



Black Rock & Sage

Issue 7, 2008
Idaho State University

Black Rock & Sage is a journal of creative works published annually through the English Department of Idaho State University. All artistic contributions, from design to poetry, have been produced by graduate and undergraduate in departments from across ISU. Student submissions are reviewed from September through February; see our website for All other inquiries can be directed to our e-mail: brs@isu.edu.

Thank you to every one who donated to *Black Rock & Sage* during this year's campus phone-a-thon. Also, we'd like to extend a special thanks to Lois Spreier whose generous gift of an endowment will help *Black Rock & Sage* showcase the creative works of ISU students for years to come.

Supported in part by the ASISU.

Cover: Detail of "Does the Dog Have Buddha Nature" by Kristin Plucar

Black Rock & Sage

Editor	Greg Olsen
Poetry Editor	Meredith Harvey
Prose Editor	Jason Dietz
Assistant Editors	Matthew Burch Colin Meldrum Tammy Olney JoAnn Winberg
Logo	Amanda S. Piper-McClure
Layout Sages	Amanda S. Piper-McClure Kathleen “Momo” Weber Rachel Williamsen
Faculty Advisor	Susan Goslee
Faculty Consultants	Paula Jull Angie Zielinski

Table of Contents

Art and Design

Kristin Plucar	Eggs in the Landscape	18
	Does the Dog Have Buddha Nature	54
HeatherAngel Patty	Mischief	29
Spencer Case	Untitled	36
Joseph Koepplin	Untitled	60
Diane Yerka	Alley Wall	67
Michael Crook	Three No. 1	81

Fiction

Lalove Foster	We Do This	6
Jeremy Dineen	Pattern	19
Becky Bird	A Penny Pincher's Secret	30
Debbie Brooks	Aunt Violet	37
	Love and Collateral Damage	42
Joshua Mayes	The Three Larks	55
Amy Brumfield	A Woman's Work	68

Nonfiction

McKenzie Young	The World's Greatest Skier	82
----------------	----------------------------	----

Poetry

Breein Bryant	In My Grandmother's Kitchen...	16
	En la Casa de Pablo Neruda	17
Spencer Case	Doorstop Buddha	27
Syndie Allen	Former Favorite Color	28
James Blitzen	Footprints	32
	Rapture in C Minus	34
Debbie Brooks	Flute Lesson	50
	Pickle's Place	52
Jeff Pearson	Growing Old	61
	Playboy	62
	Studentry	64
Kerynn Davis	Nature into Man— <i>Ford Swetnam</i>	80
	<i>Prize Winner</i>	
Martin Vest	Reservations	86
Leslie Park Ovard	Winter Solstice	88

We Do This

Sparks flew from her fingertips, like roman candles lighting up the cloudy skies. She was the candle on the birthday cake. She was the magician in the magic show. She was an angel entering the atmosphere.

And then, she was out.

• • •

Shae could not recall a day when the small cinderblock post office had actually been in use. It had closed six years ago, when she was a small four-year-old, the year that a decade of low potato prices forced most of the farmers in Annadoka to give up the land, sell their John Deeres, and leave their trailer homes to move to cities in search of work as garbage men, truck drivers, window cleaners.

Yet Shae did harbor one memory of the old, sunken, cinderblock building: the image of herself in short pigtails, accompanying her mother hand-in-hand. She'd carried a honey-colored envelope in her dimpled hands, and she stared at the little square postage stamp in the corner: a beautiful blond woman with a Hollywood smile.

In reality, the memory was largely imagined — Shae had found a picture of herself, taken when she was around the age of three, standing beside her mother in front of the large flagpole that graced the once-manicured lawn of the small, one-room postal building. Shae had seen the photograph, and her mind had quickly filled in the memory before she'd had time to realize it was all imagined. She was sure she knew how the story went. She and her mother had taken a walk to the post office together, enjoying the beautiful

summer weather, as Shae's chubby hands grabbed at dandelions and grasshoppers along the way. Her mother had distracted her with the large envelope. Mother smiled so big she might have been the picture on the postage stamp. Mother smiled, Shae smiled, a camera clicked.

Shae harbored the memory as her favorite. That long lost smile. It was a smile she did not recall knowing until she saw the photo. In fact she'd hardly recognized her mother at all on first glance, not until she'd noticed the woman in the photo carried a green turtle-shell handbag. That same handbag had sat for the past six years right on top of the refrigerator, as if her mother might pick it up one day on her way out the door headed for the grocery store.

The woman Shae now lived with little resembled the woman in the picture. Her bright blond hair was now dull, and her skin was emaciated, gray, and so thin the blue veins bulged through her neck and arms. So distant from the taunt, bronzed woman with the smoothly combed flaxen locks and red high heels, as if she'd been transformed. Baptized by the sky.

Shae kept the photo under her pillow. She'd stared at it so long the edges were now dog-eared and frayed. She'd stroked the faces, the hands, the hair. And she'd whispered the words she wanted to hear from a voice she could hardly remember, all the while praying with lips that believed that someone might hear.

• • •

Besides Charlie and Emily, Shae had no real friends in Annadoka until a brown-skinned girl from Mexico moved into the old pea-green trailer a few yards away from her own. The girl's father had been sent to manage the irrigation of Tom Carter's farms. Shae had never seen such a large family. The small trailer they lived in seemed to overflow with brown bodies radiating the zesty smell of jalapeños mingled with

the heavy odor of hot oil. Brothers, babies, mother, father. So different from the tomb that Shae inhabited.

Shae had never known another girl her age in Annadoka, and she enjoyed the superior feeling it gave her to walk Aidalba around the gravel streets, introducing her to the intricacies of her hometown.

“Now not many folks live here in Annadoka, ‘cept for parts of the summer and fall when Carter sends some of his men up here to irrigate and work in the harvest, and they stay over ‘cross from old Elsie over there.” Shae gestured to a rust-eaten trailer house, the metal siding bubbling away from the frame. “Rest of the time it stays empty. Actually, most of these trailers are empty; farmers sold out and left. Only three have people in them and with your family, that’s four.” Aidalba’s wide eyes held intent to Shae’s face, watching her lips form every word. Shae found her attentive audience invigorating.

“Old Elsie’s lived in Annadoka since Annadoka was first a town, back when a bunch of families lived out here farming sugar beets and potatoes. All her four kids were born in that house she lives in. Her house is the only one here that’s cinderblock; the rest of us is all trailer trash. That’s what the kids will call you when you go to school in Simpson City. It’s the closest school to here, and when the bus comes to take you to school you have to ride it forty miles one way. The school didn’t want to send a bus so far to pick up only me; but the law said they had to, so they did. Now that your family is here, maybe they won’t complain so much.”

Shae could see that Aidalba was enthralled.

“Come on and I’ll show you something.” She was off and running down the gravel road with Aidalba trailing eagerly behind. She ran toward her own trailer, white and speckled with rust, then ducked around the back and was running through the deep chick grass that grew thirty feet from her home to the edge of the fields. Ahead lay the

symmetrical green rows of potatoes, each plant a replica of the next stretching on in perfect unison to the horizon.

“This is it,” said Shae. “This is what we do in Annadoka.” She stretched out her arm to gesture with pride. “We do this.” She paused several seconds, letting Aidalba’s wide eyes examine the endless acres of rolling potato fields. “One time I drove out with one of the pipe movers, Freddy, to check on irrigation lines, and we kept driving and driving and I finally asked him when the fields would end, and he just laughed and said they’d end when people started eating carrot sticks stead of French fries.” She paused, to smile at the joke. “Yeah, sometimes I just come here cuz it’s so quiet I can really think. Just stare at the fields and think. You ever just like to get away and think, Aidalba?”

Aidalba nodded, timid and uncertain.

“Yeah, me too. Sometimes I just like to think out here. And breathe. It feels real nice to breathe out here with all this stuff growing.” She waved her hand toward the green fields. “They’re always happy to see you here.”

A speckled gray-and-orange cat appeared from behind a tall knapweed and rubbed its thin belly along Aidalba’s leg. Aidalba started and moved away.

“Hey,” cried Shae with delight. “That’s Charlie! He’s my cat. His wife Emily should be around here too.” A black short-furred cat appeared on cue. Shae grabbed her up and buried her face in the thin, dust-covered fur.

“Aidalba,” she asked thoughtfully after a few seconds of silence. “Do you think it’s weird to have a cat for a best friend?” Aidalba’s wide eyes blinked in mute confusion. Shae continued on as though she had answered. “Neither do I. My dad once said I needed to get friends that were real girls and stop hangin’ ‘round stray animals, but I told him these weren’t strays. Well, they used to be, but I domesticized them.

They use' to be afraid of humans, but I kept putting milk and Cheerios out for them 'til they weren't scared anymore. Now they're my babies." She scooped up Charlie where he'd perched on Aidalba's nervous foot. She held the two animals close to her cheeks. "Mom is going to be so glad you're here now Aidalba. She always wanted me to have a real girl friend."

• • •

Shae lay in her bed, her racing pulse slowly cooled as her grip on the blanket relaxed. Though her eyes were now open, the glow of sparks still blurred her vision. It was night, she assured herself. It was just a dream. And yet, her mind could not help but remember the woman sitting down the hall, the murmur of the television giving her away. The endless click of the remote flipping through the channels.

It was not a dream. It was her reality.

• • •

Shae could see herself, the little girl from the picture, running through the fields after the blond woman in large rubber boots who trudged through the mud with her thin pink arms wrapped tightly round the long aluminum irrigation pipe. Shae had seen the men with the dark skin doing this work before, moving the long pipes from one end of the field to the other, but she'd never seen her mother do this job. The pipe was long, much longer than her mother. The ends of the pipe teetered back and forth with each step her mother took, one side bouncing high into the air as the other brushed along the tops of the lively green plants. Back and forth, back and forth, in rhythm with her steps.

Shae raced to follow, raising her knees above her elbows as she hopped over the tops of the full-grown potato plants. As she ran, she shivered to feel the sharp tang of raindrops on her face. Clouds were swiftly overtaking the afternoon sky, and she felt a cool breeze speckle her body with a mist of rain. The loud rumble of thunder filled the air. Rain. It had been so long since they'd seen any in Annadoka; maybe this would make the men stay, not sell their pickup trucks and move to the faraway places she heard them talk about. Places like Boise. She rushed on, enjoying the pelt of small droplets. She shrieked with laughter, as she bounded over a row of plants, and as she did she felt the hairs on her arms rise. A wave of warmth pulled her backward toward the ground, and she saw the end of the irrigation pipe her mother carried connect to the sky in light. As she hit the ground she heard a strange popping sound. A buzzing. The world seemed strangely still; she moved as if underwater. The Fourth of July. The yellow sparkler she had used to write her name. A neon light leaving marks against the dark night sky. A shriek like a frightened bird. The smell of burning rubber. Silence.

• • •

“Mother, there’s a new girl that lives next door. She’s from Mexico, so she speaks Spanish, but she can understand English pretty well. You’ll like her.” She watched as her mother’s thumb mechanically stroked the remote control, the television flicked through the stations in steady rhythm; her dull eyes flickered along with the channels.

“She and her mother made these tamale things. Maybe I can bring you one.”

Shae watched as a large drop of saliva ran down the shrunken chin, and the eyes flicked towards the ceiling. The knotting feeling in her stomach ached.

A sound of angry wind shook the little trailer as Shae made her way to her bedroom, suddenly ready for sleep. A storm raged on outside the thin walls, wind rattling the windows and rain pelting the roof. Shae could feel the storm seeping through the glass panes and into her body. This night she left the photo under the pillow, unseen. It was too hard to look.

• • •

When Shae awoke she felt worried. As she moved down the hall she saw her parent's empty room. Her father was already gone for the day, starting his rounds earlier and earlier it seemed, though the size of the fields he was charged with caring for never grew. She shuffled on down the dark hallways, her groggy eyes assessing the dirty dishes that filled the small kitchen. Something was wrong.

"Judith Ortega, come on down! You're the next contestant on the *Price is Right!*" The announcer's voice shouted; the crowd cheered in excitement.

The alarm tugging at her conscious exploded: the television was not flipping through the channels.

Shae moved through the small kitchen toward the living room. The sofa where her mother normally sat was empty. She smelled the strong odor of urine. Her heart jumped before she even saw the figure sprawled on the floor near the kitchen table, face down, arms spread outward like a cross. Shae waited for sparks to fly from the fingers.

It was happening again. The knot of fear. The confusion of adrenaline.

Shae moved carefully forward, and crouching at her mother's head she turned the tangled blond hair until she could see a face. The eyes were rolled back in their sockets, and a low moan shuttered from the throat.

Help. She needed help. That's what she had done so many years before. Run for help. Or maybe it had been fear. Run from fear of the flashing light and the electricity that seemed to engulf her mother's body like a cocoon. Fear or help. Maybe they were both the same.

Shae turned to run, but she was dizzy and her vision blurred. The last few years spun before her eyes. Microwave dinners. Late nights with no one telling her to go to bed. The year she'd gotten lice and had to sit alone with the school nurse until the final bell rang. Drooling blank stares. More microwave dinners, and then no more. Empty cupboards. Her father in harvest, no time for the grocery store. A knot of hunger. Hunger for food. Hunger for a hand to hold. Hunger for the woman in the photograph. She stood, frozen in time, feeling the urgent need to get help. She wondered if she lay sprawled on the dining room floor if someone might come for her.

Once before, when she'd run through the fields screaming, help had brought the hollow shell of a woman. What would help bring this time?

Shae flinched at the soft knock at the front door. Once...the clock ticked and a contestant on the game show won a new car. Twice...the hollow woman moaned, and Shae moved hesitantly toward her. Three times...Shae closed her eyes, and the door softly opened.

Aidalba moved quietly forward as Shae's empty voice tried to speak. "Help me," mouthed her lips as Aidalba's wide eyes moved toward the floor.

Moving quickly forward, she knelt, her thin hands fluttered along the woman's face, leaning close to feel the jagged breaths moving slowly in and out, in and out. She whispered something in a foreign tongue, and with a sudden leap, she stood and ran quickly out the door.

Shae blinked once, twice, and stood frozen to the chipped linoleum floor.

• • •

The ambulance came in a flurry of lights and hands and voices and words. They packed her mother up, wrapping her emaciated frame in a web of wires and electrodes and bleached white sheets. Shae watched from the living room window, wrapping herself in the yellowed curtains, as they lifted the stretcher into the ambulance and clicked the doors shut. It drove off in a flurry of lights and sirens and shouts.

Shae turned to scan the room. A tomb had been robbed.

The turtle-shell purse above the refrigerator. The picture she hid beneath her pillow. The splotch of pungent urine on the dining room floor. The only remnants of the woman they had taken.

Shae wiped furiously at her face as the tears began to run down her cheeks. This time there had been no fireworks. This time there was no afterglow. This time she knew the storyline, and when it ended, there would be no return to the post office, to the memory, to the dream.

Her eyes were so full she did not see a small dark figure enter the room.

“You have bad day,” said Aidalba, searching slowly for the right words.

Shae nodded, stiffly.

“You want walk?” Without waiting for an answer she took Shae’s hand and guided her out the door and through the tall weeds into the bright sun. They walked hand-in-hand several feet to the edge of the field, the green plants jangling their leaves happily in the summer breeze.

They stood close together, in silence, Shae feeling the gentle hand, the warm sunlight. The knot in her stomach softened. In the silence they watched a magpie fly along the tops of the potato plants, skimming the green leaves with its shiny wings.

“This,” said Aidalba, raising her arm to gesture toward the open green fields that extended into the horizon, “we do this.” She breathed deeply, closing her eyes. “We do this.” She turned, and smiling, reached to wipe the wet tracks from Shae’s cheeks.

Shae closed her eyes, breathing deeply, feeling the brown fingers brush her face. She could hear a voice in the breeze as they began to walk together, arm-in-arm, rambling through the dusty weeds and out into the fields. The voice ran through her hair, over her skin, through her ears, quenching the sparks that flew from her mind.

“We do this.”

Breein Bryant

In My Grandmother's Kitchen, Looking at August, 1946

Green beans, lithe and ready for snapping,
wait in an enamel bowl on the metal diner table.
Next to them, the zucchinis he picked for her
this morning are elephantine.
Styrofoam containers and sparkling tin cans
stand washed and stacked in armament
against depressions of both the national
and personal variety. Her terror has come unspooled.
Only paths remain among the newspapers
piled like a sedimentary record. Boxes of pictures
have bloomed all over her pink plaid kitchen.

In the black-and-white photo-booth strip from their honeymoon,
the near-starvation of childhood is a wisp of hesitation
at the corners of her smile. She is unable to imagine
the finely curved alcove ceilings and arched doorways
of the home he will build. She cannot smell
the fruit room in their basement, the walls lined
with jars of peaches luminescent in their syrup
and canned vegetables from the store. She can't see him,
white-haired and winded, pausing over the garden he keeps
to feed her, listening to the first strange fluttering farewells
of his heart. All she knows is that with him,
hope accumulates like pennies in old coffee cans.

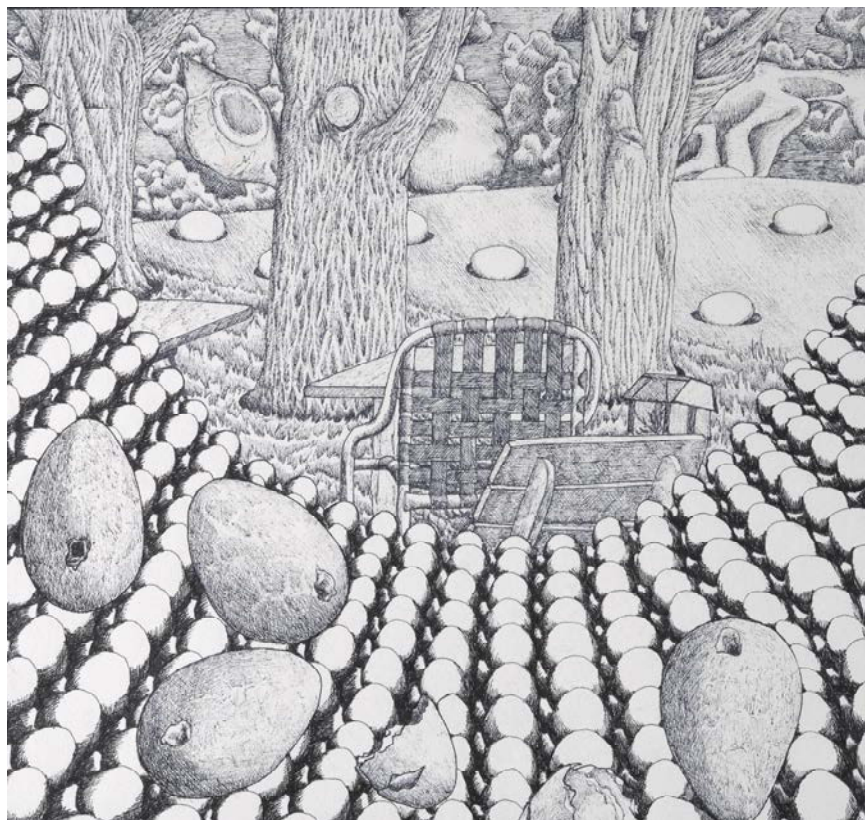
En la Casa de Pablo Neruda

Pine-plank ceilings from Chile's dead forests
curve to meet the walls like the hull of a ship.
A figurehead, now shy amid tourists,
once wept from porcelain eyes when he lit
the evening fire. His friends had explained
condensation, but he would not concede
that her spirit was oaken or feigned,
and before him each night, she could grieve.

Rapt delight was his own predilection.
Pablo's particular style of haunting
now illumines his sea shell collection.
Opaline husks, encased and vaunted,
intricate and seemingly serene,
grow bright and fantastic like daydreams.

Kristin Plucar

Eggs in the Landscape



Pattern

Standing in the dimly lit cellar of his grandfather's one-hundred-year-old farmhouse was not the first time that William had heard from God. He knew it was just the completion of a series. He ran his hands slowly along the lava rock foundation, his fingers scanning and pausing, tips reaching into depressions in the rock or feeling the sharp prickle of one hundred-year-old mortar. Like he had only one other time in the past, William crossed the concrete floor and lifted his grandfather's Hopkins 12 gauge double-barrel shotgun from the hand carved oak rack that his father had built after *his* father, William's grandfather, had killed himself with the gun. He knew it was loaded, but he pushed the release lever, tipped the side-by-side barrels down, and checked anyway. In the dim light, the two primers stared up at him like the eyes of his grandfather, each glinting as he twisted the gun to catch the light of the single bulb above him.

It had been with his grandfather that William had first heard from God. His mother had been gone, long gone, from before William even knew she was there. His father never talked about it much, at least not to William, and he grew up thinking that it was just how things were. William's grandfather, Jack, seemed always around in those days, much more than William's father was. His grandfather was like the lava-rock foundation that surrounded him now, a combination of rock and cement, seamed, but strong. On the day that William heard God's voice, he had been helping his grandfather weed the garden. His hands were black from the soil, clear up to his elbows, but William loved the work. He would crawl around the garden on his hands and knees, preferring to keep close to the ground, while Jack would follow

him with a hoe. As he pulled and dug and sweat in the afternoon sun, a thought occurred to him, one that he had never before realized.

“Grandpa, are you my dad?”

“No, Will. Your dad is your dad.” He had called William that. Will.

“Where is he then?”

Grandpa Jack had reacted in a way that surprised and even frightened William. “He’s working puttin’ food on your table!”

Grandpa Jack yelled. “And don’t ever forget that!”

William never forgot. It was the only time that his grandfather had ever spoken to him like that. And right after the words had burned past being embers in his ears, William heard the voice of God. It was in his mind that he heard it, right behind his ears, like the words had somehow bypassed the natural and planted themselves in the garden of his brain. It was a fertile place for the seed to land, and the voice struck a note that would resonate in William. The words, somehow not as important as the voice, had long been forgotten, but the tone, the harsh whisper, the beauty, would always be remembered.

William pulled the double barrel of the Hopkins back into position with a click. He lifted the gun and pulled the stock tightly into his shoulder. He held it there for a moment, aiming at some unseen enemy. His fingers edged to the pair of triggers, caressing them lightly. In a quick motion, he then dropped the gun to the front and held the stock up to the light. On its wooden surface was etched a scene of trees, limber pine, six of them, each getting smaller, fading into a forest that rose up a mountainside. The picture had been carved into the stock by a friend of William’s grandfather. It had been traded for an old bottle of Benedictine liqueur that William’s grandfather had come across fighting in France in 1944. William ran his fingers down the length of the stock, closing his eyes and imagining this place in the trees where there was no one. The only sound was that of the breeze shhhhhhing through the tops of trees and the occasional creek of a

lodgepole bending in the wind. William opened his eyes and followed the stock to the cold metal of the barrel. He put his hand on it, to feel it. To feel the cold.

“Grandpa, do you believe in God?” By the age of twelve, William had come to view his grandfather the way he had described him in the garden the few years before.

Grandpa Jack remained silent for a long time. “When you live to see what I’ve seen,” he said, “you’d have to slap God in the face if you believed in Him.”

William felt something in his chest sink at the words. “I think I heard God talk to me before.” William pulled back as soon as he said the words, hoping that his grandfather wouldn’t be angered by them. Instead, there was a long pause, so much so that William thought his grandfather had not even heard him.

“Good. Good for you,” Grandpa Jack finally said. And that was it.

Two weeks after that, on October 16, Grandpa Jack killed himself with his Hopkins shotgun.

After his grandfather’s death, things changed for William. Almost all of a sudden, his father appeared. Instead of Grandpa taking him to school, now Dad did. Dad made dinner, Dad kissed him on the forehead and tucked him in at night. At times, William found his father in the old library of the house, looking at the shotgun. William would enter and his father would quickly put the gun up on the top of the shelf, above the books.

“Someday you will have to read all of these books, William.”

“Have you read them all, Papa?”

“No, William. Not so many as all. But a few.”

“Which ones?”

William’s father reached up and took down three books and set them on a lamp stand in front of William. “Start with these three.”

William lifted the stack of books. *Lord Jim*, *The Death of Iván Ilyich*, and *Moby Dick*.

“Read this one first.” William’s father pulled *The Death of Iván Ilyich* and put it on top.

“Why this one?”

“It’s the one I read first.”

As time passed by, William’s father began to change the library. He tore out the shelves and carpet and repainted. He spent hours building new shelves with hand tools. Although he didn’t understand much of it, William completed the three books his father had offered him, and was given more. He read as his father sawed, and fit, and stained. When it was all finished, the two sat in the room together, looking at the work done. William couldn’t help but smile at the burgundy paint, cherry wood, and light brown carpet. On his father’s face was not the look that William had expected. It was more like relief. William was seventeen.

“Will.” It was the first time his father had called him that. “When I am gone, you are going to receive some money. It was Grandpa’s. Don’t sell the house. It’s your home. There is enough that you don’t have to work if you don’t want to.”

“Yes, Father.”

The second time that William heard from God was the day that his father, like his grandfather, had placed the cold barrel of the shotgun in his mouth and squeezed off the trigger. He was eighteen and he did his best to be what he had been told a man should be. He did it so well that, during the funeral, he had to lick his fingers and wipe his eyes to make it look like he had cried. No one came to the funeral, and no one helped him clean up the blood. It was two days later that he first ate, and two days after that he decided to keep the gun. He gently cleaned the dried blood, first from the outside, and then the inside of one of the barrels where it had flowed in from the pool on the floor. He was tedious with his work, spending hours, brushing, rubbing, oiling.

When he was done, he placed the gun on the handmade gun rack that his father had built and placed it in the cellar. He then walked back up the curved staircase and pulled three books from the bookshelf. He began to read.

“Dad,” William said, a few months before his father died. “Do you believe in God?”

“I suppose so.”

“Has God ever spoken to you?”

“You mean, like an actual voice? No.”

“He did to me once when I was little.”

“What did he tell you?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Was it worth it then?”

William sat silent for a long time, the question heavy in his mind.

“I don’t know,” was all he could come up with.

After his father had died, William received a visit from his inherited accountant. The man seemed so happy, like he was delivering great news. William just sat there watching the man jot his figures on his printed sheets of paper. The man’s fingers irritated William, the quickness and assuredness. It made his own fingers itch to move, to pull. As he listened to the man’s smiling words, watched his clean-shaven chin move up and down, a peace came over him. Not the peace of learning that he would never have to work a day in his life, just like his father had said. A different sort of peace, one that told him that when it was time, he would be ready.

William became certain that something was wrong with him the day his daughter was born. The birth had been difficult and he found himself thinking that if a choice had to be made between his wife or the baby he didn’t know how he would choose. He squeezed his wife’s hand as she lay there, the doctor cutting her open, and looked into her eyes. They were blue, not the brilliant blue that he had seen on their

wedding day, nor even the normal blue of the everyday. There was a lifeless blue sheen about them, like the blued barrel of the shotgun. Later that night, when everything was calm, William asked his wife if she believed in God.

“I don’t know, why?”

“Just wondering.”

“Because of today?” She looked down at their daughter, asleep in her arms.

“No, no. Just wondering, that’s all. Forget it.”

“I suppose there must be something. What do you think?”

William looked at his newly born daughter. She had opened her eyes and was looking up at his wife, who looked back down into hers. It was right then, at that very moment, his wife and daughter only a few feet away, that William realized it. His eyes teared up and he watched in silence for a while, searching for a tint of blue in his wife’s eyes that would tell him everything was going to be fine. That everything was fine right then. He searched for long minutes, until his wife closed her eyes and lay back on the bed, the baby in her arms. He leaned back his chair and closed his own eyes. Nothing was fine.

The one other time that William had lifted the shotgun from its place of rest was the day that he found out that his wife was leaving him, just as his mother had left his father. There was no apologetic note, no goodbye, just an empty closet, sheets ripped from the bed. William knew it was his fault. He was broken. Like on the day his father had killed himself, William felt nothing. He walked down the spiral staircase of the cellar, each step creaking a century of sound. As he approached the bottom, a feeling came over him, a rush of his senses, the smell of the dirt, the dim light, the muffled sounds. He felt like he had come home. He walked over to the rack where the shotgun lay, and lifted it. Dropping to his knees, he placed the butt of the stock in the soft dirt and tilted his body forward to where it met the barrel.

As he placed the barrel into his mouth, he realized that this is what his father must have felt, what his grandfather felt. He bit down, the metal filling his taste.

God, are you there? Are you going to speak to me? Slowly he reached down with his right hand and cocked back the double hammers.

What is it that you want? What are you trying to tell me? Is it love, do you love me? How could it be love with the way my life has been? How could it?! There is no love! There is nothing! It was then that William realized something that he had never considered before. It was not that God had not loved him. It was that God could not love him. There was nothing to love.

He moved his thumb to one of the triggers.

God, if you are there, you had better speak to me now! Speak! SPEAK!

William closed his eyes. A tear, running down his cheek, rolled off his jawbone and fell to the dry dirt floor. No voice came. He took a deep breath and pressed downward with his thumb.

That had been eight years ago. William took the click of the shotgun as the voice of God. He cleaned out two feet of dirt and broken glass from the cellar floor and laid concrete. He patched the chipping and cracked mortar, tore down the old storage shelves and built new ones with his father's hand tools. When he was finished, he felt something that he had seen his father feeling that day when he had finished the library. He felt relieved.

William sat down in the whicker chair that he kept in the cellar. Above him, the sound of the birthday party was muffled, but still audible. Occasionally, laughter would drift down to him. It was part of the reason that he liked the cellar. It muffled life. William smiled. He'd set up the birthday party for Serena, his daughter. It was her eighteenth birthday. He had opened up his house for the party, wanting his daughter to celebrate her shift into adulthood in the same place

he had. His ex-wife was up there also. He'd invited her and her new husband, trying to create something for Serena that he never had. Serena was a good kid, played on the volleyball team, got good enough grades. William was proud of her. Resting the shotgun on his lap, he leaned over to a small little table that sat next to the whicker chair. He picked up a book and opened it a little over halfway. Before he began to read, he listened for the voice, seeking something that he could hold onto. He thought of his love for his daughter, his grandfather. His love for his father. He had read a couple of the sections inside the book, this story interesting him more than any *Frankenstein* or *The Jungle* ever had. It was an odd story. In the story, it wasn't the father who died. William looked at the open book and then to the shotgun that rested beneath. No voice spoke to him. He thought about the time that he had heard the voice in the garden, years ago. Wondered what it meant. He didn't know. Listening to the sound of laughter above him, William reached up and pulled the string, turning out the light.

Spencer Case

Doorstop Buddha

Doorstop Buddha guards my apartment from bad karma and unsightly holes in the wall. The serene smile on his face reminds me to be more patient, and the ding in his head reminds me to open the door more carefully when I come in. Like an enlightened garden gnome, he watches as I eat take-out Chinese and contemplate nirvana. Everything is temporary, including my box of fried rice lying open on the table like a lotus flower.

Syndie Allen

Former Favorite Color

The plastic ring purchased
on a solo Roman holiday,
a symbol, flawless for that first drink.

A slammed down hand, a joke's emphasis — I still want your laugh —
broke the band in two
opposite chunks
spinning away, repelled to opposing
table sides.

Frantic gluing
and re-gluing — I will make this work —
wearable for an unheld hand.

Fickle glue.
Retired yellow ring.

HeatherAngel Patty

Mischief



A Penny Pincher's Secrets

I had a very interesting discussion the other day with a neighbor. We were talking about money matters. I consider myself to be one thrifty lady; our conversation went something like this:

I started to share some of my money-saving tactics. I told her about the ads and flyers that seem to bombard our mail. She mentioned that she just throws them away; but I, knowing that these valuable pieces of paper can save you money, told her about my latest “steal.” Believe it or not, I got a knife that can cut through a shoe just the other day for \$12.99. I had just seen the same item in a department store for \$15.99. She had bought the knife in the department store and went on to tell me that she had actually saved more money than I had because she didn't have to pay the extra \$5.00 in shipping and handling.

Well, I went on to tell her another one of my tactics. I mentioned that if you buy ten heads of lettuce, they will throw in another head *free*. Then that obnoxious neighbor had the nerve tell me that she could see why my salad was “limp.” She said that if I were normal and bought only one head at a time, I wouldn't have to force my excess produce on the neighbors. At that point, I snapped back. I pointed out that my grocery bill was much less than hers—this I was sure of. I knew that if any sane person went to Save-A-Buck supermarket, the savings alone on Fish-of-the-Sea Tuna and Skips Peanut Butter were worth the trip. With one additional trip to Fred's Supermarket, you could save a bundle on his sardines and avocados. His week-old bread is an absolute give-away. The week-old bread is always available just one counter beyond the smashed potato chips which are just slightly more stale than the bread. One additional tip I gave her was that if she

went to Dell's Deals, she could get the dented Barfy's Dog food cans for half price.

My neighbor shops at only one store. She claims that she actually saves more money than I do because she doesn't spend the extra \$10.00 on gas that I do driving around to my dozens of stores. But.... she doesn't know that when I am in my car, I take back roads and coast most of the way. My driving techniques save at least five cents a mile. I also never go over fifteen miles per hour as this also saves money. She then said she knew why my kids were in therapy.

I didn't mean to compare myself to Martha Stewart, but I knew that I had her on the next point. You will not believe this, but I have furnished my entire house for less than \$20.00. As an example I pointed out my new seashell lamp which I purchased at a garage sale for only \$1.00. She scoffed at my "new" thrift-store orange sofa and leopard print curtains, but you hardly notice the difference because the gray in the carpet picks up the gray of the cinder blocks in the entertainment center I built myself.

She looked at me in amazement when I told her about all of the money I had saved at McDonald's by purchasing happy meals for the entire family. Every time we eat out, it's Happy Meals. The free prizes alone are a savings as they can be saved for Christmas presents. My neighbor asked me if that is where we got the box of rubber duckies that we gave them for Christmas last year. It was then that I realized I had revealed my source.

Our conversation ended abruptly when we began to smell the fumes from my homemade car wax which I had left simmering on the stove. I could tell that she wanted the recipe, but I had revealed enough already. It was also time for my daily Spanish lesson. As our television set carries only the Spanish station, we turn it on for one hour a day. Needless to say, this television set was another of my "real deals."

James Blitzen

Footprints

So there are these two guys,
and they are walking down
the beach leaving footprints
in the sand, and one of these guys
is Jesus, I think, and the other one
is me, or something, and so
the one guy, maybe Jesus, turns
to the other guy and says, like
“hey, so what do you think
of all these footprints and stuff?”
and I say, “sure is a lot of sand”
because there is a lot of sand,
even for a beach and all that,
and when we turn around
the footprints are gone or
there’s only one left or something,
and I look at Jesus and I’m all,
“how do you like that?” and Jesus
shrugs and says something like,
“it’s alright, man. it’s alright,”
and I look at him cause it’s not
alright, cause something’s wrong,
and I don’t know why,
but I miss those stupid footprints,
so I get real mad and start yelling

and kicking sand until Jesus
says, “hey, man, you want a ride
or something?” And so I get on
his back and he carries me off
that stupid beach.

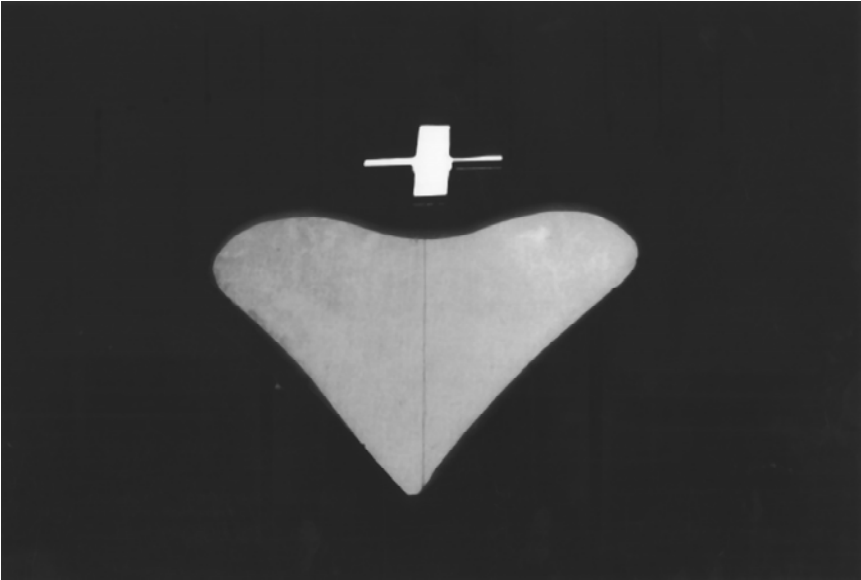
Rapture in C minus

walking to school in old
shoes down tar-soaked-
railroad-tie stairs and the iced
dew on the wood or the loose
gravel makes me slip
and down I go til my knees
meet the rocks and the wood
bites my hands but it's worse
than that cause my lunch bag
swings to hit me in the head
and the momentum carries
me just a little bit farther
til I'm lying belly-flat,
skid-faced on the trail
to school and I whispercuss
cause I'm mad as hell cause
I slip as I try to sit up
and assess the damage.
My ankle hurts and the sole
of my shoe is a mangle of
rubber, and I see my sock
through the hole, and my sock
is dirty, but I get up and finish
the walk to school because today
I have a calculus test, and I sit

by Lucy Sheweller in calculus,
and I can hide my dirty sock
from Lucy, but I can't hide
from a test I failed because
I slipped on the way to school

Spencer Case

Untitled



Aunt Violet

Rhea spent the evening undoing the day, just so the night would go down easier. The blaze before night frightened her, disarmed her, and left her disoriented and hurt in a place she could never name. It could have been the countless lovers or perhaps the nameless towns where she had spread a bedroll beneath the stars and wished for morning. Too often without a dollar but never lacking resources, she carried a weight beneath her heart that might have rooted her in inertia, but she chose instead to call it her anchor.

And so night spread dark but for the sickle moon, and she drowned it in wine. When her feet zigzagged in a cross-stitch, she tipped one to the ending day and one to the morning to follow. “Thanks,” was all she said. Tomorrow. Tomorrow would be a fresh start.

Morning never disappointed, of course. If I live to be a million, I shall never tire of the colors and the smell like mountains soaked in sleeping lakes. She swept the rotting timbers of the porch into the low sun and whistled a song till she forgot what came next and concentrated on the dirt flying against the light. The teakettle screamed into the morning, and she stopped to steep her tea till it was dark and sweet as earth.

How many years had passed this way, opening morning like an advent calendar, just to wait out the night? She’d lost count before she’d thought to keep track. But mostly it was good, no, better than good. She could lose herself in a book for days if she wished, and when she emerged, a chrysalis of new thought, her light bill unpaid, she might regret it for a moment. But candlelight and firelight and starlight illuminate as well as warm. She could always roll her belongings into a wad and strike out for somewhere needing her footprint. Never

because of or with someone, but somewhere because it called to her as a place to empty herself. Or to fill the empty. New faces, new tastes, new voices, no mistakes, and only choices.

October came round, and the crickets came inside along with the mice and moths, and Rhea pulled out an atlas. “Right here.” She dropped her finger in the Midwest and opened her eyes. “Yep. Perfect.” She slid her glasses up her nose to read the name of the town, so small the print and so tired her eyes from a lifetime of always looking forward. “Amana, hmmm.”

She tried to picture it, this little town in Iowa. Hilly? It seemed to be. Trees? And rivers? Or dry and flat? Were the people friendly or closed? Rhea only managed to rile her imagination into a full boil that didn’t rest in her sleep. All night long she walked and walked in search of something. A house? A face? The space around her heart? Wasn’t Amana a refrigerator or a microwave? How could she live in an appliance when right here birds and crickets sang into a sky always changing?

The doorbell clanged into her restless sleep, and she stumbled groggy eyed to the door. The UPS man smiled at her, or perhaps at her hair spun into a hive on her head, or maybe he just smiled at the space above her head to avoid having to look at her wrinkled T-shirt and sagging breasts. The package came from Seaside, Aunt Violet, in fact. Rhea wrinkled her nose. “Thanks,” she said and hurried from the glare of morning.

Once inside, all she could see were big flashbulb spots and swimming black, and she had to stand still and focus for a moment before proceeding. Aunt Violet. Count on a weird relative to undo the perfect morning when the truth of a dream waited just on the other side, just a few more minutes of sleep and all would be revealed. Rhea jabbed at the cardboard with the only sharp thing she could find in the house, a cleaver, making a mess of the box. Maybe the contents as

well, but with Aunt Violet it could be pink bunny pajamas and slippers, God forbid. Last time Aunt Violet sent anything, it was an invitation to her own funeral, complete with a description of the dress she would be wearing. Some kind of mermaid skimmer in hot orange with a stiff bow in her still-dark hair. Rhea shook her head. At least Aunt Violet kept the world on its toes. As a child, Rhea preferred her Auntie Violet to all the others, always smelling of gardenias, gorgeous even in overalls and cotton garden gloves. Aunt Violet could sing, like an opera star, in fact. Rhea's mom would only roll her eyes and say, "Airs!" But Rhea had heard of arias and figured her mother must be ignorant of them. Maybe jealous as well, her mother's figure daily resembling the sofa a bit more, while Aunt Violet got her tummy tucked and her breasts first augmented and then lifted.

"A girl's best friend, the plastic surgeon," Aunt Violet winked in a low whisper. Rhea stared at the purple bra swaying full of Aunt Violet's breasts. What she could see of them looked bruised, but Aunt Violet assured her they only hurt for awhile. "It's for the best. No pain, no gain. Look at my face. Before it healed it looked like I got in a street fight. Now, who'd ever guess?" She hugged Rhea then and whispered, "You know, I'm much older than I look."

"But Aunt Violet, I don't want you to be old at all," Rhea buried her tears between Aunt Violet's newly enhanced breasts.

"Oh, not so old, child," Aunt Violet smiled. "Age is only a number. You'll see." She held little Rhea till she cried no more. "Why, you'll have men and adventures aplenty. Just wait. And life is so big, you need never fear getting old." She hummed something that made Rhea want to cry all over again. "Of course, age is a gift not everyone receives." Aunt Violet began to whisper a story of Uncle Al who died at the age of thirty-four in the woods taking a shit. "Husband number four! Just imagine! So much love at such a tender age!"

Rhea's mom hollered from the next room. "Dammit, Violet! Don't feed that child full of your stories! Time to eat! And I got a life too! Hurry it up!" So pork chops and green beans and mashed potatoes buried in a sluice of brown gravy ended the story of Uncle Al and his unfortunate bowel movement, and the next time Rhea saw Aunt Violet's breasts, a much younger man was burying his lips in the space between them at a public beach. Aunt Violet winked at Rhea, and then checked her makeup in a mirror over the young man's shoulders. Rhea turned away in embarrassment.

At the time, Rhea dated Boy Number One, a baritone in the choir, honor student, and regional science fair winner in the physical sciences category. Rhea was nineteen, on the slow track to multiple lovers and life in the fast lane. She still wore the cat-eye glasses she picked out at the optometrist in seventh grade, a metallic blue like a high mountain trout, to make her eyes look blue when in fact they were gray like a cloud-filled sky. But she fancied herself more like a Wyoming sky ablaze with autumn blue. Five years later, Rhea, stalled on Boy Number One, wondered about Aunt Violet's perception and skills at foreseeing the future. She consulted a palm reader who noted no love lines and a straight, cold heart line. "I'm sorry dear. I think you best turn to international commerce for fulfillment. It's not in men." After studying her palm for some time, she added, "Or in women. Hmmm. Or dogs. Or pets of any kind." She shooshed Rhea quickly from her booth, apparently nervous of such a cold-hearted person. "No need to come back! You will do fine!" The gypsy rubbed her hands nervously, and Rhea, sweating, ran from the strange woman right into the arms of Boy Number Two.

Boy Number Two called himself Maurice. Had Rhea given it thought, and she would have realized that only Maurice Sendak made a thing of himself, but then what was Rhea but an ending to the effects of flu? She married him in a flurry, ruffles and cake and weeping

bridesmaids, and within two years wrapped the bed sheets full of her belongings and struck out for somewhere else. Anywhere, in fact, where the stars weren't forced to cluster into a corridor between tall trees and towering buildings. Montana, Big Sky Country, where the blue of space stretched to the curve in the earth. Rhea would have stayed forever but for Boy Number Three, or Man Number One as she liked to call him. After he so generously pointed out her numerous genetic deficiencies such as her thin eyebrows and shoulders and narrow hips, she caught the train to Utah and took up with the Mormons.

"Oh, Auntie Violet, you were right. Adventures and love aplenty," she sighed, "but heartache big as a semi to carry it through another lifetime." She pried at the bubble wrap taped so tight she wondered it hadn't broken the innards. But in the middle, like a treasure chest, she found a small jewelry box. Pewter crusted with rubies and garnets, and inside swathed in burgundy velvet. And in the very heart of this chest, a ring and a key tagged with a note. "Find me." Rhea slid the ring over her finger, wondering at Aunt Violet's excesses and eccentricities. She stroked the soft velvet of the box and closed it gently. That's when she noticed the compartment in the bottom of the box between the delicate Queen Anne-like legs. The key fit. She felt her heart miss a beat and wished she'd left the dream to drink coffee to the dregs instead.

The photo was tattered and discolored, beige where it should have been black or grey, and the face crinkled from being carried in a wallet, perhaps. She squinted and reached for her glasses. The gentleman, a handsome man she'd never met, with neatly clipped beard and moustache, taller than the young Aunt Violet, before the enhanced breasts, before Rhea could remember her. Between them a little girl, with yellow hair and astonished eyes, stared into the camera. In Aunt Violet's hand, the back of the photo read: Not the kid, silly. The camera man.

Love and Collateral Damage

The butcher at Carne Fresco, his arms furry, even on the elbows, heavily muscled right down to the wrists and gnarled finger joints, smiled as he carved along the bone. "Husband doing poorly, eh?"

Carma swallowed. She guessed so. At least as badly as anyone could and still be alive. "Kinda."

"Well, these'll make him better in a jiff. You'll see." He winked at her.

She wandered to the shelves along the opposite wall. Sea salt tenderizer. Freeze-dried herbs. Recipe books with names like: *Raw But Tender, Eat Now Cook Later*. The shop smelled of blood and cut bone. Like Auschwitz and Bergen-Belzen. Anne Frank on the precipice of death and life, a cliff swallow breathing the charred remains of loved ones.

"You want to taste my soup?" His huge teeth pushed open thick lips in a smile. "It's in the back. For my favorite customers only."

"I don't think so. Gotta get home and make dinner. You know." She flicked her hand absent-mindedly.

"Yeah, I know." His knife made a clean noise like wings opening into air. "Yeah." He stared hard at the rib steaks, the marred white and red flesh clinging to the hard edge of bone.

"This any good?" Carma lifted a package of stew mix, a mosaic of greens, reds, earthy browns, and yellows.

Karl squinted. "If you're a rabbit, I s'pose. Or a colt."

Carma laughed, thin and watery and tired. "Okay then. I'll try it."

"You're a pretty brave girl, you. Lentils and split peas and dried garden things. God knows what." He shook his head.

Yeah, that's me. Brave enough to try one more day; to believe in the hereafter right now, inside of and in spite of the dark storm clouds heaving through the late autumn sky. "Yep, that's me, Pollyanna and General Patton all in one." But she smiled and shoved her bangs off her forehead. When had she drained herself of life, or when had life become so heavy a weight?

Karl looked up from his carving just long enough to catch the stray locks catching the sunlight like straw chaff in a light wind. Carma's fine fingers shadowing the deep lines beneath her eyes for a moment. Ten years ago, she must have been a beauty. Well, maybe still. He gave up trying to imagine and went back to dividing the muscle along the ribs. His knife sang through the flesh, clean and swift. "Patton, huh?"

She didn't answer, so focused on the ingredients in the stew mix. "Really. Soy meal. Soy meal in everything. Just like a feedlot."

He should have pushed the product, earned his wage. She set the package down, more worn than she had been earlier.

"Sorry." He heaved his shoulders in a shrug. If only she had called in her order before she came in, he wouldn't have to keep her waiting so long. He rolled each rib steak in the butcher paper and taped the pointed edges. *Rib Steak* in big black letters. The date, what was it? Little matter, she would be back next Friday, stocking up on meats for the weekend. "Really, I offer some of my stew. Homemade. Lamb and lemon and basil. Freshly butchered and gathered from the hillsides. You could take some home tonight to your husband and spend the time watching a movie or," he stopped. Making love. Resting. Dreaming beneath the stars. Dancing and laughing like you once did. Or should have. "Would you like?"

Carma smiled. Really, when she smiled, the deep dishes of her cheeks lightened. "Let me taste it, I guess."

He wiped the blood from his hands on his apron and hung it on the peg next to the sink. Sunlight braided the water over Karl's gnarled

hands, and Carma wondered briefly how old he could be. Her age? Or twenty years older? Little it mattered, though. Already married, and to a man a decade older than herself. “You married?” She spoke out loud.

“Was. Once.” He splattered the water from his hands, little beads glistening like glass pearls on the walls and windows.

“Oh.” She wished she had not said it. How stupid. How rude.

The walls grew tall and dark around them, little corridors swaying with books and knick-knacks and collections of thimbles and spoons from every state. It needed dusting, clear to the chandeliers, with only one dark bulb to light the way. She glanced at her watch and wished she had not consented to this. Gerald would likely call her any moment and ask her where she was. He, in his wheelchair weakened by Lou Gehrig’s Disease, unable to swallow the thinnest broth, the clearest air. And she, Jezebel, hunting down fine cuts of meats and hearty stews and delaying the onset of a weekend that never ended. Friday night, her friends in summer dresses sipping beer beside the beach, and her wiping the broth from his chin, wringing the bib over the sink even as he sobbed in the next room. She would untie the rag from around his waist so she could help him to the toilet, wipe his butt, and then undress him for bed. Sometimes she would lie close to him and remember the stars and hot kisses and wild dreams, and sigh.

“Babe? Remember?” He would sometimes say, but every day his words became more something imagined and less something heard. She would reach for his hand and yes, it was still him. The nights hotter than the kisses, the dreams wild with “what ifs” and “then whats.” What was she without him? Though even pressed to her, she felt him slipping past her, beneath her, an ice floe melting its way south.

“Oh, Ger,” she choked. She licked the tear from her lip. “It’s been a good trip all in all, don’t you think?”

No answer. Carma squeezed his hand, ran her fingers over the arms that no longer held her, the long, lean lonely of him and cried inside herself. She lifted herself to her elbow, her brown hair falling over his neck and shoulders and thin chest. He smiled. "Back when," he would have grabbed her and held her and kissed her so crazy, her body would shake and go weak. The stars a dizzying swirl inside her body, full of him and yet totally alone in want of him. She smiled back at him.

Karl flipped the switch in his kitchen, all white and chrome with little flecks of gold in the countertop and floor. "Here. Try this." The stew tasted like meadows and fresh air full of earth.

She gasped. "Oh, yes!"

Karl brushed her breast lightly as he reached for a bowl. "You want it?"

If only the wanting of something could fill the need. She nodded.

He lifted her blouse and she trembled. She could smell the blood from the butcher shop still on his arms and neck. Gerald smelled of his own flesh imploding on itself, drawn into a place only deeper still.

"I meant the stew. It would be so good for him. Like before." She backed away toward the hallway, her blouse catching on one hard nipple. "I really meant the stew." She turned to go.

"Wait. I'll get you some. Don't leave."

But Carma could not hear him. Past the neatly wrapped ribs and roasts and cubed meats, the clean knives and blood-stained aprons; past the display cases so painfully bright with light, the dust motes dancing over the bloody chops and loins. Carma ran. Ran and ran and ran until she could only sit and weep and consider the wide sky swathe in stars.

Gerald tried to make words of his awkward lips, thoughts caught in his throat, thoughts that were his alone. Of course, they had always been, but now they balled up in him, a dammed up mess, he thought to

himself. Sometimes they jumbled together like a crowded cage of mice, and he was relieved he could no longer really talk. Then they'd think he was brain damaged as well.

They—the people who designed straws too short for immobile necks, food that had to be chewed twenty times like Miss Pruett harped in the second grade, and toilets for people with straight strong backs and thighs that bent and moved where you told them to. He sighed. Carma was late from work. Probably picking up an impossible cut of meat that would have her in tears trying to make it digestible for him, sending it through the food processor until it resembled some slushy broth that tasted of onions and blood. A good rib steak seared over hot coals rubbed with garlic and coarse pepper, with a potato and a frothy beer, now that would be a real treat. He sighed or at least that's the sound he heard in his head.

He needed to use the toilet, if for nothing more than the feeling that he mastered some part of his own body still. Carma had to tie him around the waist with a bath towel so he wouldn't fall off and split his head on the tub or floor when he fell. Then she would wipe him, chattering all the while, cheerful and sweet. He longed for the days when a man could take a shit without the nervous reassurance of a female. If she didn't get home soon, he knew he'd dirty his underwear and have to endure her patience and understanding. She was lovely, and he remembered the day he promised her the world. Well, the vows said through sickness and in health for better or worse, and all that, but he meant it for her. He was supposed to be the strong one, the breadwinner, crashing through the world to provide for her, she safe and soft at home awaiting his gifts. Not that she was big on the soft, especially since he took ill.

It started with a limp wrist. Really, he could let his left hand flop back to his wrist. Then he couldn't help it. The guys on the engineering crew started calling him "limp wrist" and joking about his

sexual orientation or his over enthusiasm masturbating. He never told Carma. "I think I pulled a muscle at work." She wrinkled her brow.

One day she finally said, "I think you should go to the doctor. Something's wrong. I talked to Frank the other day, and he said you shouldn't pull a muscle pushing a pencil."

"Big pencil. Lots of erasing. I'll see." Still he felt afraid, his stomach pinched around a pith of fear. He made the appointment without telling her or anyone else. His mother called that afternoon to chat and was astonished to hear him crying. "Mom. I'm going to die, and I don't want to, and I haven't told Carma." He was blubbering.

His mother sat silent for a moment. "I didn't raise you to be a baby. You dry your face and put a smile on it and take that girl for a drink. Talk about your future. Build a dream. When you got her good and drunk, lay it on her. She won't take it so hard that way." She hung up, sniffing, and Gerald felt bad for unloading on her.

When Carma came through the door that evening, he said, "How about a nice little dinner at Guiseppe's? I feel frisky and you look fabulous." She laughed then freshened her makeup and slid into a sexy dress. Halfway through the meal, he told her, and they had to leave.

"Goddam you, Ger! Why would you do a thing like that? Frisky, my ass! You can go to hell!" She sat with her arms folded across her chest, her face hard against the window. Her cheeks glistened with tears. He wished he could stroke her sad face, tell her it would all be fine, that it was a mistake; that she looked sexy and he wanted her like never before. But these days it took both hands on the wheel to make a turn. He stared at his left wrist willing it to take command, but it had lost its bone and heart. He did want her like never before, but couldn't figure any reason a woman would want a dead man. For surely that's what he was. He looked straight ahead and tried to imagine his life to come. Maybe he'd been dying this whole time and hadn't realized it until now. Yeah, that's what it was. Now he was enlightened.

Gerald lay in his own filth when she finally dragged herself through the door. It looked like the same old plans for the weekend. Feed Gerald, clean Gerald's face, wash Gerald's withered body, watch a show or two or even two hundred. Her bones ached with the thought of it, and yet. Yet, here in the starlight, his face looked almost peaceful enough to believe that the room did not stink, that he would be able to walk to her and hold her and tell her clearly what he was thinking. She sighed and stroked his cheek.

Gerald stirred, and when he opened his eyes, it was not happiness or relief she saw in his face, but anger.

"I'm sorry, Honey. It's okay."

He protested with his eyes. "No. It's not okay." A tear slid down his cheek, a cheek so thin it pooled there.

"You mad at me?" She set about stripping his shoes and trousers off him. She couldn't blame him, of course. Where had she spent the entire night? The clock radio blared 3:00 A.M. To think she let that coarse butcher arouse such thoughts in her when her sweet husband waited faithfully for her. "I'm sorry," she said again, rubbing the shadows along his ribs. Karl, the butcher and his ribs. Carma and her rib steaks. She shuddered again. "I got mixed up. I needed some air." She peeled his underpants off him and tried to remember how it felt to slide his underwear down his once-strong legs. Oh well, to live is to change. All life comes to death one day.

"I want more for you," he said. "This." He glared at the dirty underwear. "This is not fair. I'm sorry."

Sometimes Carma could not navigate this sea of distress with her husband. How to say it was really okay, that life turned out this way sometimes, that she loved him for always? "Listen, Ger, none of that, okay? I gotta get to bed. I need some sleep." She bathed him with warm soapy water, loving the long lean lines of him but missing the satisfying mass he once was. For better or worse. How much worse

could it get? Well, 'til death do us part. This trip would end at the morgue one day, Gerald choking on his own mucus, a respirator doing what he could not. But for now, there was the moonlight and the sweep of his lashes on his cheeks. She dried him slowly with a towel. He was nearly asleep. She rubbed his shoulders and buttocks and thighs, willing them to grow strong beneath her touch. No reason to wake him to dress him. She spread a blanket and comforter over him. Then she slid out of her dress and heels and spooned in the covers beside him.

Flute Lesson

She opens and closes her mouth
around syllables and sentences
about posture and embouchure
and composers and lengthy treatises on trilling and grace notes.
Entire books written on how to hold a flute
which she, by the way, recommends to me.
I cannot follow her thought
no matter how hard I try.
The more I study her mouth
pinching words out of her breath
the more I think “avocado!”
plump and buttery, full and satisfying—
a good substitute for sex
its dimpled skin peeled back in one piece,
smooth green flesh sucked against my palate,
melting down my throat.
Her monologue has not slowed
this composer’s essay on the tongue
whether it should be concave or convex,
the tip between the teeth or behind
breathing through the nose keeps the palate soft
aah the palate.
French dressing would be good
on sliced avocados,

perfectly ripened, neither too hard nor too soft,
fleshy and slightly firm,
the colors gradating from nearly yellow to black green.
Her eyes search for mine when she asks me to perform a solo.

Pickle's Place

If we evacuated this dry place,
pulled the plug and drained every soul away
it would be barren as wildflowers
on a wind chafed mountainside,
slow to open and quick to disappear —
so sparse the population.

Yet somehow
even on Sunday morning
when the numbers swell
to bursting within church walls,
voices ascending like light
behind the stained glass windows,
the diner fills with chatter
and swirling cigarette smoke,
flies committing the obligatory suicide
against grease-streaked windows.
This diner rises unexpected from the desert
startling to the motorist
too long accustomed to solitude
and the AM droll.

Even in the middle of nowhere
pop machines and beer coolers refresh,
bringing to mind a civilization at the other end
of asphalt.

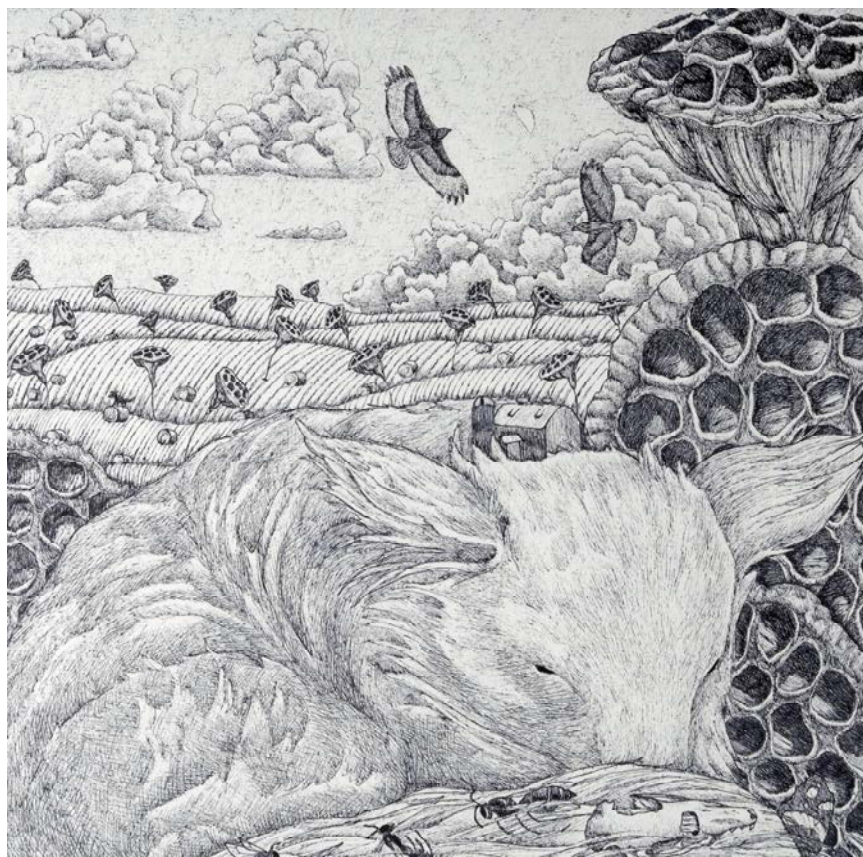
Like cockroaches the faces and chatter will scatter
when the lights are flipped on at dusk,

and all the farmers with their gunny sack women
will retreat to the flickering screens of their televisions
inside the paneled trailers that dot the desert like stones.

The prospect of breakfast at Pickle's
tiding them through the flat stretch of night.

Kristin Plucar

Does the Dog Have Buddha Nature



Joshua Mayes

The Three Larks

The Mauldin wedding was two hours away, and I had just re-entered the world after an all-night bender of *Matlock* re-runs, a six-pack of Ensure, and a bottle of Russian vodka because the Doc told me to drink more clear liquids. My head felt like it was going to split and give birth to an alien demon. I was far too old to be staying up all-night, but that vodka gets my heart pumping on all cylinders. I had to call up Mitchy Jettison and Buck Smalls because we had the gig to get ready for, and they are *Matlock* fans as well. Our barbershop quartet, The Three Larks, was known for miles outside of Chapel Hill and our reputation was at stake. We didn't confine ourselves to just singing around our barber shop, which we had owned since the summer of '72, but rather branched out and made a name for ourselves doing weddings and the occasional high school prom night. We were damn good too!

I rolled out of bed and looked out to see what four in the afternoon looked like through hung-over eyes. I scratched my face and was used to the scruffiness of it. I was going to have to shave before the wedding. Many people scoffed at the idea of having a barbershop quartet sing at a wedding, but to tell you the truth, our rendition of "Amazing Grace" would bring a tear to the eye of Jesus — his beard reminded me I still needed to shave. I failed to mention that we have been a Barbershop trio since we lost Charlie Mauldin last year to a cancer that had developed in his ears and spread to his brain. We sang "Dust in the Wind" at his funeral, and it was all I could do to sing over the sobs. Charlie's son, Junior we all called him, was getting married to a beautiful gal named Caroline from two counties over in Mapleton.

I was shaving in a rush and nicked myself, and I quickly covered the nick with an entire toilet paper square and splashed the rest of my face with a generous handful of Old Spice. I called Mitchy and Buck, and we agreed to meet down at our storage unit, which doubled as our studio and dressing room. We'd been kicked out of my father's garage during our rock 'n' roll phase as teenagers and we had just practiced there ever since. I pulled on a T-shirt since we would get dressed in the unit, and I slammed down another Ensure, crushing the can in my fists like a frat boy. I snatched my keys off of the kitchen counter and pulled forty dollars from the birthday card my daughter had sent me a week ago for my seventieth birthday. The cards I send every year for her birthday leave with forty dollars in them, but she says she can't accept my money so she sends it back as a little joke inside my cards. Smashing the money in my pocket, I grabbed the handle to the front door when my bladder failed me again. I ran back to the bathroom, and I couldn't help but hum.

I ran out of the house as fast as I could and jumped into the driver's seat of my new '05 Buick LeSabre, a gift from my son. God bless him, but did it have to be taupe? The engine came to life much quieter than I had this afternoon, and I was off. I felt more rushed than usual, and I only had thirty minutes to get to the dressing room and get dolled up for the wedding. We had already taken turns cutting our hair to perfection after the shop closed last night. Junior came and had a beer with us, getting a haircut for the wedding. For his short thirty years, he had trusted only us with his hair.

The Buick crept up stealthily on the storage unit like a lion on a gazelle, and for some reason, I felt that I should be going faster than I really was. I looked down to see my foot had slipped off the gas and was crushing a can of Ensure I had dropped in the floor boards. I coasted the car to a stop a few units down from ours since I was having a tough time trying to kick the can.

I looked up and saw Mitchy and Buck standing outside the unit, and they were both stomping and cursing at the door of our studio. Apparently I had crept up on them too, giving me the chance to jam on the horn and see who might survive to become my new barbershop duet partner. They both jumped and I saw Buck grab at his chest; he was always so dramatic. I walked over and saw that someone had replaced our lock with a shiny new one. I tried to get some information out of them, but Mitch kept slamming a crescent wrench on the new one trying to break it open, and Buck wanted to drag out the heart attack joke a little longer than usual.

“Get up, Jackass! Did you remember to take your pills marked ‘F’ for Friday?” Mitch was always calling Buck the kindest names he could think of, but they went back and forth like an old married couple.

“I sure did, Sweetheart, but I took the ones marked ‘S’ for Shut the Hell Up.”

I could see that Mitch was getting nowhere with the lock, and I suggested that I get my .38 Special (“Doris” I called her) out of the glovebox and give this new lock a taste of Three Lark justice. In the glovebox, under Doris, I saw the bill for our rent on the storage unit and decided to wait until later to tell the guys.

The idea to shoot the lock met with little resistance considering we were sweating like pigs, and we needed to get to that wedding in a hurry, having only fifteen minutes to get there. I pulled the hammer back and aimed a very steady gun at the lock, squeezing the trigger slowly. The gun fired and then I couldn’t hear anything. Looking down on my right, I saw the lock split open (good) and on my left, Buck was on the ground with a hole in his pants (not good). Luckily for me, the bullet ricocheted away from us, and Buck had just torn his pants from the crotch to the knee. Mitch had to help him up because I couldn’t stop laughing. Mitch lit a cigarette and was mumbling something about Buck being a jackass.

I threw the storage unit door open, and I glanced around at the dark packages holding the trinkets of our pasts. As my eyes got used to the darkness, I saw the chipped cherry wood of my Mother's Queen Anne dresser and our old army duffle bags stacked on top of it. We unzipped our tuxedos out of their body bags and began to dress like we had a thousand times before. I shut the door of the unit and slid a piece of the lock through the latch. Mitch was already climbing into the front seat of my taupe-mobile before I could even suggest carpooling, and we were off.

I pulled the car into the Our Lady of the Sacred Flatlands church and flew into a parking spot. Glancing around, I realized the parking lot was completely empty.

"What the hell is this?" Mitch said.

"It's Friday, right?" We all agreed.

"What time was the wedding supposed to start?" Buck said, staring at his watch.

"Five-thirty." I said.

"Five-thirty? It's only four-thirty. We're early."

Mitch was standing outside the car, enjoying another cigarette when I noticed him come back and tap on my window.

"What church was the wedding supposed to be at?"

I reached into the glove box, which was turning out to hold all the answers in life, and produced the invitation.

"It's at Our Lady of the Holy Fields. Holy damn! Mitch, let's go!"

The taupe-mobile flew past the old Shanahan Steel factory where the four of us had worked until the war became our jobs. A quarter-mile from the wedding, Buck started begging for us to pull over so he could relieve himself. I gave this some thought, and pulled the car over next to an abandoned baseball field, which had overnight turned into an automobile graveyard. I was examining the cars and saw the old Model-T I had borrowed from my father when I took Cindy Perkins

to the drive-in. I remember how she smiled when I leaned in for a kiss. I felt like the taupe-mobile was moving, and I could see it rolling towards the fence.

“Where the hell are you going?”

My foot had slipped off of that damn can in the floorboards, and we were rolling forward at a crawl. Buck was dragging his feet through the dirt trying to zip up his pants and get in the car at the same time. I was apologizing, but I could barely be heard over Mitch’s laughter.

We arrived at the church with a few minutes to spare. The wedding was beautiful, and we were sitting in the stead of our old comrade Charlie, Senior, watching his boy take a giant leap into manhood. I shed a few tears, surprised my dried-up old eyes could produce them. Mitch fought back his tears with a shot of scotch from his hip flask. The wedding moved to the county fairgrounds where white clouds dimpled the pale blue sky.

I was given the signal by the maid-of-honor to begin our set. We sang to the sky and to our friend Charlie, having planned that this concert would be our last. I closed my eyes and listened to the two men standing next to me while I sang about a woman named “Lida Rose.” I imagined the low hum of Charlie singing bass and the way we used to sound. Then I felt it. It was as if I had imagined Charlie into being, because I could feel that same low vibration in my ears. When I opened my eyes, I saw him, only younger and with the haircut I gave him last night in our shop.

Joseph Koepplin

Untitled



Jeff Pearson

growing old

why didn't people tell me everything will disappear
so I won't be disappointed when I no longer have
any of my friends
and a baby blanket with blue and yellow balloons
attached to bears triangle soft pieces
all around from my grandma
I won't be living in a red house
with paint peeling away like my memory of everything
my life turned into a paragraph
there won't be the new year's eve where I hid in the dryer
during a game of hide and seek
there won't be my pissed pants
while playing a world war II board game
why didn't someone let me know
that everyone must learn to fall asleep
without a tape player singing Sunday school songs
why didn't someone tell me
my grandma will trip
and knock out her front teeth on the church stairs
her jaw broken and blood lacerated across her neck
grandpa two months later will walk all night
without any shoes to Talbot's farm outside of town
the one he used to know and frostbite will set in
his brain going backwards
he like a child wondering why no one told him
a walk outside without shoes will burn his feet

Playboy

Outside on swing sets
we talked about S-E-X
smoked raw hot dog cigars
Weren't sure if Playboy had
naked boys or girls
the few informants I knew
were spliced with video gamed screens
while we drove a field steamroller
somewhere in space.
There was a rumor that
a *Playboy* was buried
in the Upper Dirts
next to the train carts we pissed in, but
we never went looking.

Instead a *Playboy* issue with
James Bond's latest diva
was passed through a chain-linked fence
all rolled up like a drug deal
then, zipped in a blue backpack.
We didn't open it until the privacy
of a locked basement allowed
hands on naked women's breasts.

We stole pages
called centerfolds which
we got to tear out

like we could have a woman
all our own.

The clippings I stole
burned in my family's wood furnace.
I shattered the ashes.
My friend buried the
rest of his
smutty women
near the fish hatchery
where we went back
to look at the wilted, wet
magazine and make sure that
we had these fantasy girls
all to ourselves.
The magazine is still buried there today.

Studentry

little mechanics inside the brain
wire together microphone yell
syrup flows
out of the ears
movie credits
vocabulary enhancer penis pump
museum display of a celebrity
no need to have the real one alive now
robotic flood barriers
built the window to look outside
male ergonomics
tickle women with the head of the table
stories time logged
by a pencil penetrated into
a notebook
suplex literature the canon
what not to write
slurp up the bodily ectoplasm
from the library shelves
the ooze between
to ooze between
studentry
drifts of bodies
blow over each other
eyes look at the sun
fry overeasiness omlet

glasses on
some turn blue to red
salt the hair follicles dandruff
conscripts swim and breath
stroke the toes dig into eyeholes
sharpened from broken divoted serrated
nail the cornea on the back bone of the University
hills that notch out of the desert

The Bastards
rest in the shade
one limb sweatless

dogs hump in the fallen branches
the leaves leap back into the trees
are caught by webbed branches
a body once swung from the tree
a tire swing
graveyard breeds squirrels

squirrel squirt between the fingers
treat eczema
play bloody knuckles with the ironfist
institution changelings
morph into feral pigs
run through the collection pool
pat pat clomp clomp splam
carry-on ear tags
spring tails intertwined
chains mention purification

wipe out the doppelgangers
resurrect the eternal students
chute down like defects
to be frozen

until they fill an entire ice tray

skewered with toothpicks

to be popsicles

Diane Yerka

Alley Wall



A Woman's Work

Arlene's warning made it through the door ahead of her. "Don't you say one word, Jonah. Not a single word. I'm in no mood for it," she said.

Jonah glanced up from the television, took one long look, and burst out laughing. "Woman, what are you wearing? I don't recall you leaving the house this morning looking like a fat flamingo."

"What did I just say?" She glared at him as her hand reached up to scratch the angry red rash that had sprung up along the line of her highly-starched white collar but stopped around her collarbone as the cuff dug deep into the heavy flesh of her arm, stopping any northern movement. "I am going to peel this ridiculous excuse for a uniform off my body, and then I'm going to burn it."

"It doesn't look like you'll have to peel it. Just take a deep breath and the whole thing will explode. I bet your customers were scared of that all day. Bet there wasn't an appetite left in the place."

"At least I have a uniform. Did you find yourself a job today? Are you just going to sit there on that couch, all day, every day, just hoping that a job will walk itself on up to our door and offer itself to you? You've been in that same pair of pajamas since Tuesday."

"And I'm planning to stay in them until next Tuesday. A man can wear what he wants without having to get approval from his wife."

"He needs her approval if her work is putting the food on the table. And mine is. I only took you back because you promised to get a job, and you haven't made one effort since then."

"Arlene, just living with you is work enough for ten men."

"Well, I would settle for one. Have you seen any around here?"

“I haven’t seen anyone but me willing to step foot in this broken-down house, and I’m beginning to wonder why I’m here.”

“I’ve been wondering the same thing.”

Jonah tossed a small pillow at her, an easy lob that missed her by a few feet but knocked a small snow globe off a shelf. It shattered, leaving a spray of fake snow and shimmery liquid on the wall that dripped down onto the carpet.

Arlene planted her fists onto her hips and said, “You better clean that mess up before I get back in here. I’m getting outta this thing and then I’m putting my feet up for the rest of the night.”

She pulled at the uniform as she walked down the hall to their bedroom. *Mr.* Burns, her arrogant little twit of a manager, had decided that the uniforms would give the diner more class, attract a “better clientele.” Clientele. She snorted at the thought and muttered to herself, “I taught that boy in Sunday School and he acts like he’s the savior of Stan’s Diner. I still remember him peeing his pants in the middle of the Easter program, and now that infant gets to order me around. Dress me like some demented lollipop. As if that dump of a diner could attract anything but chain smokers and trust-fund college brats who come there to feel gritty. Ain’t nobody else coming there for the am-bi-ence. Tips were down nearly half. Regulars spent the whole shift laughing at me, and that poor little old lady from Arco looked downright frightened. Between the house special and my uniform, it’s a wonder her heart didn’t give out all together.”

Arlene twisted her body like a contortionist, trying to free her arms from their pink shackles. At first the dress didn’t budge an inch; then she heard several small rips as she finally pulled herself free. The cuffs left dents sunk deep into her skin and she rubbed at them before pulling on her housecoat and some soft slippers, and then she padded back down the hallway to the living room.

With her arms crossed tight across her chest, Arlene cleared her throat and stared intently at the liquid glistening on the wall. Jonah kept his eyes trained on the television screen. She cleared her throat again but still got no response. Finally, she said, "Aren't you going to clean up that mess?"

"Looks like woman's work to me."

Arlene's reply was cut short when a piece of glass jabbed through the soft sole of her slipper and dug into the ball of her foot. She swore and sat down on the couch, grasping the needle thin piece of glass to slide it slowly out.

Jonah watched with a smile on his face and said, "See, that's karma for you. If you would've cleaned that up, you wouldn't be pulling that out of your foot."

Arlene dug her nails into her palms before sliding carefully to her knees, reminding herself that the energy to keep the fight going seemed like more than the energy it would take to clean this mess up, and she had precious little left. She gathered up the glass fragments into a cupped hand and then grasped the heavy wooden base with a miniature Lady Liberty attached. The weight of it felt good in her hand, the right weight to sail across a room and land with a satisfying thwack upside Jonah's head. The whole picture spilled out across her mind, complete with cartoon sound effects.

"What are you smiling at, woman?"

"Nothing. Not a thing." Carrying Miss Liberty to the trash by the sink, Arlene turned on the tap. She soaked a dishcloth in water hot enough to scald the skin of her hand before marching back into the living room. The empty space where the snow globe had been was surrounded by a thick circle of dust. She wiped it clear and then picked up the other globes to dust under them too, giving each a gentle shake before setting them back down. The whole row of gently falling snow soothed her, and she stared for just a second before moving to

the mess below. The glitter came easily off the wall but it clung to the already soiled carpet, no matter how hard she scrubbed.

“You know, if you would have stayed in that other outfit, you would look like those pink elephants in Dumbo,” Jonah said, laughing at his own joke.

Her eyes lowered to small slits as she stood up. Sauntering over to the television, Arlene slowly wrapped the dishcloth around her finger before dusting the top of the television in wide, lazy circles.

Jonah tried to lean around her and said, “I’m trying to watch television here. Could you get your big behind out of the way?”

“Oh, I’m just doing my woman’s work. I’m sure you won’t mind if I clean my television, the one I bought with my money from my job, just like those clothes you’re wearing and my chair you’re sitting in. You know, woman’s work.”

He muttered something behind her. She didn’t catch the words, but they weren’t friendly.

“Do you have something you want to say to me? You just go ahead and say it, Jonah Samuel McAllister, let’s hear it out loud. Let’s hear what you are going to say to me.”

Jonah pulled himself out of the chair and pushed past her.

Arlene grabbed his shoulder and said, “What? Cat got your tongue? You just sit there in your chair all day while I work to support you. The most manly thing you’ve done in years was to throw that damn pillow at me and you missed. Couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn from ten feet.”

“Well, if any woman looked like the broad side of a barn, Arlene, it would have to be you.”

Jonah pulled a snow globe from the shelf and threw it at her. It missed her by inches and landed safely in the soft cushions of the couch. Arlene looked back over her shoulder and laughed. She said, “I

apologize. You apparently couldn't hit the broad side of a barn from three feet. Silly, insignificant little man."

He grabbed another snow globe and threw it, this time hitting her square in the chest before it bounced off to shatter at her feet. Their eyes met right before she shielded her head with her arms and barreled right towards him. She reached over his shoulder to pull another globe from the shelf and Jonah did the same. They eyed each other, each bouncing the round glass in an extended hand.

"You gonna to throw another one at me?" Arlene asked in voice just over a growl. "Am I close enough now that you think you could hit me twice?"

He cocked his arm back but Arlene launched hers before he had time to release it. The globe bounced off his shoulder and crashed to the ground, followed by the one knocked loose from his hand. They each dove for the shelf and rearmed, filling both hands with happy, glittery scenes covered in frantic snow before they pulled apart, stalking each other in a tight circle around the living room.

The glass in Jonah's hand burst from the pressure of his grip and dug into his hand. He swore as he dropped it. Arlene threw both spheres right at him, knocking him off balance. He flung his remaining globe at her, and it glanced off the side of her head. She reached up to touch her ear; her fingers came back dotted with blood. She dove for him. Grabbing handfuls of fabric, flesh, and hair, they grappled, pushing each other into walls and furniture accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. Jonah knocked her into the ground and fell on top of her. He had just pulled his fist back behind his shoulder when they heard someone pound on the front door.

A heavy, commanding voice shouted, "This is Officer Martinez of the Idaho Falls Police Department. Open this door right now."

Jonah slowly lowered his fist into the carpet beside Arlene's head, right beside a smiling bride and groom going over Niagara Falls in

a barrel. He took a deep breath and pulled himself up. He reached a hand down to Arlene who shoved it away. She rolled herself awkwardly to her knees and pulled herself up by leaning on the coffee table. The pounding on the door continued. They hurriedly brushed shards of glass from each other's clothes, recoiling whenever their hands touched bare flesh. Finally, Arlene brushed the last debris from her dress and ran a hand through her hair before opening the front door a few inches.

"Good evening, Officer. Is there some problem?" Her voice was too high and the words spilled out too fast. Arlene couldn't quite bring her eyes up to the man's face.

"Arlene? Is that you?"

Alarmed, Arlene stared at him and recognized the officer as one of her regulars, black coffee, skinny eggs, and whole wheat toast. Inwardly she groaned with embarrassment but she put on her best chipper waitress face. "Chris? I didn't think I'd see you again today. I'm sorry you ended up coming all this way for a little fight." She pushed her way through the door and shut it behind her.

"Just what I heard on the sidewalk says this was no little fight. Your neighbor was pretty worried. You all right?" His eyes inspected her, seeking signs of damage.

"I'm fine. We're fine. Just having a bit of a disagreement, just a little marital squabble, that's all. We're fine. Really."

Jonah came out, stood beside her, and wrapped an arm around her waist. Arlene fought not to pull away and forced her smile a little wider. Jonah said, "We're sorry, sir, sorry to interrupt your night. Really, we're all right. Tempers got a little hot and we both just blew off a little steam. It won't happen again."

Arlene said, "Thanks for coming to check on us, Chris. I appreciate it. Breakfast is on me tomorrow."

"Well, if you're sure you're all right..." He kept watching them out of the corner of his eye while he filled out the short report which they

all signed before he headed back to his patrol car. Arlene and Jonah watched until he finally pulled away from the curb and they went back inside.

“I swear, Jonah, I have never been so humiliated in all my life.” She gathered up the dirty dishes beside Jonah’s chair and stomped into the kitchen, tossing them onto the counter as she began to fill the sink. Food lay all around the kitchen. She judged each one, clearing some into the garbage and placing others back into the fridge. Each time she walked across the kitchen floor, her slipper would catch in a loose seam of linoleum in the center.

“Jonah, would you please fix this damn linoleum? I’m going to break my neck in here.”

“Fixing the floor won’t fix the fact that you’re clumsy. Besides, you got enough weight there. Just stand on it until it flattens back out.”

Arlene threw the dishes into the sink. The screams and grunts of the WWF filtered in from the living room, so she walked over to the radio and turned it on. Two seconds later, Jonah turned up the television. She turned the radio up again, and so did Jonah. In her anger Arlene slammed the dial to its max and the nasal sound of country music blasted her ears punctuated by the heavy thud of a body slam. The noise caused her physical pain, but she refused to turn it down, just on principle.

She did the dishes with a vengeance, slamming each one into the tray. When she got to his favorite mug, the one that proclaimed that “Women are necessary because sheep can’t cook,” she purposefully dropped it onto the floor. When it didn’t break, Arlene picked it up and dropped it again. Still intact, she kicked it, bouncing it across the floor, banking it off the west wall, and smiled as it dropped out of sight down the basement stairs.

Jonah came into the kitchen when she had almost finished. He pulled out dish after dish from the refrigerator, peeling back tin foils to

grunt disgustedly at the contents before tossing them on the table. Her back was turned to him, and, with each clanking dish, her shoulders would rise up a little towards her ears.

He held up a bowl of limp lettuce and shouted, "Arlene, what's a man supposed to eat around here? Do I look like some kind of rabbit?"

"Do I look like some kind of maid?" She spun on her heel with a dirty knife loose in her hand as she stomped over to snatch the bowl from his hand when her slipper caught in the loose flap of linoleum at her feet. With a stuttering step, she fell against him. The knife caught, slipping through his shirt and just grazing his skin. He roared and fell backwards, throwing his hand on the table for support.

The flimsy metal table leg couldn't stand up to their combined weight and it bent, throwing them both down on the floor where Arlene slammed onto Jonah. Dishes crashed all around them. She pulled an arm over her head to shield it as bowl after bowl bounced off her head to splatter its contents onto the floor.

Her hand was pressed into the floor, stuck to something cold and slimy, when she felt a warm, wet liquid soak up between her fingers. Something blunt pressed into the center of her chest. She scrambled to her feet. The food lay all around them, a muddle of smells tinged with the metallic tang of blood.

"You stupid cow, you killed me." His hands grasped at the knife that stuck flag pole straight from his chest. A few bits of chicken skin clung to its handle and the thought flitted through Arlene's mind that she should wash it. Then his hands let go and rested against the base of the blade.

Arlene backed up, holding her bloodied hand in front of her as if she could toss it away from her body somehow. She backed into the cupboard. Her feet kept sliding as she pressed back against them, hoping to get further away as the blood flowed outward in a solid,

glistening pool that came directly towards her. It came within half an inch of her stained house slippers before it stopped.

Nothing moved, not Jonah's bony chest, not her feet. She didn't go to him. She didn't scream. She didn't save him. If she just let him stay there, just like that, for just a couple of minutes, no one would be able to save him. No one would bring him back to her. The only thing that she knew for sure was that she absolutely did not want him back. So she stayed. Only the jerk of the second hand on the clock and the occasional shimmer of the blood from the TV's and radio's overwhelming sound convinced her that time was moving. She stared at Jonah's body, completely immobile on the floor. Her heart was slamming into the wall of her chest so hard, it seemed impossible for his to be so still.

The wall of noise filled every space in her head, shattering her thoughts into escaping fragments. She leaned her hip into the counter so that she could stretch over Jonah to turn off the radio. Now just the television pounded through her head. She carefully picked her way around him, clinging to the counter for support. As soon as she was clear of his body, she bolted into the living room and slammed the button of the television.

The silence immediately soothed her mind. She looked out the window, expecting to see sirens flashing in the distance but saw only the setting sun. No explanation of this would satisfy anyone. Even if she had immediately called for help, even if they hadn't had the fight just a few minutes ago, the police wouldn't believe that his death was an accident. Arlene only barely believed it herself, and she had been in the room. Besides, she hadn't called for help. That inaction alone was enough to send her to jail. It was clear that the instant the police saw his body, her life was over.

She just needed time to think, time to clear her head. There had to be an answer. One that saved her from this. Time. She just needed

time. She needed to freeze time. She couldn't rush this. She had to be smart. Freeze. Don't panic. Don't do anything rash. Just freeze. Freeze was right. She could freeze him. Just for a few days. Not long. Just long enough to let people know that he'd left her again. It had happened a hundred times before. No one would doubt it. Then, she could just take him out of the freezer, defrost him, drive him to some place, and drop him off. Or wait just a couple of months until winter. Then she wouldn't even have to defrost him. It would look like murder, but it wouldn't look like *her* murder. Treating her husband's body like leftover casserole was not a great plan, but it was a plan and Arlene grabbed it.

She took four hesitant steps, glanced at him, and then ran down the basement stairs to the old chest freezer that sat in the corner. She dumped a pile of old Christmas decorations onto the floor and threw the lid open. Her fingers burned as she began throwing all the frozen food onto the floor. When it was empty, she slid to the floor beside it, surrounded by piles of melting vegetables and meat.

Her eyes kept wandering up the stairs. They hung on the bright line of light at the top, a tiny sliver of light that snuck under the door. Pulling her arms around her, she rocked back and forth as she tried to calm down enough to make it up all those stairs. Her hands shook and her eyes felt so heavy. She pulled the lids down and tried to slow her breathing, tried to imagine herself moving his body, tried to imagine touching him when he had no power to touch her back.

Her mind scrambled for any other option and came up empty. Every other course ended with her in jail for the rest of her life. Even this one ended up with her in jail for the rest of her life. Some detective would come into her kitchen, spray it with that CSI stuff, and the entire room would light up blue. This plan just bought her a few more days, maybe a few more months to come up with some better answer. Whatever her faults, she knew that she didn't deserve to die in jail.

Jonah would have argued fiercely for what he deserved too, but she couldn't change that. All that remained was for her to protect herself.

Arlene stood slowly and made her way up the crooked wooden steps, clinging to the handrail with a white-knuckled grip. Her stomach rolled as she looked at him with one slit of one eye, and she pressed herself back against the wall. She slid down to her knees and crawled towards him.

Her eyes kept wandering to the knife. It seemed wrong to leave it there, as if he would somehow be more comfortable if she removed it. Her hand slipped around the handle and she tried to pull it out, but it caught on something hard and made a wet, slurping sound that made her drop it like a poisonous snake. No matter how wrong it seemed, the knife was staying right where it was.

She slipped her hands underneath his armpits and began to drag him back along the kitchen floor towards the door, leaving a trail of blood and food. He seemed so heavy in her arms, as if death itself had weight. His body was slick, and he crashed to the floor twice before they even reached the basement door. Arlene's heart was racing at a million miles an hour, and each time she would look down at him, it would spike even higher.

Shuddering with each heavy thump of his body, Arlene got him down the stairs. Finally, she collapsed with him beside the freezer. His head lay in her lap. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the freezer. The concrete floor, the metal panel of the freezer, and Jonah all sank their cold into her skin. Hot tears began to flow down her cheeks. Running her fingers over the cooling flesh of his face and stroking his hair, sobs shook her body until the tears slowed, then stopped.

Finally, she gently moved Jonah off her lap and stood to open the lid to the freezer. Staring down into that empty cold space, her mind kept circling the thought that he would be so cold. Spreading out an old quilt drug from a mildewed box, Arlene rolled Jonah onto it and

swaddled him like a baby. It felt better to see him that way, wrapped up. The knife made just the slightest bump under all those layers. He looked comfortable.

She heaved his heavy corpse up the side of the freezer but lost her grip in the layers of blanket and he fell to the floor with a sharp crack as his head hit the concrete. Bile rose in her throat, and she stepped back to let it settle. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then forced them open again.

Drawing close to him, Arlene wound one arm under Jonah's neck and cradled his head into her chest. The other arm slid underneath his legs and she drew him up onto her lap. With one deep breath, she half-pushed, half-pulled him up the side of the freezer until he balanced for just a moment on the edge before dropping to the bottom with a heavy, wet thud. She looked down at Jonah. His hair had fallen down over his eyes and so she brushed it back, fixed the angle of his head so that it could rest against the side, and softly closed the lid.

Kerynn Davis

Nature Into Man

Ford Swetnam Prize Winner—Selected by Greg Nicholl

The brown plastic scuttles across the concrete.

It rolls past

lines of modern horses all waiting
patiently for their owners to slip back
and crack at the reins.

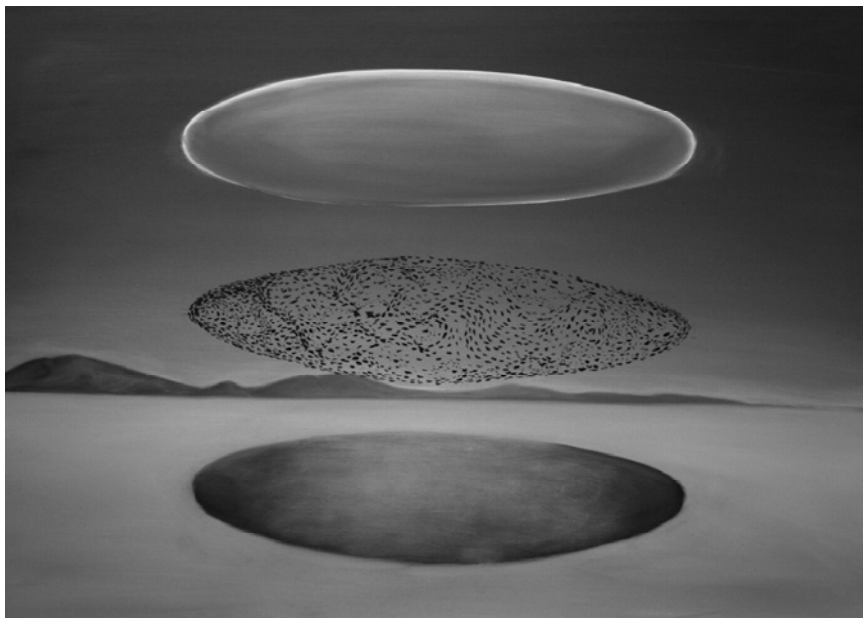
They are sent to the flowing river
where hooves become fins
and all stop to admire red fish
but have no apparent appreciation
for the blinking green scales of the others.

The plastic moves to join the aquatic life
scurrying into place;
another part of the school.

The newcomer flits
in and out of traffic
as those already traveling
take little notice of the drifter
still a slave to the current.

Michael Crook

Three No. 1





The World's Greatest Skier

Although this picture of my grandpa skiing wouldn't have enough high resolution quality to submit to even an amateur ski magazine to publish, there are qualities in it that certainly evoke strong emotions within me. Through doing a photographic analysis of this picture, I've explored the characteristics of this photograph and explained the inspiration and influence that I get when looking at these qualities.

At first glance there is a figure of a skier framed in the center of the viewfinder. The skier is a man wearing a rust-red jacket, brown ski pants, and a red hat. My grandpa was a volunteer ski patroller on the Pebble Creek National Ski Patrol. The standard color for a national ski patrol coat in the 1980's was rust. By studying his attire more closely, there is a blue patch with a yellow cross located on the upper left side of his rust colored jacket. The patch indicates he is a patroller and a smaller patch underneath shows his national number. My grandpa volunteered on the ski patrol for over 30 years until medical issues forced him to stop. In his lifetime he was also active in other community groups. This has encouraged me to be active in volunteering and giving back to the community. Through his actions, my grandpa taught me the importance of service.

At a closer examination, he has a gray mustache and gray sideburns coming from under his hat. The texture of the skin on his face looks leathery and under the lower jaw there is droopy skin. The texture of his skin, along with his graying hair, implies that this picture was taken during his mature years. Since I know this picture was taken during the ski season of 1983-84, my grandpa would have been 67 years old at the time. Whether it be age, stomach flu, or a rainy day my grandpa didn't let small things detour him from doing what he needed

or wanted to do. With this idea, I feel determination and commitment when looking at this picture.

The photographer of this picture was slightly downhill from my grandpa which gives a full shot of him skiing. From looking at my grandpa's posture, his knees are bent and his skis are close together. This "old school" stance was considered perfect when standard skis were still straight and long. My grandpa's arms are up and his shoulders are facing downhill. This is a classic posture that allows skiers to be prepared and ready to adapt in a moments notice.

Furthermore, a shadow of his skis can be seen on the snow directly underneath him. This emphasizes the distance from the snow that the skis were not in contact with the snow and gives the picture a strong feeling of motion rather than stillness. From this angle, the picture captured the concentrated, yet playful look on my grandpa's face. As I got the story from my dad about what my grandpa was doing that day, it made me fully understand the cunning look upon his face. My grandpa, my dad, and other members of the National Ski Patrol, were skiing with my older brother, who was seven years old. They had been skiing a run called Cherry Bomb which is a little alcove in the trees and is a youngster's haven. Having fun skiing with a seven-year-old brought out the youthful sides of the older men and they started going off jumps and maneuvering through trees as well. After hearing this story, I decided that my grandpa's skillful performance of going off the jump in the picture was easy for him, but he wanted the others to think it was a challenge.

Pictures allow for storytelling and invite the viewer to think about what happened before and after the picture was taken. I can imagine that before this picture was taken, all the older men were trying to talk their way out of going down this run because it's a landmine of rocks and bumps; it's a short run that doesn't allow for many turns and typically it is densely populated with kids. After this shot however,

the patrollers and my seven-year-old brother most likely stood around laughing in the sun and anticipated how amazing their pictures would turn out. This reminds me of my grandpa's patient and lighthearted attitude.

In the background of this picture, the trees are snow-covered. The boughs are sagging from the weight of a recent snow storm and some of them are brightly highlighted as the sun hits them. When looking at the trees in the background, I remember the rides up the chairlift I had with my grandpa when he would take me skiing with him on Thursdays. We would sit in silence, looking around, sometimes hearing the chirps of birds coming from the crisp, mountain air. Eventually, one of us would break the silence by making a comment about how beautiful the trees were. No matter if the day was calm and sunny or windy and cloudy, my grandpa would show me an appreciation for the outdoors and a tolerance for the unexpected.

From a photographic analysis, how and where a picture is displayed can have strong contextual meaning. My picture has not been matted or framed; it only has a small, white border around it from when the original photograph was copied. Where I place the picture, however, is how it has most influenced me. Since my grandpa's death, I display his picture by my door. This allows me to see it before I leave the house and always reminds me to seize the day, just as my grandpa did on the day this picture was taken.

Reservations

My mother has always been a collector.
When I was young our house
was filled with porcelain owls
stamped with the names of national parks,
casinos, states she had never visited.
We had clocks that hooted, great horned throw rugs,
tiny yellow eyes staring from pewter boughs.

Eventually she lost interest
and the owls slowly went extinct,
their habitat overwhelmed
by horny toads of crystal and gold,
little frog teacups on lilypad saucers.
Then pigs, then miniature shoes,
then fairies, then bells . . .

Lately, though, she has started collecting Indians.
On top of the television, a leather-clad child
with black plastic braids and chubby red cheeks
bangs a tom-tom made of a painted soup can.
A shimmering-winged Indian princess
flies in circles on a string,
tied to the bottom of a Wal-Mart dream catcher:
Bookcases bordered off into minute reservations
packed with heroic-looking warriors
of unknown tribal identity—
Tomahawk-wielding horsemen,

basket-weaving maidens,
solemn chiefs and indomitable archers . . .

Two-hundred years ago my grandparents
came from Ireland and Sweden.
When my hair is long I look like Custer.
Not having the heart or the courage
to tell my elderly mother
that I find her collection offensive,
I recently snipped a small yellow lock from my head
and taped it into the victoriously-upraised fist
of a terracotta brave.
He holds it up to the tiny heavens
like evidence of something—
a clipping of conscience
the size of a coin,
shining in his hand like fool's gold.

Winter Solstice

The weight of winter is in my hand, wrist
rather, an ache and refusal to flex.
Half-way from here to there bones bind
the equator of my life, and pain defines
what an x-ray would show, if allowed,
a cosmos of calcium planets fractured
and fogged with arthritis. Children board
school buses in the flashing blackness
and the singing of brake lines gives me
back to myself and the snow-heavy sky
I'm not surprised to awaken to. All night
I've cradled the bad hand, shifting
it this way and that, pain provoking memory
as true as the day, in my interrupted trajectory,
I buckled over the handlebars. Scaphoid and trapezium
shift stiffly as I shovel out leftover grits even the dog
won't eat. She guards her heaps of bones carried home
from pre-dawn walks along the roadside,
a hunter's trophy stripped and tumbled from the bed
of his truck, a femur sawn through, marrow black
and gleaming, the giant knee of an elk, a lantern of ribs
lit with sunrise. Magpies tease just beyond the reach
of her ambition and the air reeks of sulphur,
of inversion, of fires refusing to draw.
I circle my hand in an exaggerated gesture,
as if calling the dog, the birds, the bones inside.

Greg Olsen

Editor's Note

During the last year at ISU, I have seen some amazing things—from students shredding impossible licks on Guitar Hero to students gracefully walking a slack line in front of the BA building. Despite all of the random talent witnessed across the university, I found myself somewhat nervous when *Black Rock & Sage* decided to limit submissions to only ISU students. However, as various genres of creative works started pouring in, I became reassured of the impressive abilities of our student body. In addition, the staff and design team have been remarkable, and I am proud to be associated with this year's journal and look forward to the journals to come.

Greg Nicholl

Judge—Ford Swetnam Prize

Greg Nicholl has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence and is a freelance proofreader and graphic designer. His poetry has appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Natural Bridge*, *Feminist Studies*, *Smartish Pace*, *Arts & Letters*, *Crab Creek Review*, and several other national publications. He is the web manager for *The Cortland Review*.

Colophon

The new logo was designed for *Black Rock & Sage* by Amanda S. Piper-McClure. The layout was designed by Amanda S. Piper-McClure, Kathleen Weber, and Rachel Williamsen, all majors in ISU's Mass Communications Department.

The layout was designed largely using white space for easy readability and good legibility. The font is Dutch 766 BT. InDesign from Adobe Creative Suite was used to build the layout. It was completed on April 8, 2008.

Contributors' Notes

Syndie Allen is an English M.A. student concentrating on sociolinguistics. At the moment, her hair is windblown and she thinks her office keyboard is distractingly loud. She likes crossword puzzles, coffee, and the sound of smoking, an activity that pulls her away from her desk regularly.

Becky Bird is a returning student who formerly taught high school Family and Consumer Science for ten years and is currently studying English at ISU. Writing humorous creative works helps her stay sane, while dealing with one-hundred-and-twenty-five teenagers a day and has saved her thousands of dollars in therapy. After spending the day putting out fires and picking up spit-wads, writing becomes her Prozac.

James Blitzen is an engineering student living in Blackfoot. He was raised in Tuttle and attended school at CSI before changing to Idaho State.

Debbie Brooks is a full-time student in English at ISU, but she also sells real estate, fosters five dogs, runs, bikes, climbs, lifts weights, fixes up her house, teaches English 101, and tries to play the cello and flute. She loves writing and loves being busy.

Amy Brumfield loves to read, write, run, and participate in every other alliterative activity she can fit in while pursuing her graduate degree. Her husband and four children hope that she

can become a world famous novelist, so they can all retire to a life of leisure on a tropical island.

Breein Bryant is an aspiring poet living in Idaho with her husband and their two dogs.

Spencer Case is a creative writing and philosophy student at Idaho State, when he isn't traveling. From August 2005 to July 2006, he lived in Iraq, writing for the military publication, *Anaconda Times*. This summer, he will study Arabic at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California.

Michael Crook is a recent graduate from the University of Wyoming and is currently working on an MFA in art at ISU. His work focuses on the spiritual and physical nature of art and the conflict of superimposing abstract forms over realistic landscapes.

Kerynn Davis is a sophomore attending Idaho State, majoring in English. She made the change to English only recently, but is finding that she couldn't be happier with her decision. Much of her writing reflects her love of running.

Jeremy Dineen received his undergraduate degree from the University of Idaho in 2000 and is currently a graduate student at Idaho State, pursuing an M.A. degree in English. His current interests are postmodernism and its effect on American culture and the Christian religion.

Lalove Foster is a graduate student working on an M.A. in English. She currently attends school part time and works full time as a technical editor in nuclear safety for the Idaho National Laboratory. She enjoys hiking, camping, reading, writing, music, ultimate frisbee, sleeping and outdoor adventure.

Joseph Koeplin attended Bonneville High and graduated in 2006. He has attended Idaho State for the last two years where he is yet to choose a major. Drawing has been his hobby since he was scribbling in coloring books with crayons.

Joshua Mayes is an undergraduate student at Idaho State University, majoring in Creative Writing.

Leslie Park Ovard is a graduate student at ISU as well as a poet and essayist with work appearing in *Talking River Review*, *Northern Lights*, *Rendezvous*, and other literary magazines. Her current project, “Keeper of the Park,” is a montage/memoir celebrating the engagement with the natural world as a way to nurture individuals and relationships.

HeatherAngel Patty was born in Orange, California but has lived in Pocatello, Idaho for 28 years. For the past year, she has been working on exploring with the imagery of ancient Egypt. Her primary disciplines have been weaving, painting, and watercolors.

Jeff Pearson is the editor-in-chief for both *leg over leg zine* and *Oregon Short Line* poetry magazine. He is a full-time student at Idaho State University (for better or worse). He plays the keytar in the band Warbonnet.

Kristin Plucar, in her drawings, likes to combine objects and events from her daily routine together with fantastical landscapes. Her objective was to create a visual narrative that represented her daily experiences with her imaginative life.

Martin Vest is a sophomore in the undergraduate English program at ISU. His return to academics follows a 15-year hiatus during which time he labored as a poet. He is the winner of the 2007-08 Charles H. Kegel Scholarship and currently spends his time learning the fundamentals of academic writing.

Diane Yerka is from Star Valley, Wyoming, but has been living in Pocatello for several years. She is graduating in May 2008, with a degree in English and a minor in music. She enjoys reading, playing the piano, working in the Writing Center, and doing puzzles with her husband.

McKenzie Young is a senior at Idaho State, majoring in communication and rhetorical studies. She doesn't intend on graduating any time soon because she enjoys being a student.