissolved into puddles,
and rivulets ran down polished paint and chrome,
as we, too preoccupied to note, surveyed
and mapped obsession's terrain, charted regions
undiscovered and followed rivers to ancient
mystical beginnings.

We were the fast-pitched baseball slammed into bleachers,
the accidental home run, the steam of cold raindrops
cascading on desert pavement, the morning mist
meandering over a rogue river melting into sunrise
and with the mythical strength of Zeus, took the game
into overtime.

Now I fix things you neglected, like doors that won't shut,
leaky bathroom faucets, and the broken bedroom window.
For hours I stare at the Chevy sitting idly in the garage,
knowing that Nina's voice will be silenced by dust
settling on the stereo while I wish you would come home
and turn me on.

Dedicated to the memory of William Gretz Clay (1950-2004)
18 July 2006

The year before three summers last, Coco made a goal, then busted heads in midair with the midfielder and can now brag with blood in his gob. I haven’t spilled details of Coco’s impact, am just here to witness a copycat in making. That bloody offensive midfielder was the pride of Italia.

The pubs in Berlin hiked the bloody prices. I cannot even fancy a lager without the thought of the tremendous euros I must pay.

Everything here is outta sight. The South American fellas know how to plot a bloody party. As for us, well, we certainly have drinking as one of our Ten Commandments.

_Thou shall drink and be drunk._

Combine the South American fellas with us and whaddya get? The World Cup.

Rocco can go to any game he bloody well pleases to, that cheeky cow. My life savings are the reason I made it to the Cup this time around. I cannot bloody wait for Argentine to conquer Italia. Preliminary round points are about to come on the telly and at the same hour, The Red Stripe music lads should be “entertaining” the flustered football fans. What a waste of time.

The pub is attracting more and more shower of savages chanting “VIVE ARGENTINE!” while the Italianos are anxiously waiting for the match, standing tall next to the telly, with grand women at their side. Well, the noise around the city has
simmered to a decent level considering the World Cup is the world’s most watched event. This moment right now, as me writing gets smaller and me hand more jagged, I sit on this stool and lose control of this feeling.

I must say, these bloody hooligans are far worse than I ever imagined. To bring their babby in the pub? They must be off their nut. A babby doesn’t know a bloody rule to football.

I envy that little babby. Why, when I was a young, cute, precious, freckled and red-haired babby, I dreamed of the Cup. I really do envy that little babby.

I wanta write more in me little journal of me first Cup experience, but I better save me ink for the fighting.

Six lagers later and still not a single fight. Pints, lagers, what the feck?
Better sounding tunes, no bloody doubt!
What the feck?
The bloody jacks have overflowed!
Its juices are hovering a bloody 16 centimeters over the pub’s ground, washing the mud from me shoes.

That babby sure oughta like the distinguished smell amongst his senses.

Rocco the pub owner is shouting and spitting, asking if anyone is a pipe fixer.
No luck, of course, how could a bloody pipe fixer afford to attend the Cup?
The pub reeks of a shithouse. It is bloody awful!

Rocco is trying to convince me mind that this year’s Cup will be a disaster.
The greatest bloody riot in history is near, he insists so. With his Germanic dialect
he says, "You bet your ficken arsch the police will be fully geared and shittin' their pants, waiting cowardly while the riot comes to a storm."

A fancy fella, that Rocco. A sure funny one.

The bloody wanker with the babby is surely to become another tragedy to the Cup. That babby, it's strange how he is attracted to the telly. Those odd, robotic-like gestures he carries on his face.

Bloody babby. You don't know the rules to this game.

Rocco is continuously spitting about the Hollandia and Denmark match yesterday, how Dozajeti tripped over his foot and the ankle bone lost its skin coating and entered the realm of molecular oxygen. Rocco has six teeth missing. I saw it when he said, "It was a timeless reality. There were splashes of laughter over his injury." His words sounded very poetic with a soft German cough. He spat and spat and me eyes did the listening, but me ears were elsewhere.

The babby. I try and lock me eyes with the rotten apple.

This bloody creature won't look at me. I dare him to have the honor in defending himself. I will rip him in three and feed him to the hash market. Maybe the scientists in Amsterdam will come up with the next sensational drug by using particles found in his body.

I would be like that lad, Timothy Leary.

Rocco moved on to the fella next to me. He must have noticed me eyes drifting away. Rocco was telling the fella a joke. I must admit, it is feckin' funny, something about a genie going to America.

Maybe Rocco knows the babby's story.
I have to know why he is in the pub. Has someone sent him here to watch us? Why are his eyes radiantly fixed on the telly and not the Jagermiester soaked into his clothing? Strange, how he speaks not a spit, but screams as strong as a feather. Its two double chins and layers of black hair covered in filth. I am noticing the babby's da. That bloody idiot has no reaction to his screams.

It makes sense. The lad does not care for his babby. It looks like the da is to no good in his head. Feckin' ay, this is the World Cup! That fella looks miserable biting his bloody lip. Me eyes are on high alert now.

Me eyes will catch what's going on with these two. Me mammy passed the eyes to me when I was a wee lad. In Dublin, me school friends were all jealous because me eyes always knew the truth. No bloody way was I ever wrong.

Bloody hell this is amazing. The fans are captivating, and the weather is feckin' perfect: slight wind and cold temperature which accommodates everyone's high. Oh and not to forget the fans, so diverse and beautiful. Paradise would exist if the babby was not here.

Rocco says, "Will you shut the f**k up about the babby already ya?" I think he is frustrated with me worries. He is not the funny fella any longer. Rocco found new company to blither with. His eyes are finding me a threat.

I can read all eyes. Me mother calls it a blessing, but I think it is a curse from someone. But for some reason, I cannot read that babby's eyes. Strange. I never failed at this. It is quite impossible really.

I should get closer to the babby. It may help for me eyes to transcend at a closer degree. So I stand up, grabbing me lager and fags and walk over to the stool
behind the babby’s da. Me view is exceptional. I even see the babby’s little feet kicking in the air matching the melody of the drums. The motion of his kicking is mesmerizing. It’s quite different than the norm.

His gob is filthy, his eyes empty and me reading is getting nowhere. I do not understand. I never once failed to get the information.

I asked the babby’s da, “What did you name the wee lad?”

He replies in a nasally yank that is a grating whine, “The baby doesn’t have a name. His mommy died giving birth. She was ripped apart and lost pounds of blood.”

Me eyes are flashing with alert. The da is no saint. Babby or no babby, I see evil all over his inflamed pink cheeks. Strange how the bloody lad mentioned the ma’s death. I do not care to linger of this thought. Just as the da is asking Rocco for one more round of Bud Light (an American I assume) the babby screams out loud. I can’t grasp what it is screaming, but it sounds like me alarm clock rings in ol’ Dublin.

Stupid ignorant Yankee Devil. Why can’t he enjoy a good German lager? This is the feckin’ World Cup, where football and lager are like pen and paper.

I get closer to the babby, close me eyes a little, trying to focus in to his eyes, but his pupils are moving ridiculously fast. Faster than feckin’ science is allowed. It should be impossible, but with what is going in the world these days, everything is bloody possible.

Hell, before we know it, the World Cup Trophy will fall into the hands of some
unethical pigs that paid their way to gold. Without realizing they have a trophy yes, but no feckin’ money. Ha!

Me ears are hearing ticking. If only the music would quiet down so I can find the area of that tick. It is bloody close, and me concentration exists only for the tick. I believe the babby is doing it on purpose to kill the laughter in the pub.

I stand up and walk to the babby. He is lying in his conformed pushchair, neither breathing or moving yet still the babby’s head is looking at the telly. I get closer and realize the tick is the babby.

But the babby isn’t a babby.

I look for the da, but he ran out of the pub in an instant.

He escaped.

He left the bloody babby! But that’s no babby, if it is not breathing?

Rocco sees me looks and says, “Put the ficken paper and ink away. That eye of yours is not enough? How can you write in a blissful time like this?”

Memories, my dear, is what me reply is.

I tell Rocco he should have a look at the babby, pick the strange creature up maybe. He refuses at first, but says “Fick it” and goes along. He bends his knees, and gracefully carries the babby and stands erect with confusion. It appears that the babby is programmed. Strange.

“It’s a bomb!” Rocco says.

A bomb?

Wow.

Well bloody hell! Me eyes are still good after all these years.
Magnetism
James Badia

She was like confetti in wind,
The evasiveness of her eyes,
The luster of her legs,
The careen of her chest,
The magma of her muscle,
The momentum of her mind,
The elegance of the thoroughbred.

He was like clothes on a plan,
Timing and patience,
Hands of Buonarroti,
With the wisdom and sight of a coyote,
Brackish soaked
Power-boned steel
Armed with a crop with which to wield
The jaunt of the jockey.

An unspoken race life’s plan
And out of the gate in a second they ran.
They paced themselves well,
A tizzy trot,
A sticky stride
And then into a graceful gallop.
Thick arms, legs, flesh, veins, hair and eyes all knotted.
They rode with airborne elongated force on a one-frame pace
With an unheard four-count:
Come with-me
Come with-me
Come with-me
Come with-me.

Extra energy added a burst.
They crossed the finish-line tied together for first,
Paralyzed, sensitized, magnetized.
Self Portrait

Kristin Thomas
Where Things Went Wrong
James Moran

Aran made the long walk down the dingy hallway, footsteps reflecting off walls that might have been white at one time, but that time was long past. His hand paused, falling just short of a dented knob on a door that was all but falling off the hinges. The déjà vu was expected, and when it did come, Aran found it almost comforting. He opened the door, and his father was there on the faded green, patchworked chair. He was passed out. The newest plastic bottle of Gold Rush, a cheap whiskey, lay on the floor near where his hand dangled lifelessly. The TV was on, but the broadcast for the day was done. There were only color bars, and they doused the room in an alien multicolored glow. The sound the TV made was familiar too. A strange tone that was neither high, nor low, and constant. Hours and hours of that tone, by Aran’s reckoning. What must it do to one’s dreams?

Aran used the dusty spectrum to see by, making sure not to step on anything that might have been broken on this night’s drunken fumbling. It looked like nothing, thankfully, which meant he would have less cleaning to do later. He nudged his father gently, and when that didn’t work, he shoved him harder. His father squirmed and slurried his way back to consciousness. It was a battle doomed to be lost, but he made it anyway. Aran waited till his father’s eyes opened, then squinted shut again.

“Time for bed,” he said in a measured, even tone, like the sound coming from the television speaker.

“W...shh...what?”

The voice was so slurried that it made the word difficult to interpret. But this was frequent as well, and Aran could understand it just fine.

“Time for bed.”

“U...shoh...well...”

His dad stood halfway and then fell back again. He wiped the stream of drool from his face sloppily and stood up, this time with Aran’s help. They made their way
to the bathroom, Aran stumbling to the left and to the right under his father’s almost dead weight. His father grasp the bathroom cabinet and shut the door behind him.

Aran sighed and went to his room, a small area of liberty for him. Barely enough space for a desk and a bed, but he was happy to have it all the same. He saw the beggars out in the night and in fact could see a small gathering of them outside his window on the ground level. He turned on the stereo and switched to a favored track, “Mercurial” by Aria. Warm guitar and winding, misty synthesizers combined with esoteric drums flooded his small room. A minute later a woman’s voice kicked in, filling out a void in the instruments and doing so beautifully. He sat down at the foot of his bed and pulled open the bottom drawer. He lifted up the various papers and letters contained within, until he came upon a small tin box. Inside was his own addiction. Everyone in this city had one, it seemed. He opened the small lid and saw the baggie of tobacco, some rolling papers, and the crimson dust contained in its own little plastic bag.

He stared at it a while, then began to think, as he often did late at night. Where had it all gone wrong? He remembered when they used to live in a nicer apartment, up on one of the higher levels of Rostmerch. Back then there were all sorts of little touches that weren’t present here, all things placed there by his mother. Mother...she had left when he was five. He remembered the day very well, even though he didn’t understand what his dad had meant back then.

Aran had been playing with cast iron cars, miniture replications of the Runners, specially modified vehicles that raced around the twin magnetic tracks that looped through the city. His father came in and sat next to him. He watched Aran play for a while, smiling as best he could. Aran looked up and asked what was wrong. His father said that his mother had found a new friend. After that there were lots of shouting matches behind closed doors, his father and mother, bickering and yelling. Aran would lie on his bed, hands over his ears, crying silently to the dark. Then one day, he heard a door slam. He walked out to the living room, and found his father staring at the door. Aran asked his dad where his mother had gone, but his father did not reply. It was a day after that Aran started to wonder where his
mom was and asked his dad constantly. His father would only say that she would be back soon and not to worry. Usually after this he would head into his bedroom.

That was where it all started. That’s where his father started drinking. That’s when the decline started. His father wasn’t able to hold his job for long, working on the delivery systems. He fell quickly, gold demon swallowing his mind drink after drink. He lost the apartment. They had to move down to the lower levels, down where the hovercoptors drifted about, to the rotted underbelly of the city, where hope was in short supply, and dreams died easy, where drugs were the preferred currency, like the one Aran was now staring at. As he set about making his laced cigarette, he promised himself he would get out. You couldn’t see the stars from the lowest levels, but Aran knew he would one day.

He licked the paper and rolled it into a small cylinder, then lit the end, the flame reflecting on his face for just an instant. He rolled over to the window overlooking his bed, unlocked it, and pushed it open. Warm, stupid thoughts rolled through his head. He giggled, and the music became just a bit sweeter and seemed to grow warmer as well. Things were all right, weren’t they? Yes, now, in this scarlet, opium induced haze, things were quite acceptable.
Infectious Laughter
Anastasia Voight

News release! There's a virus loose.
But it's not the kind to goose

your hard drive, nor
make your nose a running sore.

'Tis an insidious infection.
It does not mar the clear complexion

with pox or dots or roseate spots
or chancre or buboes blots.

It will not poison nervous system
and make of you a wretched victim.

It won't leave you paralyzed or twitching
or flatulent or endlessly retching.

It doesn't bring the diarrhea,
nor discharge such the gonorrhea,
nor swollen glands nor hacking cough.
Analysis is clear enough.

This virus is a subtle one.
No secretions, no fevers run.

No aches, no pains infection tell.
Au contraire, one feels quite well,

more than well, sublime, superb.
In fact it is difficult to find adverb
adequate descriptively
for such heady jollity.

Though science has yet to grant it name,
there are some, while chuckling, claim
identification of viral pest
that grants its victims terminal zest.
The retrovirus cheerfully
identified acts to fortify
nuclear instructions that codify
the DNA of levity.

How virion works this transformation
involves famed reverse transcription
that inserts the viral version
permanently in the host’s edition.

After, genetic persuasions in the brain
alter strengths of dopamine
and salubrious serotonin
to keep the pleasure center goin’.

Nameless or named, it matters not
to zoned-out victims who forgot
what challenges all lifeforms face,
what tests and trials line life’s sweet race.

Each freshed infectee
sallies forth with antic glee
ignoring pleas by virus free
to reject jocularity.

A rumor rampant on the net
is that some remnant hippie sect set
this fulsome foolish infect free
to end all strife, humanity!

And so, we’ll exit laughingly!
Gravy
Jacob Nielsen

"These mashed potatoes are excellent," you said, I think repeated four times at the dinner table, people filling the seats, glass and porcelain plates of steaming wonders being passed with shaky, careful hands. Did anyone hear you? I promise I did, my brain Answered, "Yes, they are" to the space of unknown stars, but my lips had no such reply to our stars. Is that what you needed? Your eldest, now gripping cool, iron bars, dwelling in a corpse-gray room, foul echoes for comfort, was not at the table, was not passing dishes. But not because of you, rather because he chose Frost-bottled spirits, and perhaps the metallic smell of an unforgiving powdered snow over photos, and dinner, and football. You and me, and the rest, you served perfectly, though relations could use a little gauze. Your mashed potatoes kissed taste buds in perfect desire, though they could use a little gravy.
Once in a Lifetime
James Badia

I found myself motionless, between the sun and the attractive jogger in Jefferson Park. As she stopped, I noticed her eyes continuously changed with the brilliance of a blue kaleidoscope. Sweat sprinkled her face like flakes of glitter. Her long brownish hair flickered glimpses of fire. That was no ordinary, August first, afternoon.

She knelt down, in front of me, as if she knew me. “Hi,” she said. I sounded like a phonetic fool. “Ha...I...,” I cleared my throat, “Hi.”

She had my collie, Rex, by the scruff of the neck with both hands. Her fingers were interwoven in and out of Rex’s tan and white fur. She said, “He’s so cute...What’s his name?”

“Rex,” I replied.

“What’s your name?” she said.

Lost in her eyes, I puckered my lips with a twist. Then, I raised my left eyebrow as to think. I finally said, “Jesse.”

She lightly laughed, stood up, offered her hand for me to shake and said, “Jessica, Jessica Miller!” Her laugh was utterly intoxicating. I soon found myself drunk with courage.

A scent of vanilla danced around the park’s path. As we walked, we seemed lost in each other’s minds. Topics changed like enthusiastic whirlwinds.

Awkwardly, there was a pause in the conversation. I looked in to her eyes, breath held, and said, “I have to see you again!”

She laughed lightly with a grin. “You will.” Her smile seemed to warm the very pump that kept me alive. When she whispered her address, “6363 Cold Stone Drive,” I almost lost her words as they blended perfectly with nearby doves.
She said good-bye to Rex and me. I stood like steel. I watched her vanish into the mass of athletes and ancient oaks far down the trail.

On the walk home, Rex seemed to become unusually anxious. The thick white fur on the back of his neck started to stand up gently and gradually, almost electrically.

I started to notice a few clouds in the distance. The further we walked the darker and harder the sky grew. I was caught off guard by a blackish gray cat that ran by although it caught Rex’s attention.

A flash of lightning momentarily blinded me. Rex pulled, and in an instant he was off the chain. I shouted, “Rex,” but he still ran. I ran.

A second later, thunder crackled and pounded. As the animals turned a corner, they vanished from sight.

I finally got to the corner. Alone in the middle of the street, I was soaked with sweat. I gasped for air. I bent over from the pain in my side. My naked palms were clutched on my bony knees, fingers spread out.

I began to smell the moisture in the air. With a step, it began to rain.

“Shit!” I soon focused on the large droplets of water. Each pounded the black-top like a little meteor that hurtled to earth. Each encounter released a tiny explosion of steam.

“What next!” I walked drenched. My feet squished with every step.

Two beams peered through the haze of mist and rain. A silver pick-up skidded as it stopped. “Now what?” I said to myself.

Suddenly, with a click and a longer creak, a large man stepped out and walked towards me. “Come on in, I’ll give you a ride,” he said.

“No thanks, sir,” I said.
The man looked confused. He stopped. He puckered and twisted his lips, his left eyebrow raised, and he began to think. “Are you okay, Jess?” he said.

“Do, do I know you,” I said.

“You ought to. I’m your brother, stupid,” the man said.

He walked closer. He produced an old black leather wallet and said, “Get it out…your license.”

The lump in my throat went nowhere. I took out my license. Surprisingly, we looked similar.

He said, “Come on, Jess. Let’s go home.”

I felt the need to get out of the rain. I said, “Okay,” nodded, and got in to the passenger side of the truck.

He said, “You had me worried. What the hell were you doing out there, in the middle of the rain? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, but I really was not. The stranger started to drive slowly in the rain down the street. I ignored him and efficiently scanned the street for Rex.

“What are you looking for?” he said.

“Rex, my dog,” I said.

He unexpectedly hit the breaks, slung the shifter in to park, and turned to me.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize it was August already, Jess,” the man said. His eyes filled with compassion. Wrinkles appeared in his forehead. We stared at one another until I was distracted by the sound of the dry rubber wiper which periodically caught the glass. The rain stopped. He turned the wipers off.

“What’s that mean, August?” I said.

“Open your wallet again. Read your name and address aloud. It seems to help,” the stranger said.

“What’s going on? Who are you?” I asked the stranger.

“It’s me—Frank, your brother.” He displayed his license, again. It read Frank Miller...6363 Cold Stone Drive.

“What’s going on?” I asked. Everything seemed in slow motion as he explained.

“You were in an accident four years ago, you and Jessica, your wife, on August first. Does any of this sound familiar?” the man asked.

I looked for imperfections in his face. Tiny weathered wrinkles branched out past both outer ends of his eyes. Razor stubble sprinkled most of his face. I searched for signs of credibility. “Go on,” I said.

“You were on the way home.” He cleared his throat and continued, “Two guys doing about 120 mph in a black and gray Ford ran a red light and hit you broadside. It was a mess. No one expected you to make it.”

“And Jessica,” I asked. “What about Jessica?”

His eyes sank slowly down to the floorboard. “Damn, this truck is dirty!” He drew a large deep breath. He looked up at me, “I’m sorry. She’s gone, Jess. She and Rex are gone.” A thick silence filled the cab of the truck.

“And me, what the hell’s my problem?”

“You had swelling around the brain,” he said. “The doctors weren’t exactly sure. It’s like a combination of amnesia with schizophrenia, but it comes and goes. The strangest part, every year since the accident, just before August you start to get disoriented.”
Numb, memories began to flash clear images in my head. Speechless, I exhaled and studied the floorboard. I stared. I heard nothing. I only saw blank space with my eyes. I had to force myself to breathe, from that point on.

Frank drove to the house. He got out, wordless, and went inside. I sat there. Later, the silence was broken by the high pitched tap of Frank’s ring against the passenger door glass. I slowly turned my head. My brother stood before me.

“It’s been four hours,” he said. “Are you going to sleep out here?”

As I opened the door, I wondered where the daylight had gone. The thick humidity irritated my eyes.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Frank. Hey. Thanks,” I said.

He said, “Don’t mention it.”

We walked up the pathway. “I can’t believe it.” I shook my head slowly and said, “I can’t believe I’ll never see her again.”

A few steps later, I could see Frank, forehead wrinkled, with a faint grin on his face as if he knew different.

I still force myself to breathe.
I Felt Like a Child
Lalae Azodi

I felt like a child
When he embraced me.
His arms were safe, secure, and stable.
A breeze as cool as the opposite side
Of a pillow
Blew over us.
I shivered
When he kissed my forehead.
My heart filled with a marching band playing to its own tune.
The words he whispered were as crisp
As a summer's day.
I looked up to see the face of a man
I had never really met.
For every time I saw him
I saw a different version of him.
He was ever-changing,
Like a chameleon unaware of his surroundings but knowing which part
To play and when.
When he reached for my hand, I looked down,
A spectacular fit
Like a plaster mold with perfect edges.
I allowed him to take my hand and lead me
Into oblivion.
I followed like a child unable to gain by balance
And in need of direction.
Frustration of an Artist
Melissa Flores

A single feeling,
A single concept borne within a single mind,
Inexpressible in its simplicity.
Paint it in a fit of passion.
Write it in a moment of clarity.
Wring it our in tears, and pray that it is intercepted the way it was intended.

Dry and heavy hands,
The laborers of a singular mind,
Wear their bulbous veins
Like silken cords of honor,
Wear their stocky calluses
Like proud badges of courage.

Tightly woven canvas.
Paint it melancholy amethyst,
A humble home for the likeness of the earth
And likeness of tongue to taste its murky surface.
Indiscriminate eye to witness it all.
The canvas says, “Truth, Beauty, Freedom.”

Raven ink and pallid page.
Dance the pen across the paper.
Scribe curling ribbons of glyph,
And darken the page with blue-black shadow.
Cast a dusk of words unspoken over the winter-white surface.
These are the ambassadors of the inexpressible.

Tormented gesture.
Impermanent fixture of the body.
Flood of liquid salt quickening in turbulent haste,
Staining contorted crease of feathered cheek.
Proud hands clenched, humbled by supplication,
An entreaty for the elusive connection that is never attained.
Addiction
Amy Roll

Eve jerked up in bed to a piercing noise off in the distance. She turned her head to look at the clock behind her. Squinting her eyes, she made out the bright digital letters: 9:30 already? She rolled her eyes. It seemed as if she had only been asleep for a couple hours. Smirking, she realized she had. Her days had begun to run together, and sometimes it seemed as if there was no point in bothering to rest between the chaos. Eve sat pondering a few moments. Thoughts started racing through her head faster than she could comprehend them:

What’s the point in going to French anyway? You’re already failing the class, and there is no way you can make up for all the lab time you’ve missed, and you know that, Eve! Why do you have to try and fool your self into thinking you’re something you’re not. Just admit it. Admit to everyone back home what a true loser you are...tell them about what you really do with all the money they send for books. Oh, maybe if Dad ever looked at your bank statement, he’d question the ATM withdrawals for two and three hundred dollars. Why don’t you tell them, Eve? Tell them what you really are... tell them...

“Stop,” she mumbled aloud. She hated it when she fought with herself. She knew she had messed up. But, this second semester was supposed to be different. A sense of purpose and responsibility had risen within her after slacking off when first she had arrived at the university. Eve thought she could do better, but even at the start, that dark creature lurked in the back of her mind. Even now as she sat on her bed with tears rolling down her face, she craved that which brought her to this state in the first place. Frantically, she jumped out of her bed. She paced around the room, not quite being aware of her body’s movement. Eve was a creature of
habit. Her pace quickened as she began looking around the room. Grabbing her purse, she dumped it onto the bed, rifling through the contents. Eve grabbed her wallet and yanked it open. Plastic cards flung out one by one. Maxed Out. Declined. Overdrawn. Not Authorized. Digging for money, she groaned. Nothing! She gazed over the room again, eyes darting back and forth wildly. Her eyes locked on the right desk drawer.

Eve ran over and pulled it open so violently that she fell back onto the rug with the drawer in her lap. Searching through the contents, she found a little plastic baggy. Grabbing it, she crawled on her knees to the desk. Eve poured out the white powder onto the flat surface. She looked around and grabbed one of the cards lying on the floor. Meticulously, she cut the shimmering pile into six long lines. A slow smile crept upon Eve’s face. Looking around, she grabbed a fast food cup and yanked the straw out. She looked around and grabbed her scissors, snipping the straw to a nice five inches with an angled edge. Gazing briefly at the straw, she paused. But this moment of hesitation was too short to bring clarity. Eve leaned over her master, straw in right nostril until it was all gone. Falling back, she gagged as a steady drip came into the back of her throat. God, how she loved that taste. Jumping up, she was suddenly excited about the new day. Quickly throwing some clothes on and seizing her backpack, Eve was already out the door and down the dorm room stairs. She ran and got to French class right as the bell rang. Eve’s heart raced as she sat at her desk.

“Stay calm. Stop twitching,” she said to herself. It was so hard. It seemed as if her world was moving a million miles an hour and it was impossible to keep up. Trying to focus on the blackboard, she allowed her mind to wander. As it did, nagging thoughts started popping up in her head:
I told you. Look at yourself right now. Shaking with your pupils as big as saucers. I hope you don’t think you’re fooling anyone. Sitting here in class right now. I bet the teacher is wondering why the hell you showed up today. She probably already dropped you from the roll. Why don’t you just stop lying to everyone? Or, are you too afraid? If you are, you should just end it. What’s the point in living this pitiful existence you’ve created? Come on! DO SOMETHING! SAY SOME THING...or maybe you should just silence yourself forever...will any one care if you’re gone anyway?

“Stop it! You’re wrong,” she screamed aloud. Stunned, she looked around the class.

“Eve? Who’s wrong? I am certain that this verb is...” the teacher’s voice trailed off as Eve sprang from her seat and ran out the door. She kept running until she reached the dorm doors. Gasping for air, she collapsed on the front steps. Tears streamed down her face as she knew there was no turning back. It seemed as if she couldn’t right the wrong and asking for help was out of the question. Eve simply could not admit her problem because deep down, she did not want to stop. She had become an addict and at that point, nothing was more important to her than finding her next fix. Rifling through her backpack, she pulled out a cell phone.

Flipping open the top, she spoke a name, “Dad.” One ring, two rings, silence.

“Hey, sweetheart. How’s it going?”

“Just fine. How about you?”

“It’s going, just working...did you need something?”

“Oh yeah, actually. Yesterday, my algebra teacher said I didn’t have the right calculator. I need the T-I 89 for the class, and those cost about $150, and I just spent all my money on my sorority formal gown.”
“Oh well, okay. Did he say when you needed the calculator by?”

“Well, I have a quiz in that class day after tomorrow, and I need it for that.”

“Okay then, I’ll wire you money tomorrow for it.”

“Thanks, Dad. You’re the best.”

“No problem, Darling. I gotta go…conference call in 10 minutes. I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad. Bye.”

“Bye, Sweetie.”

Click.

Eve rocked back and forth on the steps, knowing that the money would only buy her enough to last through the weekend and today was Friday. She clenched her eyes shut and sobbed. She knew this charade could only last so long. But shrugging and sighing, she stood up and pondered what to do with herself until she had money to calm the craving within. She walked back down the steps, a mere hollow shell of her former self, and prayed someone noticed a sign. Feeling numb, she went about her day as a robot. Her spirit had finally been crushed. She was no longer Eve. She was an addict. Not knowing where to turn, she kept walking. Walking straight to nowhere.
And I Feel Just like Jesus’ Son
Mark Meitzler

Oozing brown
liquid flows through
my veins. I focus on the
pleasure and forget about the pain.
Playing electric guitar in my room,
I want to fly away on a witch’s broom.
And this city is my kingdom. The pimps, the
pushers, the whores, the politicians shaking hands
behind closed doors. I want to lick the sugary sky. I
want to see the light before I die. And Lou Reed’s right
I’m Jesus’ son tonight. Lou Reed is right I am Jesus’ son
tonight. Needle’s metallic ringing in my head. I’m soon to be
lying in my eternal bed. Motion leads to where I am right now, face
against the ground. It’s such a beautiful sound when people are not around.
Warm sweet liquid dripping from my nose, bright red blood as beautiful as a rose.
Lou Reed’s right I’m Jesus’ son tonight. Lou Reed is right I am Jesus’ son tonight.
The Bounty Hunter's Mark
Jeff Conklin

It was a lousy night to die. The night was so thick with fog that you couldn't even see fifty feet in front of you. Figures. I had just arrived at Eddie's Bar and Grill just after the sun went down. One of my informants, Deekin, had said that the person I was looking for would be here tonight but couldn't give me a time. Just like Deekin not to have all the details. I had been tailing a man that went by the name "Thor" for about three months now and had always been one step behind him. He is wanted on several accounts of murder, rape, kidnapping, drug and arms dealing; you name it, he has more than likely done it. One of your general bad apples and not a person to be taken lightly.

I had been sitting at the bar now for about three hours just talking with the bartender, kind of poking and prodding for any information that might be useful, but he didn't know anything. Kind of funny, isn't it? In all the movies the bartenders usually give the best information. Anyway, the bar was thick with a cloud of smoke, so much so that I had to step outside and get a breath of fresh air. It was getting to be about midnight when I stepped outside and propped myself up against the railing just outside of the bar. I let the cool breeze and the fog wash over me to help clear my head. That's when I heard a rumbling sound coming down the road. A few minutes later the fog was lit up with an intense white light that almost made it look like Christ was coming back.

Like something out of one of your worst nightmares, this motorcycle just tore out of the fog, creating behind it a vortex that was slowly made whole again as the tendrils of the fog pieced themselves back together. He revved the engine a few times as he slowly approached the front of the bar and grill. The bike looked like it had just come out of World War II and had barely survived; much the same was the
man who drove it. He put down his kickstand, turned off the engine, and made his way to the entrance. I let him walk right by me, a nod of my head my only acknowledgment to him. As he walked by, I noticed a tattoo on his left shoulder of a big war hammer with lightning bolts all around it. This was the man I had been waiting for, and sure enough he had the look to him of the mythological war god.

The heavy wooden doors of the bar slammed closed behind Thor. I remained outside a few minutes more to prepare myself for the task at hand.

Upon entering, I noticed that there were very few patrons in the bar this night, and for that I was thankful. Thor had taken up a residence at the far end of the bar and was in a hot and heavy discussion with the bartender. As I approached the bar, they stopped conversing, and I took up the empty stool to Thor’s left. He slowly turned his head to look at me, a cool and calm look on his face, and then he said, "The barkeep here says that you’ve been asking a lot of questions about me. What of it?"

I simply turned to him and said, "Can't a man be curious?"

A smile creased his chapped lips. "I guess there's no harm in that, mister..."

"Smith...Roger Smith."

"Well, Mr. Smith, what can I do for you?"

I thought about that for a few minutes. I don't usually tip my hand so soon, but I wanted to see how he would react. I reached behind my jacket, unbuttoned one of my holsters, and then put a pair of handcuffs on the bar. "You could make this real quick and easy and put those on for me," I said. He stared at them a minute, then at me, then at the cuffs again. He shook his head and asked, "So with which organization are you affiliated with, Mr. Smith?"

"I'm with the one that has that catchy slogan, what was it again? That's right, to serve and protect."
He chuckled a little bit at that and said, "So what do you want with me?"

"Oh, well...aside from all the crimes that you've committed, I came all the way here to congratulate you and buy you a drink."

A very puzzled look came to his face. I guess that wasn't the comment he had expected. Then I decided now would be a good time to get serious with him. "All joking aside, Thor. I can call you 'Thor,' right? I'm here to bring you in and also to see if you knew the whereabouts of another man...Zanatos."

At the sound of that name, he became very rigid and took up a defensive posture. "I know no such person," he said.

I looked him straight in the eye and said, "Thor, I have no doubts that you're a smart man, but someone higher up is providing you with all the goods that you sell, and I have reason to believe that person is Zanatos."

"This conversation is over, Roger Smith. Don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out." He then got up to leave, and I put a hand on his shoulder with barely enough force to stop him from moving.

"We're just getting started, Thor. Have a seat and don't make a scene of this."

He batted my hand away and started to walk off. Why is it that bikers seem to like doing things the hard way? I stuck out my foot as he walked away, and wouldn't you know it, he tripped right over it.

He fell like a huge oak tree and bounced a few times off the dirty, beer-stained floor. But he wasn't down long at all. With a grunt he threw himself back up, and I somehow totally missed the huge flying anvil that was his right hand as it connected with my jaw, knocking me off my stool.

Falling to the floor seemed to take forever. In that instant time almost felt like it had slowed down just so that I could take in the fact that someone had hit me.
Eventually I made solid contact with the floor, my head rattling like a rattlesnake’s tail. It took a few seconds for me to recover and realize that Thor’s massive hands were slowly reaching for me. As quickly as possible, I threw up both of my legs and was able to plant them firmly on his broad chest. With all the strength I could muster, I fully extended my legs, pushing Thor away from me and throwing him through the air. His landing was cushioned by a hardwood table that splintered under his immense weight.

When he got up this time, I could see the fire in his eyes that fueled his anger. At that point I figured the only way I was going to stop him was to hit him with a wrecking ball…but I didn’t see any of those outside. By the time I got back up on my feet, I knew I would be meeting the floor again pretty quickly. I saw Thor charging me like a bull, but with my senses dulled from that blow my reflexes were not topnotch, and I simply stood there. His right shoulder buried itself in my gut so hard I thought I might break in two. We both crashed through another set of tables, but this time it was me who took the impact from it.

Thor then picked me up off the floor, gave me a nice solid hit to the stomach that any dad would be proud of, and then tossed me like a rag doll towards the bar. The bartender barely made it out of the way before I hit the back of the bar. As I fell, the glass from all the alcohol and mirrors came raining down on me. Lying there on the floor in a crumpled heap, the alcohol slowly saturating my clothes, I decided that enough was enough. I stood up, reached into my jacket again, and pulled out one of my 9mm Beretta pistols with my left hand.

I had my arm fully extended by the time I got all the way up off the floor. Whether it was just dumb luck or destiny, I found Thor at the end of my pistol, the barrel just inches from his nose. To let him know that I wasn’t just fooling around, I released the safety on my gun.
"Tired of our little game already, Mr. Smith?" Thor said.

Staring him down through the sight on my pistol, I said, "As much fun as this is, Thor, I thought I'd save you from any further humiliation. I know you'd never let yourself live it down were you beaten by someone like me."

I saw Thor's eyes look to his right, a big wicked grin suddenly lighting up his face, and that's when I heard a distinct racking sound to my left. Glancing to my left, I found myself staring down the barrel of a shotgun. Damn bartender.

"Put your gun on the bar," said the nervous bartender.

I thought about that for a moment and then simply let my gun fall to the floor behind the bar.

"I told you to put it on the bar."

"I heard ya," I said. "But you know...the bar just didn't seem the best place for it. It looks better on the floor, I think."

"Okay, smartass," he said. "Now put everything you have on the bar, or so help me god, I will shoot you this time."

He looked as though he was just itching to shoot someone, and I did not want to be that person. In my head I went through a mental checklist of what I had on me to see if I might be able to get out of this predicament. As if struck by a premonition, I remembered bringing a flashbang with me...and then I got a crazy thought in my head.

I started putting items on the bar such as my other set of handcuffs, a note pad, a pen, a lock pick, and extra clips for my guns. Then I reached behind my jacket and grabbed a hold of the flashbang. If you've never seen one before, you might think it looked like a grenade, which was what I was counting on. I guess you might call my belt a "utility belt," but I was no Batman. I managed to wiggle my
thumb in the ring so that I could pull the pin out. These things had a three second fuse so I needed to play this just right.

I pulled the pin out...one. Brought it out from behind my jacket and immediately all eyes were drawn towards it like a magnet. Two...I put it on the bar just like the bartender said and then fell to the floor closing my eyes. Three...there was a loud pop, and then, even with my eyes closed, I could still see the intense light that was let loose by this phony grenade.

Thor, the bartender, and the rest of the patrons, however, weren't as lucky as I was and were blinded by the light. Taking advantage of the situation, I jumped up, tore the shotgun from the bartender's hands, and smacked him across the face with the butt. He fell like a rock and was out cold on hitting the floor. I turned around and saw that Thor was slowly stumbling towards the exit. Hitting the slide release on the shotgun, I proceeded to eject the rounds so as not to have to worry about this threat. I threw the now empty shotgun back at the bartender, picked my gun up off the floor, and dropped the shotgun rounds in a jug of beer that was left on the bar as I made my way to the exit.

Making it to the exit, gun in hand, I took a peek out the window to see where Thor might have gotten to. He was outside, straddling his ancient motorcycle, rumbling through his pockets. I strolled through the doors and said, "Surely, Thor, you didn't think I was going to let you just ride off into the night?" I raised my gun, sighted in on my target, and lightly squeezed the trigger. As the hammer fell down on the firing pin, it struck the primer on the bullet, igniting the powder and producing a loud crack which sent the round out of my barrel at lightning speed. That was all in a fraction of a second, which was then followed by the sound of air coming out of the fresh new hole I made in Thor's front tire.
"Why you son of a..." Thor started to say, but when I turned my gun on him and cocked the hammer, he stopped.

"And if I should try to run?" Thor asked.

"Oh, I'll probably let you get about twenty-five yards, just so you might think you'll get away, and then I'd put a round in one of your kneecaps," I said. "Let me know which one you want me to shoot in case running is one of the decisions you choose to make."

"What others do I have, Mr. Smith?"

"There's the obvious where you tell me when Zanatos is moving his next shipment in and where the drop will be. Then I'll arrest you and take you to the FBI because I know they're just dying to get their hands on you. Or I can shoot your gas tank and send you to hell, extra crispy."

As Thor was weighing his decision, I decided to take a seat on the steps leading to the bar, gun still pointed in his general direction. He finally looked up at me and said, "You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Smith."

"I aim to please, Mr. Thor. So are you going to tell me what I want to know, or should I light the torch you're sitting on?"

Thor gave me the answer to my question, but when I was about to ask more of him, the FBI decided to intrude on my personal interrogation. Damn suits with guns. They probably found their badges at the bottom of a cereal box. I decided to play nice with them while they were trying to take credit for the job I had already done.
Third Place Poetry Winner

Urban Lullaby
Tina Richardson

In this world of incessant
sound, the weight of silence
drifts with crushing calm
like wads of cotton packing
the air. The sky feels
low and heavy with piercing
stillness, enclosing you
in the winged aftermath of noise.

You strain to hear anything
that will prove your presence
on this sphere prone to creaks
and moans and sighs
like old houses
singing lives lived.

Return me to the resonance of
noise—the hum of traffic,
a baby’s cry and children
laughing, dogs barking and
the sirens of domestic
dispute. I want to fall asleep
on this celestial body tattooed
with disruption beneath
a canopy of clutter and
civilian chaos.
To Fly
Patrick D. Connolly

I crouch to pluck a freshly blossoming rose,
peeking, meekly, between the half-rotted planks
of a white picket fence. The petals are damp, delicate,
and powder-soft.

I close my eyes, raising it to my nose,
peach-fuzz to peach-fuzz,
contemplating this world that has forgotten about me.

A shooting star blazes its path across the crimson, twilight sky,
a giant, red, fiery ball of streaking light.

I want to fly.
Sometimes I can.

Not like a shooting star, infinitely fast and destructive.
Not like a bird, swift, graceful, and effortless.

I am a simple moth. Frantically, I flail my
powder-soft wings, fighting to remain aloft.
Each gust of wind sends me back, back into my past,
a relentless struggle, a battle lost before it was even begun.
I recognize the futility, yet, flail away I must or plummet
off into the black void, eternally lost and forgotten.

And so my wings quiver in a frosty ripple of damp evening air
and I'm swept back, once more. In utter exhaustion I seek safety,
a place to rest my weary body.

Far below I gaze a bush. Memories engulf me.
I've been here as well, long before. I sigh.
There was a rose then, which someone has carelessly plucked away.

I want to fly
into the light, the radiant, flickering flame,
seeking power and comprehension, enormity and contentment.
I want to know the secrets the stars keep in their twilight court.
I want to fly, to soar, mighty and in command.
I want to glide. I want to drift. I want to plunge now if I must.
I want to know what I want.
With these futile desires I clench my fists, 
not in wrath, but despair. To my horror I see that it's 
not the rose I've crushed, but the flailing, fluttering wings 
of a powder-soft moth.

A solitary drop of blood spins and tumbles, 
slowly, off the end of my palm, 
a glistening red orb, falling, floating, flying, 
endlessly through empty space.

I discover, only too late, that in some other universe 
it is not a drop of blood but rather a giant, red, fiery ball 
of streaking light, scorching its course across the crimson, twilight sky, 
a shooting star. My wish comes too late.

I open my eyes to see that I've pierced myself upon 
the prickly, pointy thorns of a rose. 
Oh, how I bleed.
Second Place Prose Winner

Promises
Patricia Clay

The years are beginning to catch up with him. His hair is graying rapidly; he no longer stands five foot nine. His mind betrays him more often than before, and sometimes his sentences are incoherent. Slowly and unsteadily he walks from the kitchen table to the couch. I refrain from running to his side to steady him. Sometimes he needs to know that he can hold his own. It’s one of those not-so-good days for Aaron. At the age of forty-six, his body has betrayed him and has been reduced to that of an eighty-year-old man. The last six years have seemed like an entire lifetime. Sometimes, I don’t know if the pain is more unbearable for him or for me.

When we met we were young in many ways. We didn’t care what the future held as long as we could hold each other. We promised to spend our lives together “come what may.” To some that may sound trite, but for us it was an important step that we took when we felt secure in our feelings for each other. Would I encourage my daughters to make such a commitment knowing that the other person had a life-threatening condition? I don’t know. The advice I might give would be to think long and hard about the future of that. Did I? No. My future was shrouded in a thick fog. I didn’t venture to the possibilities of it. I hid from the reality of it and blind-sided myself into believing that this “now,” our life as it is today, would not happen to us. We were beyond the grasp of the inevitabilities of life. I was sure that there would be a miracle. And there has not been. Have I lost hope? No, I’ve only put it to the side along with my dreams.

"Is it cold in here to you?" he calls from the living room.

"I’ll turn up the heat," I say.
I move the thermostat setting to seventy-eight and swap my long-sleeved shirt for a lighter cotton tee. Then I go about my usual Saturday chores.

His blood is thin; his circulation is poor. Twelve days ago he had a stroke; it’s his fifth in six years. He doesn’t believe in doctors anymore. When they learn that he has a rare heart condition, they want to take a look to find out how and why he’s survived this long. They don’t care that their procedures take a toll on what little life he has left. The doctors want to put him on medications because they believe that they are small gods who can extend his life. They almost killed him once with their miracle drugs. Now his kidneys are permanently damaged. He refuses the doctor’s instructions and strengthens his faith in God who has carried him through more difficult times than I ever thought possible. He has more faith than I can muster. Sometimes I curse God; other times I ask for forgiveness because I’m not as strong as Aaron, and I pray, but I no longer know what I’m praying for. Is it wrong to pray that this will end?

“Can you help me upstairs?” he asks as I enter with clean laundry. “I want to go to my room.”

“Sure,” I say, depositing my load on the couch and offering him my shoulder to lean on.

His room, the one we used to share, is dark and smells of earthy extracts. He doesn’t sleep well. The atrophy in his feet and legs keeps him from sleeping through the night. Sometimes he reads or watches television. I started suffering from sleep deprivation because I have to work, and dawn comes early; I needed my rest. So I’ve mostly moved to the bedroom that belonged to our oldest. When Aaron used to have really good days, he would make breakfast before I had to leave for the office. Now it’s fast food and designer coffee almost every morning. I miss those quiet moments we spent together.
I notice the dirty plastic dishes in the trashcan by the bed from the night our oldest stayed with Aaron while I was out of town. The residue of food is beginning to smell, so I pull the plastic bag out and tie the ends. Then I place it by the bedroom door to be carried away later. I notice that the container for fresh water that he keeps on the night table by his bed is empty, but the hospital-issued plastic bottle that he keeps slightly under the bed is full of urine. I hate that job, but I smile and take it away as if it is nothing. When I return the clean bottle to its rightful place, he smiles and touches my hand lovingly with his cold fingers because he knows how I feel about having to do that chore.

“Stay with me for a while. Tell me about your trip,” he says.

So I sit cross-legged on the bed facing him. The memory of our early morning conversation about my recent business trip is temporarily lost in the fog that often crowds his mind. His eyes seem vacant and his smile weak.

“The flight wasn’t too bad.” I tell him again as I reach over and straighten his pillow. “I enjoyed the city, and the meetings went well. I wish you could have gone with me. You would have had a great time.” I lie knowing that he would have hated the entire trip. “We could have had breakfast on the terrace overlooking the city.” He shifted against the pillows and smiled.

I was glad that Aaron couldn’t accompany me. I couldn’t tell him that. Or that I enjoy traveling for the company. I look forward to being out of this house and away from him. Not him, but the disease that consumes him—the disease that consumed us years ago when he almost died from pneumonia, from the medication, from the doctors prodding and poking into his heart, into his lungs, into his soul. Out of his condition, love was reduced to a commitment and more recently transformed into a taxing obligation. I feel an unwelcome frustration and a resentment that I do not want to feel, but I’ve lost at this game in a way I never imagined.
“What are you thinking about?” he asks, bringing me from my thoughts. “Your book?”

“Yes, of course,” I reply. “I had an idea that kind of…”

“What do you miss most?” he interrupts. “Honestly, what is it?”

“What do you mean?” I ask because I know where the question is heading. We’ve had this conversation before, and most likely we’ll have it many times in the future.

“About us. What do you miss most?” he clarifies, his eyes cloudy and his skin pale.

“Nothing. Should I?” I ask as if the question is rhetorical and pray to my unseen God that the phone will ring or something will happen to take me away from this exchange.

“This is temporary. I am getting better. Just today, I walked outside to the back fence. I was tired, but I couldn’t walk that far yesterday. What do you think of that?” he asks. “I refuse to let this stroke get me down. By June we’ll be planning that trip to Colorado.”

“I’m sure we will,” I agree. “You rest. I have things to do.”

“Can’t we just talk for a while?” he asks looking up at me. “I just thought that…you’re right. I love you,” he says, allowing me to see his exhaustion.

“I know. You’re tired. You need fresh water,” I tell him, politely excusing myself from his thoughts. “I’ll be right back.”

I take the container and gladly leave the room. If I can stay away long enough, he’ll be sleeping by the time I return. So I sit in my office at the computer and hope that the words will come. Hope that my imagination will take away my pain, take me to the place where life is sweet, where people don’t hurt each other because life took a wrong turn. In my world, the one I create, I can write things the
way I want them to be, the way I thought they would be, but I can’t change my reality, and I can’t change his.

An hour passes, and I dare not wait longer before I return to check on him. I take the container of fresh cool water along with clean sheets and towels upstairs. On the other side of the room, he’s sleeping quietly and easily. I turn off the television and put away the clean laundry. Then I sit in the chair, prop my feet on the side of the bed and begin reading a book at the place where I left off the night I flew home from Chicago.

In the distance, I hear my cell phone ringing. It’s downstairs in the kitchen, but I don’t rush to answer it. Instead, I look at Aaron, his chest slowly rising and falling to the rhythm of his body. I want to cry real tears for all the things that no longer pass between us, but I don’t; I spent them many, many months ago. My phone rings again. I know he’ll leave a message; he always does. Then he waits for my return call. Sometimes I don’t call, but he understands, and he’s patient with me. He knows me better than I know myself, and that scares me. I should tell him no; I should walk away, but I can’t because occasionally what I miss—what I need the most—is that soft place to fall.

_Dedicated to the memory of William Gretz Clay_
Continuum
Melissa Flores

The future sparkles with a certain clarity,
Solid and unmistakable, like polished steel.
I can't forget the time I crumbled
Beneath your steadfast logic,
Blind as you were.
The river glinted leaden azure,
Strong and unstoppable,
Like the flow of time itself.
The past is a mountain;
The future is a delta.

The sky that day:
Vanilla cream clouds and perfect blue.
The canoe was old.
Its ancient paint flaked away like dried onion skins
And followed in our wake until it was confident enough to follow a current of its own.
Trees like sentinels.
Flowers like neon street signs.
The pedestrians are ebony beetles,
And the traffic cop is the curiously rigid squirrel
Perched upright upon a weary tree stump.

This is a one-way street.
Time cannot travel in reverse.
Our time machine glides along its sapphire ribbon in its singular direction,
Its path inevitable.
I could make this voyage with no one else,
Yet your Novocain gaze absorbs none of these visions,
And your acid tongue consumes the very metal of my delight.
I point downriver and ask you to observe.
It's all right if you don't understand.
I can share this with no other.
Two Sides to Every Story

Neil Cross
On His Own
Scott Buss

Not too many people really know what life is like from the bottom up, life in the shadows, the dark places where things unseen and unsaid happen to the ghosts of people unloved and left for dead. It is a fine line between getting by and getting forgotten; however, fifteen years of pain with a family unprepared for children was enough for me to choose forgotten and left for dead a goal worth achieving. With less than a hundred dollars, I left home.

The road is not as long as the road is painful when there is no turning back. My first nights living on the streets were bitterly sleepless, tearful and, terrifying. There are no black holes to crawl into that don’t have some set of eyes watching. Police are always alert to relentlessly move you on, passersby stare, and always, the other street people exist around you. They are the most worrisome because they are your peers. I learned quickly that nobody is kind at the bottom of the barrel. Nice people are usually gay men who want to prey on you; nice women are usually the whores who want any money you have and become less nice when you don’t have any. Really bad people roam the streets at night—thieves, drug addicts, asylum refuse, and dregs—scary friends at any level and none that I wanted to call my own. Find a job; find a job; find a job. At fifteen there are very few legitimate jobs.

During the first days on my own, unwashed, wearing the same clothes I left home in, I searched for a job, and all too quickly realized that without a shower, a comb, and clean clothes, my chance of finding a job would diminish rapidly. And it did. On the street “despair” is a real word whose reality is based on the worst concept of hell. No one can fully describe the sorrow that comes from curling up behind trashcans and lying on cold concrete, destitute and hopeless. The basest form of survival stems from this place. This is where you dig deep inside to examine
what you are, who you are. Who am I? I am a thief. I am a burglar. I am a prostitute. I am a survivor. I have been in your house, and I have stolen your clothes, your food, and your money, sometimes while you were sleeping. I have used your shower, your toothbrush, your toilet, your vibrator. I have seen you on your knees, on your back, and on your face, and I have done things that make me cry even now.

After months, I finally found work washing dishes at a sleazy Chinese restaurant. The owner didn’t care how I smelled or looked. He paid me poorly every week and fed me daily. I saved almost all my money and stole what I needed and wanted. I kept my money in the wall at work. Most of the buildings in San Francisco have plaster walls. They are made by smoothing plaster over thin pieces of wood called lathe, and from the 1906 earthquake forward, city fire codes required all new construction to have fire blocking inside the walls, 36 inches from the floor. It makes a perfect shelf in a wall, and behind the sink, in the wall, 36 inches above the floor, in tidy stacks of dirty bills, is where my money stayed. It was the safest place I could think of.

I started to know other street people, my community of the undesirable. As in other levels of society, there are the haves and have-nots. I fell in with some haves and was invited to live with others in a burnt-out, condemned building. To get inside, you had to run up a plank that leaned against the side of the building and leap to the rusty fire escape ladder. You would heave yourself up and swing around the outside, past the bar-welded ladder hole, then climb to the roof, and go over the pediment. Long before me, someone had smashed the roof access door open, and that was how you went inside. Home was dark and cold but dry. We tore down walls and doors, burned them for heat, and drank a lot of very cheap, stolen alcohol. Why nobody stole good booze is a mystery to me. I lived this way for nearly two years.
At seventeen and not being under age anymore, I was able to find a better job. The day I had my interview, I took a shower, and stole some clothes from a house in Pacific Heights. I learned later on that the home was owned by Richard Theriot, the owner of the San Francisco Examiner. My job was to sell clothes at a men’s store. After three weeks I was fired for stealing the tailoring money that customers gave us. We kept it in a pouch underneath the cash register and gave it to the tailor along with the clothes to be worked on, at the end of each day. Everyday I would steal ten dollars.

Back on the street I soon found a job more suited to my personality, delivering the San Francisco Chronicle to the happy homes of respectable families. I not only delivered their paper, I also stole things from their homes. The Chronicle hired me as an independent contractor, and I made almost $800.00 a month. I started work at 4:00 am, and by 5:30 I was finished. In addition I had saved almost $3,000 from the Chinese restaurant. Now armed with my two years of savings and my paper route, I thought I could move into a real place. It was time to move back into the suburbs. It turned out to be harder than I thought and kept me on the streets for another four months.

I started by calling the rooms for rent listed in the paper, but without references, a phone number, an address, and all the other things that make people real, finding a place was impossible. No one wanted to rent a room in their house to a seventeen-year-old that didn’t have a verifiable background. I had to think of something else. There was a two-year college in the town where I was trying to live, and I thought about going to the college to see if I couldn’t find people looking to rent rooms to students through the college. That was one of the brighter moments in my life because there was a roommate board, one I couldn’t use because I wasn’t a student. The roommate board was not a board in the sense that it was a physical
board but a referral desk for students. Now, I had all my days with nothing to do except wait for work to start in the morning. So I became a student. I had to take the GED and wait for the results to be sent to the college. I had to wait for the semester to begin. I waited four months. I waited in line for books, and I waited in line for referrals. I waited to use the phones in the referral office, and I waited for people to answer the phone. Finally, after six interviews I found a home with four other lowlifes. School had served its purpose.

I was put on academic probation after my first semester and dismissed after my second. I had a home, a job, a bed, showers. I quit the paper and worked at a nice restaurant called Sid and Jim's washing dishes. I was promoted to prep cook, given tips and two drinks a night on the house and food. I worked there for two years until the owners sold the restaurant. I moved around a few times after that and held a number of other jobs. Nothing in my life to date has been as terrible as my time living on the street. If you have a chance, read John Steinbeck's book, *Cannery Row*. My life was nothing like that.

That was almost thirty years ago. Things are different now. I have a career. I am friends with my family and have family of my own. The past sleeps buts wakes up now and then. It reminds me that I am never far from the bottom and the shadowy places where people are quickly forgotten and left for dead.
Elegy to the Heart’s Companion
Jacob Nielson

Micro-blades penetrate the walls
of my torn throat as my eyes witness
the departure of the fair snow angel.
Foundation’s firm, callused hands
have now reformed themselves—
brittle, crooked, bony, lifeless.
Those zombie claws now wring my sponge
heart, once soaked full
to volume’s max,
now spilling the earned
and treasured fluid
of life’s oil refinery.
I can hear the drained liquid
splashing to the floor of my soul,
and I see frail hope
trying not to slip on the puddles.
Shades of Red
Linda Leschak

Can we talk about her yet?
That girl I knew—the one who
laughed too loud, cried too deep.
How she viewed life simply
and was well liked for it.
How easily everything came to her
not surprising to any of us.
How she seemed to waltz through
her days far above the ugliness.
How her composure
complemented the designer clothes
and how everything else she had
seemed always bright and new.

Can we talk about her yet?
How she claimed to dream her favorite colors
all lavenders, pinks and glistening reds.
How she altered her looks to fit her mood
ever changing like a proud chameleon.
How she knew she’d be famous one day
and spoke of it with wonder.
How her eyes danced when she was happy
and sunk into her soul when she was sad.

Can we talk about her yet?
How her parents were driven,
eagerly clawing the glass ceiling.
How they gathered enough success
to make themselves almost disappear.
How distant they grew
as she unfolded into her teens,
and how confident they were that
she’d follow in their steps.

Can we talk about
the day the maid found her alone
adrift in her favorite color and
was not able to clean after that.

Can we talk about that yet?
The Sundowner
Heather Stilwell

The gray curtain descends, the thunder begins
a low rumbling cadence—who are these porcelain-grinned
faces? The thunder builds, shattering the dollhouse
as the figures furrow their frowns. What do they want?
The electric flash cuts a vicious crag across my mind
as they are illuminated—wait, WAIT—then gone too soon.
Almost I knew their game, their names.
The wind whirls, and my thoughts swirl, a driving crescendo
of thumping gods and demons whirlpooling
my head, my breath whistling outside, always outside,
as the onlookers rubberneck the aftermath. Under the
rubble and destruction, I still lie somewhere, craning my neck
skyward as the waters submerge my head.
As the icy waves course through my mind,
the storm’s tympani stills its beat
and fades into silence.

For my grandmother, and for all of those who suffer from Alzheimer’s Disease
Henry walked outside, gazing at the early morning sunrise – cobalt fading into lighter blue hues, hints of celestial orange, and with some luck, a little kiss of purple – a miracle marked daily by the sun’s advance. Beautiful, he thought, bringing the steaming hot cup of coffee to his mouth. It burnt, black, with two sugars, the way it had been every morning for the past thirty-five years. He had come to the conclusion, long ago, that he liked the burn of his tongue. At some point in the past, he’d told himself it made his senses feel alive, but he didn’t notice that anymore. He was simply set in his routine.

He was jolted out of his trance, his half-asleep smile disappearing as he heard his wife’s random and painfully arbitrary screams from inside. She always woke up when he did. Sometimes, he just wished she would sleep in and let him tend to the church himself. He could use the time to himself. Since they had retired nearly a decade ago and committed themselves to God by opening their own church, they never spent a single moment apart.

"Henry, those little hellion kids came through here last night," his wife was still shouting from the kitchen. She was filling a cup on the tile countertop, he saw through the open screened window, the last cup of his pot of coffee, even though he knew, like every day, she’d soon be complaining about how it makes her jittery and how they should switch to decaf. His response would be the same, about how that was never going to happen and that she could brew her own decaf. He breathed a long sigh as he walked up the steps and pulled back the creaky screen door.
“Let me guess, it’s that ol’ tree again, isn’t it?” he finally asked, once inside. He was right. He moved across the small but tidy and organized house to peer out the living room window, out over the green pasture that was the only thing separating their house from the old church. Their dog, Bud, was trotting around the pasture chasing sparrows. Sure enough, the tree in question, the old and magnificent tree, had been covered, spiraled, wrapped up and down with toilet paper. It had rained briefly the night before, and most of the toilet paper had turned to that saturated gray color. It was a myriad of whites and grays, intermingling with nature’s own greens and browns. Kind of beautiful, he thought, if not an outright annoyance. He rubbed his eyes; it seemed very early in the morning for him to be dealing with all this. For a few long moments he just stood there, quietly looking at the strands, hanging, rippling and swaying in the crisp springtime breeze. He gathered up his cigarettes and lighter, his boots, and trusty leather jacket.

Once on the porch, he swung the jacket over his shoulders and lit up a short cigarette, moving slowly down the steps and into the yard, heading towards the old tree. The dog, sensing or spotting his presence, gave up on the sparrows and came running over, eyes bright and tongue lolling, happy to see his master had come out to play.

“No way, Bud, not this morning. Go chase something else,” Henry said with a chuckle, leaning down to ruffle the dog’s shoulders, and continued on past him, briefly leaving the dog looking confused. He took a drag from his cigarette and flicked it, half-smoked, into the bucket at the edge of the yard. He stretched his back slightly by lifting his arms skyward, one at a time, supported at the elbow, and popped his back. He cautiously made his way over the small fence, pushing a branch aside, and walked to the base of the tree. After confirming that the partially-drenched toilet paper couldn’t just be pulled from the tree with ease, he looked up at
its taunting branches, and felt the sense of challenge wash over him—and there was just a tiny prickle at the back of his neck.

He was getting old; sure, he felt young at heart, but his body was feeling the toll of working hard for decades and decades. There was a knot at the back of his throat, just for a moment, before he cleared it and hitched up his jeans. He hesitated for another moment, just gazing up at the sky through the web of leaves and branches. Slowly at first, he climbed up by pulling himself onto the lower, solid branches of the tree. His old muscles ached, and joints popped, but it felt good, reminiscent of some earlier time. It hurt, but it made him feel. He was fleetingly reminded of the hot coffee he had been drinking just a few minutes earlier. It burned his senses, but in doing so, it made him more aware of them. Muscles started burning likewise everywhere as he continued up—this was no small tree to contend with. He climbed around, slowly but steadfast, determined in the set of his jaw, and efficiently began raining down clumps and strands of toilet paper, littering the bright green grass below. With dandelions intermingling and sticking up from between the growing gray-white mounds, some crushed and blowing their seed of snow, it looked like a miniature snowstorm, a tiny ghost graveyard from his vantage point farther up in the tree. Henry found this thought particularly amusing as he took a moment looking down before he proceeded to the uppermost branches.

One more hail of wet tissue, “splat,” against the ground, and he was making his way victoriously down the tree. He moved slowly and with great care, placing each foot in a different nook of a branch and testing it for his weight. As he got closer to the bottom, his sense of accomplishment grew. He ached all over. He would be sore for days. But looking up at the sky through the branches, he felt alive.
Last Minute Shopper
Patrick D. Connolly

It was 8:38 p.m., Christmas Eve, and a useless lump of soggy, yellow toilet paper was going to cause me to miss Christmas. I could picture the whole family, my parents, brothers, sister, Gram and Gramps, Uncle Stinky and his new "Ol' Lady," and an assortment of nieces and nephews ranging from cute little babies to possessed demon-children, all sitting around the living room of my parents' house wondering why I'd blown off the Christmas get-together. I stared blankly at the wall of the stall with its petrified, greenish-black boogers, anatomically correct drawings of women in various poses, and lines of prose signed by "The Shithouse Poet," trying desperately to invent a plan of escape from this most unlikely of prisons.

Like most single, middle-aged men who work more than 60 hours a week, I'd planned to take care of my Christmas shopping the week before, but somehow I never got around to it. So, on the way to my folks' house, I stopped off at the mall to make a few quick purchases. The problem came about halfway through my shopping when the Blazin' Buffalo Wings I'd eaten for lunch abruptly informed me that they wanted out, post haste. I had to do the butt-clench waddle as I speed walked, using the shortest possible stride, past rows of silky female undergarments, searching frantically for the men's room. I located it, finally, and had barely enough time to drop my drawers and face forward before my bowels erupted in a searing fountain of flaming-hot butt-juice. Whoever told me the "Blazin" sauce would burn like hell going down didn't have a clue.

When I finished, I turned to grab some paper off the roll and nearly crapped again noticing, for the first time, the handy work of some juvenile delinquent with too much time on his hands. I wanted to know who'd had the audacity to pee all over the toilet paper so I could wipe my ass with the little punk's tee-shirt, but that kind of
thinking would get me nowhere fast. I knew the mall would be closed soon, so, muttering a quick prayer that nobody else would need the restroom for a few minutes, I stood up and hopped out to check the other stalls. To my utter dismay, the Shithouse Paper-Pee-er had taken care of those rolls as well.

After a momentary fit of rage which included cursing the little jack-ass and the parents who’d spawned him unto the world, I hopped, pants dragging, towards the hot-air hand dryer. With a little bit of practice, I was able to face away from it, hunched over with my hands behind my back, and funnel the hot air right down my backside. Unfortunately, the sudden heat wave between my cheeks began to burn, and I knew I had to crap again. I’m not sure what correlation there is between hot-air and diarrhea, I’ll have to look into it sometime, but regardless, I had to get back to the commode ASAP!

Hopping with pants down around your ankles while doing the butt-clench waddle is much harder than it sounds. I managed to get a meager couple of feet before falling down in a jumbled pile of elbows, knees, and pants into what I hoped was only water but somehow knew was something more. There was no way to avoid the accident straining to blast its way out of my rear, so I just went with it, spilling the remaining contents of my bowels onto the dirty tile floor. When that little episode of pain and humiliation was over, I crawled on hands and knees, through filth I’d rather not mention, towards my original stall. That was thirty minutes ago.

So here I sit, admiring the bathroom art, adding nose-dirt of my own to the fine collection arrayed before me, and wondering if Sally Jenkins, who is apparently well known, orally speaking, might be offended if I called her for assistance since my own dysfunctional family can’t be bothered to answer the damn phone.

“IT can’t possibly get any worse,” I tell myself, just before the power to the building is turned off and the men’s room goes dark.
Pine Cone

Noah W. Greer
Brothers and Sisters
Sadie Truax

Backyard blackness tented over our heads
And tapped foam slid down my red fingernails.
New brothers and their most-wanted girls touched shoulders.
All were my glazed peers and next-door strangers.
Slapping down red hearts, I waited in tight-ripped jeans
For the dose of amber numbness,
Never digesting the sloppy rules.
Four hours of you-break-it-you-buy-it
Boys, while I stood coyly taping my phone number
to my forehead and promising more
Of the candy ingénue next weekend.
Yes, I hung on new blood sisters
Without recognizing their smudgy eyes on the street,
And every 2 a.m. when the slurred songs faded
With our gears in reverse
We went weaving home on “pleather” trust.
INKLING CONTRIBUTORS

Prose and Poetry

Lalae Azodi is a sophomore majoring in pre-law who also enjoys creative writing.

James Badia is a sophomore whose hobbies include studying, traveling, running, remodeling homes, and spending time with his nephews.

Scott Buss is a graphic artist and web designer who enjoys golf and photography.

Scott Campbell is a sophomore who enjoys reading, writing, guitar, video games, and occasionally school.

Patricia "Trisha" Clay is a senior at the University of Houston majoring in English. For fun she takes creative writing classes at Tomball College.

Jeff Conklin is a freshman who enjoys reading, writing, drawing, video games, watching movies, and music as well as playing his guitar.

Patrick D. Connolly is a sophomore majoring in literature and creative writing. His interests are reading, writing, camping, and fishing.

Melissa Flores is a sophomore liberal arts major. Her hobbies include reading, writing, drawing, painting, sculpture, and science.

Sousan Hammad is a sophomore journalism major whose interests are politics and giving her voice to those who are voiceless.

Rhett Hewitt is a sophomore majoring in English and creative writing. His hobbies are writing, outdoors activities, auto tuning, and off-roading.

Emily Jones is a sophomore currently undecided in her major but leaning toward English.

Linda Leschak is the secretary of the Tomball College Creative Writing Club and a retired professional who enjoys digital photography, writing, scrapbooking, traveling, and fitness.

Mark Meitzler is a freshman majoring in film who plays bass in the rock and roll band Stolen Library.

James Moran is majoring in psychology and is employed as a truck unloader at Kohl’s. His hobbies include computer hardware, soccer, and Photoshop.

Jacob Nielson is a sophomore majoring in criminal justice and psychology. He enjoys basketball, guitar, merengue dancing, writing, and the outdoors.

Christine O’Rourke is a concurrent credit student majoring in biology. She enjoys classical music, swimming, writing, and studying natural sciences.
Tina Richardson is a sophomore English major, Senior Editor of the 2005 Inkling, and recipient of the 2004 Tom Howard Poetry Award.

Amy Roll is a freshman whose hobbies include writing and photography.

Heather Stilwell is a chemist who takes creative writing classes at Tomball College. She’s an aerobics instructor who plays flute and loves Elvis.

Julia L. Taylor is a sophomore who works as an assistant director at a private school. She enjoys walking and reading.

Sadie Truax is a junior majoring in English at Sam Houston State University. She enjoys theater, writing, reading, dogs, oil painting, Shakespeare, historical fiction, and music.

Anastasia Voight is a retired biology teacher and enjoys reading, silk painting, and taking fine arts classes. This is her second year to be published in the Inkling.

Artwork

Colleen Acquarola is a senior management major at the University of Phoenix. She enjoys softball, bowling, and tae kwon do as well as taking photography classes.

Christy Addison is a sophomore who loves anything associated with art.

Neil Cross is a Tomball College Student who enjoys photography.

Noah W. Greer is a sophomore who enjoys music and art.

Andrew LeRoy is a sophomore majoring in liberal arts and specializing in graphic design. With paints, pastels, charcoal, and drums, he traipses wide circles through an artist's life.

Edwin J. McCaddon is a sophomore majoring in graphic design who enjoys designing comic covers for his friends.

Gina M. Ramos is a freshman majoring in International Studies and Business. Her hobbies include reading, singing, and drawing, and volleyball and dance keep her soul happy.

Kacy Breanne Reed is a sophomore criminal justice major who enjoys black and white photography and spending time with her cat, Silverman, along with the rest of her family.

Kristin Thomas is a Tomball College student who enjoys creating art.

Lisa Veltman is a sophomore math major who enjoys art.

Lauren Wagner is a Tomball College student and a graphic design major.
Inkling Staff—Fall

Jonathon Wing, Elizabeth Tashakori, Nick Klawetter, Sheryl Herold, Mark Meitzler, Pam Kubicek, Trycia Nguyen, Patrick Connolly

Inkling Staff—Spring

Jacob Neilson, Mary Lavender, Tina Richardson, Patricia Clay, Maryam Kazerouni, Patrick Connolly, Linda Leschak, Ashley Murphy, Sousan Hammad, Andrew LeRoy
Inkling Staff—Art

Earl Staley, Pam Kubicek, Andrew LeRoy, Tina Richardson, Steffani Frideres

Inkling Advisors

Dr. Rebecca L. Tate

Dr. Greg Oaks
HOW SUBMISSIONS ARE SELECTED

Works for publication, including artwork, are submitted to Dr. Greg Oaks or Dr. Rebecca Tate, *Inkling* faculty advisors. They substitute, in place of the author's name, a number; thus, only they know the identity of the individual contributors. Each staff member is then given a duplicated copy of each submission to be considered for the current issue. After final selections are made, the staff members' copies are returned to the faculty advisors and destroyed, thereby prohibiting the circulation of unauthorized copies of anyone's work. The final step in the selection of materials is a staff selection meeting where the *Inkling* editors, staff, and advisors meet to discuss and vote upon the final selection for publication. Only after final selections have been made do the advisors reveal the identity of those individuals whose works have been chosen.

CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST INFORMATION

All *Inkling* submissions selected for publication are considered as entries in the Tomball College Creative Writing Contest. Each anonymous work is then submitted to a panel of faculty judges: Doug Boyd, Professor of English; Dr. Greg Oaks, Associate Professor of English; Katherine Sanchez, Professor of English; Melissa Studdard, Associate Professor of English; and Dr. Rebecca L. Tate, Professor of English. Each judge picks his or her top five in both poetry and prose. Next, each work is assigned a point value ranging from five to twenty-five. The total for each work is added, and the top three highest numbers become the first through third place winners.

Special thanks to:
Doug Boyd, Professor of English
Robbie Powell, Office Services Tomball College

This issue was printed by:
Kwik Kopy Printing of Tomball
940 W. Main - Tomball, Texas 77375
281-351-8000